

‘A spit in the face of fans’ says UEFA chief

Should supporters own 51% of every football team? As fans mutiny and political leaders rage over a cash grab by wealthy bosses, the case for major legal reform is growing.

Rebel alliance: The 12 teams between them represent just seven cities in three countries.

“It’s pure greed… it’s a criminal act against football fans”. That was Gary Neville’s angry verdict yesterday on the shock plan by 12 of Europe’s biggest clubs to form a new entity: the European Super League. If the idea becomes reality, the new group will include 20 clubs, and will run alongside existing European and domestic leagues.

Football authorities immediately hit back. The European football body, Uefa, is threatening to ban the breakaway clubs from other tournaments. Fifa, the international governing body for the sport, said players would be barred from the World Cup. This would mean England without Harry Kane, Marcus Rashford, Raheem Sterling or Harry Maguire.

Teams for the current top club competition in Europe, the Champions’ League, are currently chosen by merit and win big financial rewards in TV revenues and sponsorship. But the new league would not be merit-based: it would guarantee all 12 founder members a place in every future tournament. Critics say this amounts to a kind of cartel that shuts out smaller clubs. For many, this is a killer blow to the sport. It would be like watching the top 12 tennis players simply play each other over and over again for, say, an entire year.

For the billionaire owners of the clubs it makes sense. Fans can not get enough of elite football. And this guarantees massive extra money for the clubs to spend on snapping up the world’s top players.

Many experts think there is a conflict between the interests of billionaire owners, who see their clubs as businesses, and the fans, for whom a club is a community. One major European country claims to have solved the problem already. German clubs in the top leagues have to be 51% owned by fans, so supporters can outvote private investors. Partly as a result, a ticket to a Bayern Munich match can cost as little as £7.65. In contrast, a cheap seat for an English Premier League match will cost around £33. However, ticket prices are not just set by the club: they are also affected by supply and demand. That is why some think fan ownership really does very little to bring football back to supporters. Football teams are businesses, and their decisions are dictated by market forces.

Should the same law apply in every country?

Yes, say some. "Here, football is one of the last activities which really brings people together, across all ages and all classes of income," says one German club boss. "Most chief executives have decided to take less money and enable people whose families have supported the club for generations to keep coming. We want to have our whole society as part of our football, in our stadiums."

Nonsense, say others. There is one reason why the Premier League still has the most exciting clubs, great coaches and the most thrilling players: money. This money dwarfs the amount in German football and comes largely from the pockets of the super-rich owners that Britain rightly welcomes to the party.