



Over the past years, English football fans have started voicing protests against the commercialisation of a game they consider theirs

»Football has altered from a sport based on teamwork and co-operation to a collection of individuals making as much money as possible,« David Conn said



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Profiting from the People's Game

By Karen Balling Radmer

Recently, a total of 24 new basketball teams were founded in 12 countries to take part in a new "super league" outside the control of the international basketball federation, FIBA. Likewise in football, the richest clubs in Europe have all the financial reasons to want to form a breakaway league. This is the view of Wladimir Andreff, Professor of Economics from the University of Sorbonne in Paris, and Vice Chairman of the Organisation of Sports Economists.

Andress told Play the Game that money is controlling the destiny of professional sport. As evidence, he pointed to a recent statement by Spanish telecom giant Telefonica. The company recently stated that if a new, breakaway European League were to become a reality, it could double the income it currently receives from sponsoring football's Champions League.

The losers in the money game, said Andreff, will be the fans, the amateur

players and the local communities. Those who have always been aware of the game's social benefits and responsibilities.

But how have we reached such a stage? Andreff painted a frightening picture of the economics of professional football, which is nowadays dealing in larger and larger sums of money.

English author and football journalist David Conn spoke on a related theme, warning that the ugly side of the commercialisation of the English game is set to be imported to the rest of Europe - just as the game itself was many years ago.

TV economy

According to Wladimir Andreff, the most dramatic change in the economies of today's large football clubs has been the sale of TV rights. With the advent of satellite TV and the digital revolution, these rights can now be sold almost anywhere in the world where a demand exists.

In the 1960's and 70's, football clubs

made most of their income from selling tickets for games. Fans arrived at the stadium to see their team, and all over Europe fans followed "their" club - with allegiances usually lasting a lifetime.

In the 1990's, however, major changes began to take place. Many more TV stations were appearing. With football seen as one of their greatest attractions, these TV stations began to bid against each other to secure the rights to broadcast the important games. The result is that today, over 80% of many large clubs' income comes from the sale of TV rights. With these large sums of money came the new job of "commercial director" whose main task was to ensure that the club was commercially exploited to the full. From pencil cases bearing the club logo to concerts at the stadium, Europe's top clubs began to earn enormous sums of money from commercial spin-offs. As a result, they can now afford to buy the new talent that helps them remain among Europe's elite.

»One of the problems with this economic model is that football is now do-





minated a handful of rich clubs,« said Wladimir Andreff. »In Europe, the results of matches are often determined by each clubs' economic ambitions. The richest clubs can tempt the most talented players away from their rivals. Therefore they win more games, earn more money and are then able to buy more talented players. These clubs are far more likely to win major honours.«

The rich get richer

Andreff pointed to another trend as a harbinger for the future. TV stations are now increasingly attempting to exercise their control over the actual sporting event. In a number of sports, rule changes have been discussed with live TV in mind. A suggestion to divide soccer games into four quarters, to allow more time for advertisements, was looked upon favourably by many TV companies.

»We are also seeing more and more corruption in European professional sport, especially football.« he said. »We are seeing blatant breaches of the rules, and even matches where the result is fixed. And it is well known that the Russian Mafia "washes" its money through European professional sport. I see these examples as just the tip of the

iceberg.« He warned that without more government intervention, the amount of "dirty money" in sport will continue to increase.

The disappearance of the role model

The new order also has plenty of losers. Youngsters for whom football has traditionally provided role models, for example, or fans that have supported their club over many years. According to David Conn, very few youngsters from his home city of Manchester can afford to watch a United game. Most must be content watching the reserves.

»Football has altered from a sport based on teamwork and co-operation to a collection of individuals making as much money as possible for themselves,« he said. »Now its values are primarily the values of business, not those of sport. The owners of the football clubs have made vast amounts of money. They have allowed tickets prices to rise, built new stadiums using taxpayers' money and make a fortune in the process. The losers are the spectators and the game itself.«

Conn warned that in England at least, only the richest will be able to afford to attend football games in the

future, while the rest of us must be content watching our favourite team on TV. And if the trend continues unabated, there is nothing to stop it spreading to Europe.

Fans confident

However, there could be evidence of light at the end of the tunnel. Malcolm Clarke of the English Football Supporters' Association presented Play the Game with a more optimistic message. He pointed out that many clubs are beginning to realise the importance of their grass roots fans. All public companies, including those football clubs listed on the stock exchange, are obliged to satisfy their shareholders - shareholders who would not be pleased if the company's customers were seen to be unhappy.

Clarke pointed to recent signs that fans are again being seen as an important asset to a club. He points to recent events in which fan pressure prevented the owners of Manchester United selling out to media mogul Rupert Murdoch as an optimistic sign for the future. Although we are still in the early stages, he said, the tide could finally be turning. ♦

Professor of Economics Wladimir Andreff painted a frightening picture of the current economics of professional football. Without government intervention, the problem will continue to grow

