

Brand hockey gains ground

The World Series has shown that even an alternative sport can find takers; provided it is marketed well



VIVEAT SUSAN PINTO
Mumbai, 13 March

A hockey league? A few years ago, the idea would have been unthinkable in a country crazy about cricket. Yet, the World Series Hockey, a joint initiative of the Indian Hockey Federation and Nimbus Sport, finds itself in the spotlight today, thanks not only to the performance of the national squad at the recent Olympic qualifiers, but also the partly dwindling interest in cricket.

Sample this: The weekly tune-ins during the first seven days of WSH, which began on February 29, was 6.3 million, almost 2.5 times more than the English Premier League (EPL), the most followed sports league in the world. WSH is broadcast on Neo Sports and Neo Cricket, while EPL is available on ESPN Star Sports.

While the viewership of WSH cannot be compared to an average cricket match between say India and Pakistan or India and Sri Lanka or even India and Australia, initial figures are encouraging.

Yannick Colaco, chief operating officer, Nimbus Sport, says that work on the league began a year ago, with the company paying attention to every detail

right from the venue where the matches would be staged to the formation of the teams, coaches, players etc.

The fact that the tournament is spread over 34 days only, makes it a compelling buy for advertisers, who are looking for a short burst outside of cricket.

"WSH has been cleverly scheduled to end just before IPL begins on April 4," says a media planner based in Mumbai. "For advertisers this is a low-cost investment in a sport, which is rapidly gaining eyeballs."

On an average, the number of "cricket days" (or days when national-level cricket is played and viewed) in a year is about 80-90. If IPL or the Indian Premier League is taken into account then the number of cricket days goes up by another 50, say market experts. "There is still room," says Colaco. "for other sports. We have taken advantage of this."

Backed by a slick marketing campaign involving print, TV and outdoor has ensured, say market experts, that there has been enough sampling (that is, viewers who watch a programme to get an idea of what the event is all about) for the tournament. Advertisers are clearly

happy. Says Vodafone's Anuradha Agarwal, senior vice-president, consumer insights, "Our interest in hockey has been recent. But we are pleasantly surprised with the execution of the tournament. We also felt this was a good time to be associated with the game. It has the potential to grow."

Besides Vodafone, the other key sponsors of WSH are Pernod Ricard (associate sponsor) and Bridgestone (title sponsor). But the tournament has also managed to attract a decent number of on-air advertisers including names such as Coca-Cola, Airtel and IBM. Experts say this is unprecedented for hockey, which has never attracted this kind of advertiser interest before.

Spot ads on WSH, say media analysts, are in the region of ₹ 40,000 per ten seconds. Sponsors are getting a complete package, which involves both on-ground and on-air presence.

But having successfully got the league going, the challenge, say market experts, for Nimbus would be to convert these initial gains into steady wins.

Colaco says he is confident viewership for the tournament will get better in

The fact that the league is spread over 34 days only makes it a compelling buy for advertisers who are looking for a short burst outside of cricket

the coming weeks. "The numbers have been good so far. We are keeping our fingers crossed," he says.

What Nimbus is banking on is on creating a groundswell for the tournament, which it hopes can pull enough viewers in. "Apart from the main tournament itself, we are taking the players to schools, organising workshops, clinics, where children can meet the sportsmen, understand and learn the game. The rub-off is that spectator traffic at every venue so far has been good. This coupled with steady advertising for the tournament is ensuring that it is top-of-mind for those interested in the game. This should help us get viewers," says Colaco.

A similar strategy was used by Hero MotoCorp, when it decided to associate with hockey two years ago. Under its Phir Dil De Dho Hockey Kho (Give Your Heart to Hockey Again) initiative, the company not only had a high-decibel on-air campaign featuring Virendra Sehwag and Priyanka Chopra among others, but also on-ground activities. Hero used the same tactic during the recent Olympic qualifiers, where it was a sponsor too. Anil Dua, senior vice-president (marketing & sales), Hero MotoCorp, says the investment in the sport is for the long-term. "It's a good bet," he says.