

Column from the Sprout #8

'The future of football'
By Richard Corbett MEP

The future of European Football is not usually on the agenda for MEPs, but I have had the luck of being asked to serve on the Independent Review of European Football that has been set up by governments and UEFA.

Naturally, I want the Review to focus on why referees are always biased against teams which I support, but the remit is somewhat wider than that. It concerns the whole constellation of problems facing football, not least the growing concentration of wealth and success among an ever-shrinking number of clubs.

This is a sore point in Yorkshire, which currently doesn't even have a single Premiership club (compared to 7 in the neighbouring North-West and 6 in London), let alone any likely to qualify for Europe (though at least that must please the Europhobes!).

Football faces the problem of the "jackpot" effect - a well known economic model where the rewards system is such as to entice participants to "gamble upon success" in a rat-race to the top - but with the cost of failure also immense. Top clubs are inevitably tempted to spend beyond their means on players, knowing that if they are successful, the money spent will be more than adequately covered, but with the high risk that if they fail they descend into a spiral of debt. The words "Leeds United" somehow spring to mind!

Should there be a limitation on the volume of clubs' spending on players' wages? This could be a fixed percentage of a club's earned income. Similarly, there could be a limit on the deficits/borrowing that clubs are entitled to have for current expenditure. Clubs are tempted to overspend and borrow because other rival clubs do and they don't want to be left behind, but if their rivals can't borrow either, then they will not need to. It would amount to a mutual "disarmament" in this high-risk aspect of the modern game.

What else could be done to counter this trend? Can UEFA and individual leagues impose financial re-distributive measures?

It will probably need a range of measures that, cumulatively, could at least attenuate this problem. For a start, UEFA has just brought in rules limiting squad sizes. This is intended to prevent the hoarding of players by big clubs, some of whom now have massive squads of players who only play occasionally, and one suspects have been bought to avoid other clubs buying them.

In a similar spirit, they are bringing in a "home grown" players scheme such that each professional team must include a number of players who have come up from their youth teams.

Then there is the issue of the collective marketing of TV rights by Leagues and not by individual clubs. This allows all participating clubs to take a share of the revenue, rather than the "big" ones creaming off all the revenue, as happens in Italy. I was involved last year in ensuring that the European Commission accepted that collective marketing is a legitimate practice that does not violate our European rules on economic competition.

We could also recommend that the percentage of Champions League revenue that is recycled to

small and medium sized clubs have increased from its current level of 6% to a more substantial level

In my view, UEFA/FIFA should also require all national associations/leagues to operate redistribution systems of their own in favour of small to medium sized clubs.

Maybe there should also be a central clearance system for transfer fees with the retention of a "tax" of 5% of all transfer fees for redistribution among all professional clubs in the relevant national association.

But the most tricky knot to crack might be the rules for qualifying for European competitions. How can we avoid qualification for Europe becoming a monopoly of an elite group in each country? Perhaps the Inter-Toto Cup should be expanded into a more comprehensive pre-season "European Qualifying Competition" affording opportunities to clubs that may not be among the regular qualifiers for Europe. For instance, why not allow the second tier champion, upon promotion to the top league in their country, and the winner of the Fair Play trophy of the previous season to enter a qualifying competition? Maybe we should also revive the old Cup-Winners Cup.. This afforded the possibility for many medium sized clubs to shine in a European tournament. Its abolition is recent, so we are talking about reviving a known and understood concept with a genuine history. At least all this would bring in teams other than the usual suspects!

The balance of who qualifies directly into the group phase of the Champions League could be re-examined. Only champion clubs should qualify directly without playing a single qualifying match. This would increase the number of countries from which the champion team qualified and therefore help medium-sized leagues.

With my reputation as an anorak for rules of procedure, I would also like to make a recommendation to the International Board regarding the rules of the game. This would be to address the fact that the receipt of a yellow card by a player during a match is no longer a major disincentive for the big clubs who do not mind their players being regularly suspended after accumulating two yellow cards, because they have another equally good player in reserve. Smaller clubs, by contrast, tend to have a more limited number of top players and the loss of such a player by suspension has a major impact on their next few matches. The remedy would be to make a yellow card actually matter during the match in which it is given by requiring the yellow-carded player to leave the pitch for 10 minutes (as happens in other sports - though not to UKIP MEPs in the European Parliament!)

Another possibility would be to make the cost of fouls higher by allowing free kicks to be taken 10 metres further forward than the spot at which the foul was committed. This would also make many free kicks more interesting

We have received a suggestion that, in national leagues, each season should begin with the previous season's winner on -10 points and the previous season's runner-up on -9 points and so on. Is this idea realistic? It would at least make Chelsea supporters go apoplectic!

It is often said that football is a pyramid with a continuum from the grass roots to the top professional clubs. Yet this very idea is now challenged because of the growing concentration of wealth and success among a small number of clubs who, in almost every European country, are in practice becoming detached from the rest of the pyramid. This trend can only be detrimental to the long term interests of the sport. It must be countered.