

Virtual sports field ads to prevent signage damage

Saturday's SuperSport Super 14 fixture between the Bulls and the Highlanders will see Vodacom's on-field advertising being used in 'virtual' format. The move is primarily to appease FIFA, the governing body of world football, which is concerned about the damaging effect of painted signage on World Cup pitches.



The three rugby stadiums affected in this way are Loftus Versfeld, Ellis Park and Free State Stadium. On May 1, when all three stadiums will see action, the virtual advertising will kick in for each match. TV graphics company Sporting Presence will produce the images and superimpose them onto the TV image.

Trial runs at SuperSport have reportedly been impressive, with apparently no discernible difference from the real thing.

SA Rugby has agreed to FIFA's request, as did Vodacom, whose on-field branding is affected by this request. The sponsor has five on-field markings, but under the new technology - officially known as the Togsport Virtual System - the field itself will remain free of such advertising

International examples

Precedent is provided in countries such as the UK and Germany, where both FIFA and UEFA forbid on-field signage. The National Football League in the United States uses virtual advertising to a great degree, while in South America it is often used extravagantly, with advertisers opting for zany innovations.

Neale Connell, director of UK-based Sporting Presence, said this puts SuperSport at the forefront of television technology. "The potential of this application is enormous. Even now, TV companies are just scratching the surface. I suspect many advertisers will be looking on with interest."

The channel has previously used the technology in football - team logos were superimposed onto the field during the recent Soweto derby - but this is the first time it will be used for pure advertising purposes.

"Being able to do this in standard and high definition opens a window of opportunities in a range of different sports in the future," says Tex Teixeira, head of production at SuperSport. "For instance, as a sign of things to come, the channel also

plans to use virtual signage on its shootout golf event next month. It's a very exciting development.”

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