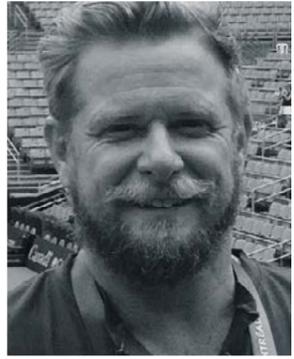


DANNY RIDLER

NEP



SMASHING THE WTA TOUR

The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) is the global leader in women's professional sport with more than 2500 players representing nearly 100 nations competing for a record \$146 million in prize money. The 2018 WTA competitive season includes 54 events and four Grand Slams in 30 countries. In 2017, the WTA was watched around the world by a total TV audience of 500 million – with host broadcast services provided by NEP UK.

Perform, the sports content producer and distributor, is a partner in WTA Media – a unique collaboration with the WTA created to centralise media rights and handle television production and distribution. Perform initially looked at building its own flypacks and hiring technical crew to handle host broadcast services, and also put out a tender for external OB companies to cover around 2500 live WTA matches per year. Ultimately, the company decided that working with NEP UK – with access to their expertise, resources, and talented staff – would be the best, most cost-effective and fastest solution.

The timeframe from contract award to the first project was pretty tight. NEP's Brian Clark and Donald Begg led NEP Group's response to Perform's requirements, and with NEP UK being busy building new trucks, Donald called upon the resources of NEP USA's System Integration Facility in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to design a flypack solution that would be scalable, robust, and – being mindful of shipping costs – as light as practically possible.

» Members of the Perform team visited the facility in December 2016 to meet with the NEP Group team and finalise the configurations of the systems. The SI team pulled out all the stops to deliver the two main flypacks, named Jupiter and Saturn, on time, with Neptune – a third add-on system to allow a second court to be covered – coming a few weeks later.

At the same time Donald worked with Simon Moorhead, NEP UK Broadcast Services MD, to recruit two Technical Project Managers (TPM) - Danny Ridler and Kristoffer Johansson - to manage the tour.

"We had to start the first event of the tour even before the final details were signed off," recalls Danny, "but we were excited for the challenge and ready to get to work."

There are 54 events or tournaments in total through the year, starting in China in January and ending around the end of October with the BNP Paribas WTA Finals, which are hosted in Singapore this year. NEP UK covers around 23-24 tournaments over 10 months. Danny and Kris manage everything for these events, including logistics, crew bookings, customs and technical requirements. "NEP UK excels at matching the right people to the right job and letting them move forward, trusting their expertise and experience," Danny notes.

Another of the NEP Group's strengths is its international reach and global pool of resources. With OB trucks, flypacks and equipment at 85 NEP Group facilities in 24 countries around the globe, Danny and Kris can save time and money for WTA by using local or near local resources for most events.

"We are able to use NEP Group OB trucks from local offices where we can, saving a considerable amount on freight and hire costs, and we can also call upon local resources. Because it is all in the NEP Group, we know it will be the same great service no matter where we are," says Danny. "Additionally, the NEP Group has good buying power and good relationships with suppliers around the world that results in top-of-the-line equipment and fantastic service. The international nature of the NEP Group helps the tour to run smoothly – we're a global company facilitating a global tournament."

The tour uses two dedicated flypacks – one in operation and one travelling to the next event. They have a basic spec of six Sony HDC-4300 cameras – which are 4k capable but the current remit is to shoot HD – plus Grass Valley Kula vision switchers, EVS XT3 servers, Calrec Brio audio consoles, and an array of ancillary equipment. Each flypack consists of 55 crates and weighs about 5 tonnes. Danny and Kris also alternate events, each leading a team consisting of a sound guarantee, a vision guarantee and two to three multi-skilled staff, depending on the size of the event. NEP's solution has the flexibility and scalability to allow for additional camera operators and other technicians to be added as required for larger tournaments.

Larger events such as the Singapore finals will require up to 17 cameras, additional replay machines and more ISOs and feeds to service the additional broadcasters that cover the bigger tournaments. NEP UK's solution is founded on the flexibility to handle both the smaller tournaments and the larger tournaments seamlessly, no matter where they are.





SMASHING THE WTA TOUR

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» “The premier tournaments like Singapore, Doha, Eastbourne, Birmingham and Montreal generally require coverage of more than one court,” Danny explains. “For instance, in Montreal we’ll cover Court 1 like we normally do with six cameras, plus we’ll have nine or ten cameras for Centre Court – that’s where we’ll pull in additional kit and additional camera ops and engineers. For us, it’s easy. We have the global resources and talent to accommodate it.”

“This is really a first for us and for Perform, this kit is on the road for a year so it has to be robust, durable and need little maintenance,” Danny says. “Obviously, things do happen, that’s a given for any large project, but NEP UK has specced the kit well and we work hard to keep everything in good shape.”

The first year went very smoothly, with a few challenges that the NEP UK team overcame with confidence. However, some things are beyond the team’s control, and NEP UK’s technical experts have to be ready for anything to ensure the broadcast happens smoothly.

Danny recalls a few ‘interesting’ experiences: “At one tournament last year the power was terrible and the AC was dying, and we had to monitor the temperature of the kit to prevent it from shutting down. Another time a couple of power supplies went down on a server, so we stayed late pulling it apart and phoning people to send new kit, but we got it done. We have a great team that approaches each challenge positively. The question is always, ‘how are we going to produce a tennis tournament even if everything around us dies’ – and we haven’t missed broadcasting a single point.”

The success of the 2017 tour gave Perform the confidence in NEP UK that has enabled them to innovate and consider new ways to cover tennis.

“Perform and NEP UK have a great relationship and we endeavour to keep that relationship strong and collaborative. Now that they have seen what we can do and how reliable our methods are, they are keen to get more creative, so we are looking at different cameras and angles, netcams, views above the court – ways to capture the excitement better,” says Danny.

The partnership between Perform and NEP UK continues to be highly successful, and as Perform’s DAZN OTT live and on-demand sports platform grows, NEP UK is well positioned to deliver additional international sports coverage.

“There aren’t many other companies out there who can do what we do,” says Danny. “With the NEP Group worldwide network behind us we can rely on NEP’s local support across the globe, and we have an incredible amount of in-house talent and experience in delivering top-class sports coverage. We like to say we offer global scale with local service, and it’s really true. I’m proud of what we have achieved so far with the WTA tour, and excited about how we can make it even better over the coming years.”

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Roger Conway B.Sc.(Hons), C.Eng. M.I.E.E Cert Ed Tel: +44(0)7850 403 611 Email: rgrcnw@aol.com