

In search of a level playing field

by Richard Corbett MEP

Barcelona's 2-1 victory over Arsenal in the Champions League final was, as always, the climax of the European club season with the millions of eyes watching only outnumbered by the millions of pounds counted.

It is a stage to which every club aspires but it is sadly one that fewer and fewer can achieve, and one that remains a distant prospect for all of Yorkshire's clubs.

The final was the ninth time in 11 years that both finalists came from one of the 'Big Four' countries of European football. In the 50 year history of the European Cup, there have been 46 finalists from outside of England, Italy, Spain and Germany - but only three in the last 11 years.

These facts are the tip of an iceberg with the growing concentration of wealth and success among a smaller and smaller elite of clubs in Europe - a concentration both on a limited number of leagues and, within them, on a limited number of clubs who now dominate each league.

In Italy the last 15 years have seen either Milan or Juventus clinch the Scudetto, apart from a win each for Roma and Lazio. Over the past 20 years in Spain, only Atletico Madrid, Valencia and Deportivo La Coruna have interrupted La Liga's usual winners of Barcelona or Real Madrid. In France, Lyon has become so utterly dominant they have strolled to a fifth successive league title, with the margin of their triumph growing each year.

It is a problem football fans in our country know all too well. From 1947 to 1956, seven different sides claimed the league title, a statistic which was repeated in the following 10 years. Between 1967 and 1976 the figure only dropped to six. Contrast that with past decade and as we all know only Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea have lifted the Premier League trophy. The same three clubs plus Liverpool have also accounted for the FA Cup over the same period.

The promotion of Sheffield United thankfully gives Yorkshire a representative in the Premiership next season but the league's disparate levels of wealth mean simply avoiding the drop will be seen as a major triumph at Bramall Lane. Wigan and West Ham may have prospered in the Premiership last season but the likelihood of them or Sheffield United qualifying for the Champions League is remote; none have the faintest hope of winning the title in the next decade.

Key to clubs dominating their leagues and the 'Big Four' leagues dominating Europe is TV money and the enormous jackpot rewards for playing in the Champions League. As a result of the financial clout the competition brings once a club is embedded in the Champions League the likelihood of them failing to qualify decreases to the point where they are all but guaranteed their place. The last time Manchester United did not play in the Champions League was in 1996 and since the 1997/98 season, when the group stage round was enlarged, Bayern Munich, Real Madrid and PSV Eindhoven have also been ever presents.

The problem is exacerbated in countries where TV money is not shared fairly among the clubs in a league. Spain and Italy operate this practice with the likes of Real Madrid, Barcelona, Juventus and Milan taking most of the TV revenue for themselves alone.

But competitive balance on domestic fronts and in Europe is key to maintaining spectator interest. Ways must be found to counter the trend and to re-distribute football's increasing wealth more fairly. Unless this is done, competitive interest will disappear as a dozen (or 14) clubs dominate Europe and just two or three monopolize each national league.

It seems sensible then to make it obligatory for all leagues across Europe to sell television rights collectively with all participating clubs taking an equal or near equal share of the revenue and with a significant proportion going to the next lowest league.

Currently UEFA gives around six per cent of the money it makes from the Champions League to smaller clubs as "solidarity payments" but a team reaching the last eight of the competition can expect to pocket upwards of 20million euros. This percentage could be gradually increased, with a percentage of UEFA Cup revenue similarly earmarked. The solidarity payments from the European Championship revenues should also be made available for a wider range of solidarity spending.

Many of Yorkshire's clubs would then profit from increased solidarity payments, especially because to be eligible for the money clubs would have to comply with UEFA's "good financial management and governance" criteria. Poor financial management is a problem which has blighted many of Yorkshire's clubs and any initiative which encourages more prudence should benefit all of our region's teams.

Another issue related closely to the increased wealth of a few clubs is "hoarding", a procedure in which the buying power of elite clubs allows them to purchase players from smaller leagues and clubs without necessarily needing them, mainly to stop them signing for rival teams. Chelsea, for instance, has over 40 professional players on its books.

The most recent Champions League winners from outside the 'Big Four' came when Jose Mourinho guided Porto to victory over Monaco in 2004. Following Porto's triumph, Mourinho led an exodus which included Deco, Ricardo Carvalho, Paulo Ferreira, Nuno Valente, Pedro Mendes and Maniche. All headed for clubs from England and Spain. Out of the players, only Deco, Carvalho and Ferreira have become integral parts of the teams they originally joined.

Another club forced to cope with a stream of players leaving is PSV Eindhoven whose hopes of landing Europe's top prize are continually hindered by clubs from the 'Big Four' plundering their leading players. Since 2004 PSV have lost Arjen Robben, Mark van Bommel, Metejka Kezman, Dennis Rommedahl, Johan Vogel, Ji-Sung Park, Young Pyo Lee and Wilfred Bouma. All have ended up in England, Spain, Italy or Germany. The problem repeats itself down the football pyramid with PSV having the financial might to sign the best players in the Dutch league as replacements, and in doing so maintain their dominance of the Netherlands.

UEFA have recently set up two initiatives to combat this competitive imbalance and they should also be applied by national leagues and associations for their own tournaments. In an attempt to spread talent more widely a limit on squad sizes (currently 25) has been introduced, a move which will prevent clubs "hoarding".

The UEFA "home grown" players scheme should also be strongly supported. It will require four of the club's players to be trained up by its youth system and another four to be trained up in that club's country. It does not infringe on EU law or discriminate because the player's nationality is not of concern.

In addition the link between the financial budget of a club and its playing strength becomes less direct if the club is forced to incorporate a certain number of home-grown players into its squad instead of

simply buying talent on the market. This is another area in which Yorkshire's clubs have room for improvement but when investment has been put into youth systems in our region, top quality home-grown players have been produced. Michael Tonge and Phil Jagielka were both products of Sheffield United's youth system and both played key roles in the Blades' promotion. The financial crisis at Leeds prompted a reliance on youngsters, with the likes of Scott Carson, James Milner and Aaron Lennon earning moves elsewhere while the efforts of Matthew Kilgallon and Frazer Richardson almost pushed United up.

Some of these ideas will not be welcomed by all and critics will point out that historically a few teams have always dominated their own leagues and Europe. This cannot be denied but it is equally true that in recent years the problem has intensified. Others will point to the continued emergence of sides in Europe and national leagues but the likes of Middlesbrough, Wigan, Villarreal, CSKA Moscow and even Gretna have been bankrolled by fabulous sums.

The aristocrats of the game will always exist and deserve the success they have achieved but it is desirable to return to the days when a club the size of Nottingham Forest could, blessed with the right players and an excellent manager, lift the European Cup without extraordinary financial backing.

UEFA have recognized that action must be taken. The return of just one group stage in the Champions League has increased other club's chances and this has already born fruit, with Porto's triumph coming the year after the clunky second group stage was abandoned.

There is no doubt that a better future for football depends on widespread competition and UEFA must use the wealth the game continues to accrue to help leagues and clubs return to a more level playing field.