

Words by Neal Romanek

HANGING LOOSE AND WIRELESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Ballito Pro International Surf Event was streamed live to a large following of loyal fans. This year's event featured wireless cameras, giving a new perspective on the surfing and the event

The Ballito Pro is a top world qualifying series surf event that takes place every year along one of South Africa's most beautiful stretches of coast. This year's event, the 50th, was held in June and featured the World Surf League's top ranked surfers and the cream of South Africa's men, women and junior competitors.

Starting with simple highlight packages for linear television, the event's coverage has evolved to a fully online experience. The daily Ballito Pro coverage now includes a webisode, a highlights package

and eight hours of multi-camera live online coverage.

Producer Greg Kitto has been involved with every aspect of the event's media coverage for ten years now. His company White Hot Media specialises in water sports and, in addition to The Ballito Pro, produces coverage for all the World Surf League's events in South Africa.

"Anything in the ocean, that's our niche. And surfing is our specialty," says Kitto, an avid aquatic sports enthusiast himself. "It was a spin-off from what I loved to do, and now luckily it's my job."



In 2012, Kitto started webcasting the event and the online coverage has steadily expanded since then.

"The World Surf League has a million followers on its Facebook page, and about the same who have downloaded the app. They have quite a strong online media following, and that is where they're pushing all their media now."

This year The Ballito Pro partnered with Facebook for its live stream, after previous years of juggling multiple content across multiple outlets. Live content went out over Facebook – as well as YouTube and the World Surf League's website. The content was free to view and brought in an average of 200,000 viewers each day.

The production has become more elaborate each year. For the 2018 edition, four fixed 4K cameras – Panasonic UX180 and UX90 models – were placed along the beach. "These are handycams and they have a great picture," says Kitto. "The surfing is 200 metres away so you don't need these big lenses that you would have in cricket or football."

The production also featured a drone operator on the beach, but the big innovation for The Ballito Pro this year was going mobile.

RIPPING Building on six years' experience of webcasting The Ballito Pro, White Hot Media's Greg Kitto this year moved the production on, going wireless. This expanded the coverage potential, including getting a camera operator out on a jet ski alongside the competing surfers

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"We wanted to take it wireless so that we could have more flexibility and could show more of the event. We could show the people, we could show the locations. Surfing can be a little bit too structured – you see a guy surfing, you do replays, the guy comes out of the water, you do an interview in front of a banner and not a lot of people get to see where you are. You're in Ballito and it's this beautiful place, so we wanted to bring in more of that."

The team partnered with LiveU to provide cellular bonded uplinks which allowed cameras to operate and stream from anywhere, including putting a cameraman on a jet ski out with the surfers.

"I liked being able to take the interview cam and make it roving. We could bring in the public on the beach and show the area. We had two cameras roving the beach and then we had a camera out at sea, so people could see the surfers' point of view."

Ballito is a small and quiet seaside resort without a lot of space for rolling up OB vehicles. Kitto's team built a custom studio on the beach itself. The team used vMix software for multi-camera switching along with Blackmagic hardware.

The Ballito Pro event has also extended to the surrounding area with music and entertainment taking place daily. The new wireless set-up allowed footage to be captured of the fun times being had beyond the surfing too.

"Ballito is as much a festival as it is a surf contest," says Kitto. "The surfing is the focus, but they also have extreme sports and they have music concerts. Now that we know certain elements are working well, next year we can start to bring those other elements in, and have more stories on those things going into the evening. We can start streaming some of the concerts and bring more of that experience onto the platform. Potentially the event can boost tourism for the region. We want to help grow the event, but also help promote the region." 