

University of Rhode Island Relies on Grass Valley Solutions to Give Students Real-Life Sports Production Skills

Live sports is one of the biggest draws for TV audiences around the globe. In the US, the NFL alone [generated the ten largest sports audiences in 2019](#); of those, Super Bowl 53 topped the bill, attracting 98 million viewers just on linear TV. With many experts predicting continued growth for the overall sports market over the next three to five years, the demand for highly skilled, knowledgeable production crews is rising. Arming students with training in real-life sports production environments is key to ensuring their success in this exciting and competitive industry.

The opportunity: innovating for success

To meet this need, the University of Rhode Island (URI) recently launched its Sports Media program, a series of courses that allows students to major in writing and producing sports for all platforms, from cable television and the Internet, to social media. Students gain all the skills they need to succeed across a range of careers in this dynamic sector.

Jeff Fountain, Manager, Broadcast Center and Video Production Engineer at the University, commented, “Students are always looking for new and interesting careers. The University of Rhode Island’s Harrington School of Communication and Media major in Sports Media has seen a huge response from enthusiastic undergrads. We realized that we needed to give students a platform to practice and develop their skill set in an environment that is as close to a real-life professional experience as possible.”

An experienced technical director (TD) with many years’ experience, Fountain was familiar with Grass Valley’s solutions and keen to leverage its best-in-class technology for the students. He explained: “Grass Valley has played a pivotal role in advancing live sports broadcast and is the gold standard for live sports production. We want to give our students access to the very best technology, teaching them on the same systems they’ll encounter in the real world. When looking for a system, it came down to brand loyalty, so I didn’t look at other vendors; when a brand earns your loyalty, it’s a very powerful thing.”

Underpinning the Sports Media program is a \$1.25 million renovation of the university’s existing Broadcast Center. Featuring the latest solutions for digital production, streaming and broadcasting, the new facility comprises an advanced control room and professional news desk, with [Grass Valley’s Viper XXL](#) bidirectional transmission system forming a key component of the workflow.



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Fountain added, “We need to give the students a facility that allows them to practice and develop their skills on camera and also in pre- and post-production, so creating a state-of-the-art broadcast center was essential. I’d come across the Grass Valley system being used by another university and it blew my mind. We needed a plug-and-play solution that would allow us to send multiple camera feeds from live sporting venues miles away to the Broadcast Center control room — this is exactly what the Viper XXL does.”

In the past, Fountain and his team would typically have brought in a local sports broadcaster, to provide and fund an outside broadcasting (OB) truck for live coverage of its sports teams in action. Now, with the Viper XXL, the University’s own students can create the coverage of their college teams with a fiber connection from the cameras running straight back to the broadcast center control room. What’s more, with remote production becoming a rapidly growing part of the live sports production landscape, creating a remote workflow around the Viper XXL makes a lot of sense and gives the students hands-on experience of this highly relevant production approach.



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The solution: going remote to take control

Grass Valley’s Viper product family line is a portable transmission system consisting of two identical end units, linked by fiber optic cable and designed to transport a variety of broadcast production signals bidirectionally between two locations. Viper simplifies preshow preparation as a plug-and-play device with the added ability to be rack-mounted or used as a standalone chassis. This proved ideal for the University of Rhode Island’s requirements as the receive unit is permanently located in the broadcast center, whereas the transmission unit goes to different venues that have been pre-cabled with single mode fiber back to the broadcast center.

The Viper XXL system can simultaneously support up to eight 3G cameras with related audio and control data signals while also providing multichannel intercom capability and 100/1Gig Ethernet connectivity. It comes in a 14 RU

JBT (junction box terminal) enclosure, including a 48-port network switch and spacing for breakout cable panels.

As Fountain explained, “This is a huge game-changer for us and our students, as the Viper XXL system enables us to leverage our control room to function remotely. The Grass Valley system uses two strands of single mode fiber with one strand sending and the other receiving. As it also brings in audio, our students can have up to eight microphones plugged in at the same time. One of the most important elements is the four-wire duplex clear communication feature that allows the control room to talk to the student manning the cameras on location, and that’s absolutely a deal breaker in allowing our students to have a true sports production experience.”

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The outcome: from student to sportscaster stars

The Sports Media students saw the benefits of Viper XXL's plug-and-play nature in its first deployment, a live basketball game featuring the Rhode Island Rams. Fountain commented, "We put the system into play with the Sports Media students running the cameras and a professional crew in the control room, and it was a terrific success. With the Grass Valley Viper XXL system — you turn it on, you plug it in, and it works — it's just a remarkable piece of technology."

This deployment has enabled the University of Rhode Island Sports Media students to gain firsthand experience of a real-life sports production setup, but the solution's applications go beyond just this department. "The Viper system will extend the reach of the control room to anywhere that you can run or already have single mode fiber. Let's say to the Performing Arts stages where there might be an important presentation by a lecturer delivered to an audience, or perhaps in another building, there's a music concert that you

want to capture and produce. By simply moving the send module around, your control room becomes the hub and you're giving students the opportunity to create content by just pointing cameras at what's happening on their own campuses."

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Grass Valley's Viper XXL system has become an even more critical to URI, according to Fountain. He adds, "As the beginning of the fall semester comes closer, we are starting to ramp up video content production in support of distance learning. The Viper XXL unit will allow us to extend the reach of our studio and control room to one of the major auditoriums on campus. This will come in handy as large classrooms are in high demand due to social distancing requirements between individuals. The Viper XXL system will be a useful resource in helping keep students safe."

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