

Technology

Euro free kicks – maybe

You can watch the soccer tourney for free, so watch out for scammers

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Ask my dad and he'll tell you the World Cup and the Euro tournament are the only good reasons to pay for the privilege of watching commercials. That's why when I was a kid, our family got cable for exactly one month every other summer.

Now the countdown for the European Football Championship (Euro) 2008 is nearly over, and I'm faced with a decision about how to get access to the games (although England isn't even in it this year, so don't bother, Dad). I have cable now, so I could simply watch the games on TSN like I did in the 80s, but things have evolved since then and I now watch TV shows streamed or downloaded from the Web.

The tournament host, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), has an excellent website (www.uefa.com), complete with an RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feed and video highlights to post on Facebook, Friendster or blog program WordPress.

UEFA offers a pay-per-view option that claims to function on both Internet Explorer and Firefox for anyone with a 512k connection and up. Fans can purchase old games for only \$3, but when I try it they don't stream with my Firefox browser, so I'm forced to use Internet Explorer. The quality is good, though, and there are other options for annual pass-es and tournament passes.

The bad news is that the UEFA site doesn't work for Apple, Linux and Microsoft Vista platforms. There's also Digital Rights Management (DRM) agreement installation that only allows you to watch the games with Windows Media Player. This also means you can't download the video files the way you can from You Tube.

The UEFA site also only sells past games from its archive, which is updated about an hour after the games finish, so for live games it sells the feed from www.euro2008videosport.com, which allows users to buy 24-hour passes or passes to individual games. I watched the France-Ecuador friendly game live last week, and its quality was excellent. A bonus is that you can get commentary in German or French.

As is always the case online, there are some unofficial options as well. The new world of so-called P2PTV (peep-to-peer television) players are bound to be showing the Euro games, although trolling through all 60,000 channels to find what you want is a little tedious.

The most popular players, at www.ppmate.com and www.pplive.com, have exclusively Chinese-language interfaces and are often filled with glitches. Another, www.TVUnetworks.com, is being touted as a higher-quality English-language version, but it's still pretty cumbersome.

Beware of third-party sites charging cash for "unlimited access to streamed Euro games." These sites, such as www.oleolefootball.com and www.free-football.tv, charge you up to \$16 and then tell you to download the P2P software and direct you to websites for the feed, both of which are free. They have PayPal accounts and a fancy-looking FAQ section that make it look like you're getting something for your money.

Unscrupulous Web hucksters aside, today's options are certainly better than the state of things during the 2006 World Cup. Even though the Web is touted as border-free, Canadian users couldn't get access to the online games. The BBC streamed gloriously high-quality games, but it was only available to users in the UK.

The Zattoo online TV player (www.Zattoo.com) is the choice of many European football fans for online streaming, but it's similarly re-strict-ed to select European countries, even though it was developed just over the Detroit River in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Joost (www.joost.com), another Web TV player gaining in popularity, doesn't appear to be carrying the games at all.

Still, this spring, as long as you have your computer and an Internet connection, you should be able to surround yourself with the absurd patriotism of international football.

Ole!

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