

AUSSIE WHO PAID \$10,000 TO PUT HIS TEAM ON TV

Hammer fans' hero

By PETER BADEL

THIS is the shrewd Sydney entrepreneur who allowed West Ham devotees across Australia to see the Hammers' finest footballing moment in two decades.

Desperate to see his side's bid to win promotion to the English Premiership last Monday night, Hammers tragic David Lewis was devastated to learn no television network in the country would screen West Ham's all-or-nothing clash with Preston North End.

So he took the matter into his own hands and bought the TV rights himself.

In a deal media mogul Kerry Packer would be proud of, the 47-year-old father of two contacted Sky TV in England and forked out up to \$10,000 to watch his beloved Hammers, who earned a stunning \$84 million pay day with an emotion-charged 1-0 victory.

Sky TV initially rejected his approach, but relented when Lewis secured the help of cable TV company Setanta Sports.

"It's the best money I've ever spent," Lewis said.

"When I found out the networks weren't interested in showing the game, I desperately wanted to see it so I thought, 'Okay, I'll try and buy the rights.'

"I contacted Sky TV, told them I wanted the rights and they said: 'Are you crazy?' I'm not one to take no for an answer, so I did some research on the net and found Setanta, contacted them and told them what I wanted to do.

"They also asked if I was crazy. I said, 'look, I want to see this game, I don't care what it costs, will you help me get the rights?'"

"They said, 'if you buy the rights, we can show it.' "I said, 'no worries, I'll get the money.'"

A Hammers fan since 1972, Lewis planned to stick a satellite dish on his roof and show the game in his living room to a few mates.

But when Setanta offered to beam the game throughout selected pubs and clubs in Australia and New Zealand, the entrepreneur in Lewis was awoken.

"I thought I could be a promoter. I could open the game up to West Ham fans like me," said Lewis, who also bought the rights to West Ham's identical match last year, which they lost to Crystal Palace.

"I thought, 'heck, this is costing me a lot of money, my wife will kill me!' I needed to find a way to share the cost. That's when it all got out of hand."

The owner of an IT company, Lewis turned his obsession into a nationwide gala night. With the help of his staff, he devised an online ticketing website where West Ham nuts could pay \$25 to watch the match.

"We had around 350 people at



Cult figure: David Lewis with daughter Juliet, 9, and (below) West Ham players celebrate their return to the Premier League Picture: SARAH RHODES

East's Leagues Club and about 2000 throughout the country. It was just sensational," Lewis said.

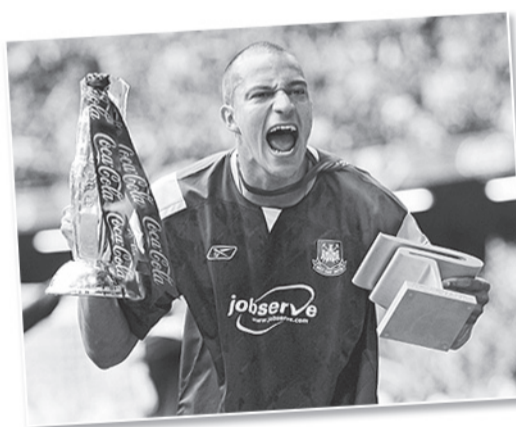
"Never once did I think about making money. I was just a football fan desperate to see West Ham make the Premier League."

Lewis is now a cult figure.

"I've had calls from Africa and New Zealand and hundreds from the UK," he said. "The BBC called me and we did a live interview. I've had tens of thousands of e-mails thanking me."

He even received a marriage proposal from a London woman.

"I told her I am quite happy with the English wife I already have," Lewis said.



Iran eye the finals

IRAN can clinch a spot in the 2006 World Cup finals for themselves and Japan if they beat Bahrain on Wednesday.

The Iranians topped North Korea 1-0 yesterday in Group B of Asian qualifying matches, giving them 10 points from four matches.

Japan, who beat Bahrain 1-0, are next with nine points. Bahrain have just four points.



Move: Hernan Crespo

Chelsea to offload Crespo to AC

CHELSEA striker Hernan Crespo will seal a move to Italian giants AC Milan this week. According to the BBC, Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon will meet AC Milan officials to discuss the permanent transfer of the on-loan striker.

AC Milan president Adriano Galliani said: "We will meet with Peter Kenyon on Wednesday to discuss Crespo."

"Our goal is to confirm the 11 starters from Istanbul for next season."

Galliani was referring to

Milan's starting team in the Champions League final.

AC Milan will be keen to sign the 29-year-old, with rumours that Chelsea could offer him, and his international team-mate Juan Sebastian Veron, to Milan's bitter city rivals Inter as bait to try to lure talented Brazilian striker Adriano to Stamford Bridge.

Crespo scored twice in the Champions League final before Milan lost on penalties to Liverpool.

He joined Chelsea from Inter Milan for £16.8 million

(\$40.3m) in 2003, but after a disappointing first season he followed Veron back to Italy on a season-long loan at the San Siro.

The AC Milan president also confirmed Kenyon has asked for permission to open talks with Kakhabar Kaladze with a view to signing the Georgian left-back.

Chelsea have been looking for a new left-back since selling Celestine Babayaro to Newcastle in January and are keen to consider a part-exchange deal with Milan.

They are also in talks with

Athletic Bilbao over a possible £12m bid for their left-back Asier del Horno.

● FORMER England star Paul Gascoigne believes he deserves a break after 22 years in the game.

The 38-year-old former player for Newcastle United, Tottenham Hotspur, Lazio, Middlesbrough and Rangers is in Greece to play in a charity match today for the United Nations.

"I've been a good kid the last two-and-a-half years. I try to keep a low profile, but the paparazzi don't leave me alone," he said.