

AV TECHNOLOGY



[Print this article](#)

By Daniel Frankel

URL: <http://www.avtechnologyonline.com/article/31408.aspx>

The Saints Tackle AV Management Issues

Superdome Technology Managers Have Full Control Over More Than 600 Tv Sets Without Having To Lay Additional Cable

Just as the New Orleans Saints struggled mightily on the field throughout the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, the Louisiana Superdome was itself challenged by an inferior AV game plan.

Completed in 1975, the Superdome's interior has always been festooned with hundreds of televisions, mounted in areas like concessions, concourses, and luxury suites. Typical content consisted of the game currently in progress, providing close-circuit stat feeds to sportswriters, or keeping luxury box denizens up to date on the scores of NFL rivals.

During the first several decades of operation, many of these TV sets were old-style analog Zenith CRT units with rotary-dial controls, with no remote. Most were mounted up high to prevent dome visitors from changing the channel themselves.

"Before I got here, the people who worked here had to rig a 30-foot ladder and go up to each of these TVs and turn them on and switch them to the right channel," says Brodie Cannon, who has been the Superdome's AV technician for the last 11 years. Cannon says that whole process — getting each of those TV's turned on and making sure they were tuned to the right channel — took up to eight hours to perform in preparation for a New Orleans Saints game.

Like the Saints, who came within a playoff game victory of their first Super Bowl appearance back in 2006, their feel-good post-Hurricane Katrina season, the Superdome's inhouse TV system has come a long way. Today, the facility features over 600 flat-panel monitors of various makes and sizes, each centrally controlled via standard coax from a networked PC application that fits in seamlessly with the dome's existing TV distribution system.

Using Contemporary Research's RF-based Display Express control system, Superdome technology managers have granular control over every TV in the house from a single seat in a centralized control room. Now, in areas like the press box, Superdome technology staffers can, using fairly intuitive GUI software interface, switch over the TVs from the ESPN feed that runs before the game to the in-house stat feed that's supposed to run during the contest.

"One authorized person with a laptop or an iPhone can do anything they want using this system — turn sets on, change the channel, whatever — and there are very, very few failures," says Tim Landry, a technology manager employed directly by the Saints for 10 years before going out on his own last year. (He now services the team's AV needs as a private contractor running his own shop.)

Like the Saints, however, improvement to the dome's expansive TV control system came slowly. Even today, "It's still a work in progress," admits Cannon, whose first "upgrade" upon joining the dome was to design a long pole so that staffers could switch the TVs on without climbing a ladder. "If the TV was already on the right channel, all you'd have to do was bump the power button with the pole," he explains.

Later, remote control TV technology was "introduced" to the dome, which proved problematic. In the end-zone balcony area, for



Some of the 191 displays monitors controlled via RF coax cable are used in the function rooms of the Louisiana Superdome.

example, rows of TVs were suspended up high, tuned to the Superdome's closed-circuit instant replay channel. "If you're sitting in the balcony, you can't see the stadium replays on the big Daktronics ProStar LED boards because you're physically blocked by the balcony," Landry says. "So those TVs are the only way for people to see the replays."

The problem is, certain fans got wise and started bringing their own remote controls so that they could switch the channels themselves. "If they also wanted to watch the Dallas game, or Atlanta or Tampa Bay, they could just switch the channel," Landry adds. "But that's not why those TVs were put there."

However, starting around 2001 — just after the adjacent pro basketball facility, the New Orleans Arena, had opened, expanding the scope of TVs to be managed even further — the Superdome technology staff decided to upgrade to AV technology of the current millennium.

"What we needed was a way to make sure we could control what was on each TV," Landry says. "But we didn't want to get into the hassle and expense of running another wire to every TV. And we didn't want to use an infra-red-based control system, because I have found that IRs always get out of sync and there's always something to deal with." The Contemporary Research control system allowed dome technology managers to use the same coax feed that was already attached to each television in the house.

Initially, before Hurricane Katrina in 2005 spurred a \$134 million renovation of the storm-damaged Superdome, many of the older TVs were switched over to RCA CRT sets. Each set was equipped with a Contemporary Research control box, which bridged the coax feed and TV set. Separately, control of the set was established through an RJ45 jack connection between the module and the set.

The system is simple — each box connects directly via the existing coax of the distributed TV system to a head-end processor that inserts the control channel into the RF system. That processor is connected to the dome's network, allowing Superdome technology managers to control the system from virtually anywhere they can get a network connection.

Programming the control software required no special certifications. In fact, dome technology managers figured it out themselves, organizing groups of TV sets into individually addressable zones. "The control system uses none of the coax bandwidth," explains Landry, who estimates the cost to upgrade the dome's TV system at that time, including the integration of PC-based control, ran about \$100,000.

Later, after the hurricane-related damage rendered many of the RCA sets a loss, dome management spent quite a bit more on their distributed TV system, switching the bulk of its sets over to 42-inch LG LC7D LCD flat-panel sets. The same control system was kept in place. New control boxes, however, were deployed that match the sets' RS-232 interface design.

"Buying those products was nothing compared to having to rewire the building, which we thankfully didn't have to do," Landry adds.

Daniel Frankel is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who regularly writes about the businesses of entertainment and technology. He can be reached at frankel_daniel@hotmail.com.



[Print this article](#)