

The big sell out

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No other country allows the crown jewels of their major sport to become the uncontrolled playthings of investors whose backgrounds remain untested. The Football Association's failure to investigate properly the background of the foreign nationals buying top clubs or their growing influence on the sport heralds the end of the Premier League as an English institution. Persuaded that football's only hope of survival is spending unlimited millions of pounds, the game's administrators have swallowed the myth that the Premier League can flourish only by unquestioningly allowing a wholesale takeover by foreign investors.

The rot started when Roman Abramovich, the Russian oligarch, was allowed to buy Chelsea in 2003, despite the controversial origins of his fortune. Many Chelsea fans believed that Abramovich's billions would not have any negative effects on football in England. Over the next two years, the majority of Premier League clubs are destined to be owned by foreigners. Premier League football will not be played for English fans, but for one billion paying spectators on global television. Financially that might be rewarding for rich investors and for the players themselves, but the benefit for fans and for the national team is questionable. The English game, some believe, is facing a fatal blowback.

Over recent weeks, some of the nine foreign owners of Premier League clubs have been quietly discussing Richard Scudamore's (the chief executive of the Premier League) dismissal and his replacement by a non-British executive. Their motives are financial. Having spent millions to buy the clubs and many more millions on foreign players, they are impatient about inadequate profits. To maximise the profits, the foreign investors argue, the Premier League should be rebranded and marketed like Coca-Cola.

Pini Zahavi, the Israeli agent responsible for brokering Abramovich's purchase of Chelsea, Alexandre Gaydamak's takeover of Portsmouth epitomises the unsentimental predator. 'What's the problem?' he asks rhetorically. 'Britain has sold its banks, its gas, electricity and water supply companies and even its airports to foreign companies.'

The difference is that football is not a utility or a bank, but part of the fabric of England, uniting so much of the nation in frenzy and depression during international competitions such as the World Cup. That communal glorification is already threatened by the rising costs of watching Premier League matches. With the exception of the top-six clubs, spectators are increasingly deterred from watching less glamorous matches from the stands because of excessive ticket prices and the amount of football shown on television. More insidious is the growing habit by the managers of the star clubs to 'rest' their best players in matches against their inferior rivals and in cup matches. That disappoints the fans, is a step towards potential match-fixing and hastens the introduction of a European super league, a poisonous scheme for English football.

No foreign owner is genuinely interested in investing in British youth or re-establishing closer relations between the clubs and the fans, or encouraging football's grassroots in order to strengthen the national game. The Icelandic consortium (which) bought West Ham for £85m has made little effort to retain the club's relationship with local charities and council officials.

So far, foreign players and managers have been tolerated because the game remained under English control. The first foreign takeovers were seen as eccentric but not threatening. That will change if Americans, Russians, Arabs and the odd shady Thai politician execute a wholesale takeover.

Not only would the game lose its English identity but, more important, impotent against the foreign investors, the FA would find it increasingly hard to organise and train the England team and adequately police the rules about the registration of players and financial probity. As the divorce between the FA and Premier League solidified, loyal fans could well become disenchanted by the internationalisation of their clubs. The blowback for the investors would be empty seats in the stadiums reflecting the fans' anger that their passion had become a plaything for remote speculators.

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