

Sports

English football counts cost of foreign investment as 'big six' plan breakaway

LONDON: English football is reeling after plans by six of its biggest clubs to join forces with top Spanish and Italian sides to form the basis of a breakaway European Super League (ESL). The plans put forward by Manchester United, Liverpool, Manchester City, Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham have been hit by widespread condemnation by the UK government, governing bodies, fans and former players.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson backed the Premier League and English Football Association's stance not to recognize the breakaway, describing it as "very damaging for football". The breakaway clubs still plan to keep playing in their domestic leagues with the ESL replacing their participation in UEFA's Champions League.

However, English football may now be left to count the cost of the end game from decades of embracing foreign investment. Of the six breakaway clubs currently playing in the Premier League, only Tottenham, whose billionaire owner Joe Lewis resides in the Bahamas, are British-owned.

Under the Super League proposals for a 20-team competition, the 15 founder members would be protected from the pitfalls of relegation, guaranteeing revenue streams from television rights deals and commercial sponsorship from regular matches between the European elite.

A pot of 3.5 billion euros (\$4.2 billion, £3 billion), backed by US investment bank JPMorgan, has been put forward solely to support infrastructure investment of the founding members to offset the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The 20 teams would be split into two groups of 10, who would face each other home and away. After an 18-game regular season, the top teams from each group would progress to the quarter-finals for a con-

clusion to the competition which mirrors the current format of the Champions League. But it is the major American sports leagues that the plan most closely resembles. Three of the English breakaway six are in American hands, who also have stakes in US Sports franchises.

'Imposters'

Manchester United have been under the control of the Glazer family, who also own NFL Superbowl champions the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, since a controversial leveraged takeover in 2005. John Henry's Fenway Sports Group own both Liverpool and the Boston Red Sox and Arsenal's billionaire owner Stan Kroenke controls the LA Rams and Denver Nuggets.

All three clubs have felt the pinch from the Premier League's competition for just four places in the Champions League. United have finished outside the top four in four of the last seven seasons. Arsenal, who sit ninth in the Premier League, have not qualified for the Champions League since 2016 and Liverpool face a battle to do so this season.

"They're breaking away into a league without competition that they can't be relegated from," said former Manchester United captain Gary Neville. "It's pure greed. They (the club's owners) are imposters. They're nothing to do with football in this country." However, the move is about cost control as much as competition. Europe's traditional powerhouses such as United, Liverpool, Barcelona and Real Madrid have seen their dominant position undermined by the state-backed wealth of Abu Dhabi's investment in Manchester City and Qatari-owned Paris Saint-Germain.

Even Chelsea, thanks to the wealth of Russian oligarch owner Roman Abramovich, have left some of their competitors trailing in the arms race for talent in



LIVERPOOL: An aerial photo shows Anfield stadium (right), home of English Premier League football club Liverpool, and Goodison Park, home of Premier League club Everton (left), in Liverpool, north west England yesterday. —AFP

the transfer market. City, PSG and Chelsea have all reached the semi-finals of this season's Champions League.

"I think there are two things in play here: one is greed and the other is desperation," said former Football Association and Manchester City chairman David Bernstein. "One of the things they haven't done during the pandemic is to impose some sort of wages control. They've got themselves into a bit of a predicament." In their launch, the ESL clubs added: "The competition will be built on a sustainable financial foundation with all Founding Clubs signing up to a spending framework." That would allow the owners to rake in higher revenues without the pressure to splurge the extra income on player wages and transfers.

However, the clubs need fans to keep paying for tickets, shirts and TV subscriptions if those profits are to be realized. Supporters groups from Liverpool, United, Tottenham, Arsenal and Chelsea have all voiced their anger and opposition to the plans. —AFP

Fans were also incensed, with the Chelsea and Tottenham supporters' trusts calling it a "betrayal", and the Arsenal Supporters Trust saying it was the "death of Arsenal as a sporting institution". Former Manchester United defender Gary Neville, now a TV pundit, said he was "disgusted" and called the Super League an "absolute disgrace". Southampton manager Ralph Hasenhuttl described the plan as "absolutely unacceptable".

Will it actually happen?

Given the staunch opposition from UEFA and the domestic leagues, the Super League faces some big hurdles. Signs are the clubs will not get much support from their own fans and probably none from the wider football community.

FIFA's immediate reaction was less severe, although it issued a statement in January warning that it would not recognize the Super League. The Super League also needs another three clubs to come on board. French champions Paris Saint-Germain, who are backed by Qatari wealth, are an obvious target. Germany's Bayern Munich, the reigning European champions, are other notable absentees.

In a purely business sense, the plan has its merits. It's similar to the American model where sports teams compete every year without having to qualify or face relegation, giving certainty to investors and sponsors. It's probably no coincidence that, according to reports, the American-owned English clubs were key instigators.

The timing of the announcement is also worth noting. UEFA were due to announce a major overhaul for the Champions League yesterday, expanding it to 36 teams with a new format and a sharp rise in the number of games. It's possible that the Super League is a negotiating tactic, designed to win greater concessions and a bigger say for the major clubs. However a source told The Guardian: "Usually the threat of a super league is a bargain chip, and about leverage. But this is the furthest it's ever gone by considerable distance." —AFP

(SOS) said it was "appalled" by the decision of Fenway Sports Group, the club's US-based owners, to take part in the plan. "FSG have ignored fans in their relentless and greedy pursuit of money. Football is ours, not theirs. Our football club is ours not theirs," they said in a social media post.

SOS chairman Joe Blott added: "It is purely financially, cynically, greedily driven without any thoughts for the football fan, and that's the challenge that we have." The Arsenal Supporters' Trust called the club's agreement to join "the death of Arsenal as a sporting institution".

The Manchester United Supporters' Trust labeled the plan an insult to the legacy of the players who died in the 1958 Munich air crash. "A Super League based on a closed shop of self-selected wealthy clubs goes against everything football, and Manchester United, should stand for," they said.

"To bring forward these proposals without any fan consultation, and in the midst of a global pandemic when people should be pulling together not serving their own selfish interests, just adds insult to injury. —AFP

The fourth and fifth-placed teams will play off for the remaining quarter-final spots. The quarter and semi-finals will be played over two legs and the final is a single game at a neutral venue. There are also plans for a women's version.

What's behind all this?

Money. Europe's top clubs have long agitated for the income that guaranteed, annual competition against their fellow powers would bring. Currently, they have to qualify for the Champions League by placing high in their domestic competitions, and then make it through the season-long tournament to reach the high-profile latter stages. The clubs, saddled with big debts and huge wages for their star players, say the pandemic has "accelerated the instability in the existing European football economic model".

The Super League will bring them far more than the Champions League. The founding clubs are expected to receive more than 10 billion euros in uncapped "solidarity payments" during their initial commitment period.

They will also receive 3.5 billion euros for infrastructure investment and to offset their losses from the pandemic. By comparison, UEFA competitions generated 3.2 billion euros in TV earnings in the pre-pandemic 2018-2019 season.

What was the reaction?

The condemnation was widespread and swift. European football's governing body UEFA and English, Spanish and Italian football authorities issued a joint statement threatening to ban participating clubs from "any other competition at domestic, European or world level". Players could even be barred from their national teams, they said.

World body FIFA said it "can only express its disapproval" about a competition "outside of the international football structures". British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the plans were "very damaging for football" and "would strike at the heart of the domestic game". French President Emmanuel Macron praised French clubs for not taking part.

Reaction to the incendiary scheme has been furious, with football's governing bodies FIFA and UEFA, as well as all the leading domestic leagues condemning the "cynical" plan. While their clubs would gain financially from the move, supporters of the Premier League teams involved were united in their contempt for such a nakedly greed-motivated project.

The Chelsea Supporters' Trust said in a statement: "Our members and football supporters across the world have experienced the ultimate betrayal. The CST is appalled that Chelsea FC (CFC) are among the rumored teams to have signed up for this alternative competition and hope that these reports are untrue. This proposal would risk CFC from being banned from other competitions and could jeopardize the future of our club. This is a decision of greed to line the pockets of those at the top and it has been made with no consideration for the loyal supporters, our history, our future and the future of football in this country. This is unforgivable. Enough is enough."

'Cynical and greedy'

Liverpool supporters' group Spirit of Shankly

Key facts about the European Super League

PARIS: Twelve major football clubs announced a new European Super League yesterday, breaking away from the UEFA Champions League and prompting an angry response from fans, politicians and their domestic leagues. Here are the main things to know about the new venture:

What happened?

Twelve heavyweights from England, Spain and Italy have agreed to establish a new competition, the Super League, governed by its founding clubs. This challenges the supremacy of Europe's top club competition, the UEFA-run Champions League.

Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur are the English clubs involved, Atletico Madrid, Barcelona and Real Madrid are the Spanish teams and the Italian sides are AC Milan, Inter Milan and Juventus. The teams have 99 European titles between them.

Three more teams are expected to join as founding clubs, which are guaranteed participation each year, with another five qualifying annually, making it a 20-team competition. Games will be mid-week, ruling teams out of the Champions League but leaving them free for domestic fixtures.

What's the format?

The inaugural edition will take place "as soon as practicable", the announcement says. With an August start, it will feature two groups of 10 playing home and away, and the top three qualifying for the quarter-finals.

Fans unite to slam Super League as 'ultimate betrayal'

LONDON: Fans of the six Premier League clubs leading the breakaway European Super League have slammed the controversial plan, branding it the "ultimate betrayal". Liverpool, Manchester United, Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and Tottenham are all involved in the new league, alongside Spanish trio Real Madrid, Barcelona, Atletico Madrid and Italian clubs Juventus, Inter Milan and AC Milan.

The founding clubs will share 3.5 billion euros for infrastructure investment and to offset coronavirus pandemic costs. They are expected to receive a further 10 billion euros in "solidarity payments" over the life of the initial commitment, convincing them to turn their backs on the Champions League in favor of the new invite-only competition.

The Bottom Line

Elite football? Elite money? Or both?



By Ahmad Jabr

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News of top football teams in Europe forming their own breakaway league has rocked the sports world. The widespread condemnation of the move has led many to question the motives behind it, since most of these teams already participate in the world's richest football club competition - the Champions League, in addition to domestic tournaments that are followed with much fanfare around the world.

It does not need an expert to understand that this move is primarily motivated by money. Currently, all the revenue that the Champions League and domestic leagues generate from TV right deals, sponsors, ticket sales, etc is distributed among participating teams. The major clubs have always argued that the current system puts them at a disadvantage as the revenues are barely enough to cover their expenses, which are significantly higher than other teams, despite contributing to the majority of the money that is made, since fans around the world pay to watch them play.

Therefore, they must have figured out that they can create an 'exclusive elite club' where they are guaranteed to take advantage of all the funds they believe they mainly help generate. And while they haven't said they're breaking away from domestic tournaments, their plan could effectively spell doom to the leagues that are already struggling financially and were hit hard by the pandemic.

The idea of creating a super league of top football clubs in Europe has been discussed since the 1990s. Under the Super League proposals for a 20-team competition, the 15 founder members would be protected from relegation, guaranteeing revenue streams from television rights deals and commercial sponsorship from regular matches between the European elite. This system is very similar to how major sports are run in the United States, and has led many to believe that the owners of the clubs behind the Super League want to create a competition that follows the American sports system under the belief that it is the best model to maximize profit.

In the US, there's only one major league for each sport, where a maximum of 32 teams compete. This guarantees a high level of competition combined with more revenue for each club. It seems that the owners of the top European football clubs are seeking to follow a similar model with the Super League - a competition where teams compete every year without having to qualify or face relegation, giving certainty to investors and sponsors.

But where does this leave the other clubs? Historically speaking, most major US sports leagues were created from mergers, whereby the 'elite' teams ultimately thrived and the less fortunate ones eventually perished. In some sports, mergers to create 'super leagues' in America led to the demise of entire leagues that held major status at the time (see the American Basketball Association, or ABA for short). This isn't good news for domestic leagues, nor is it for fans of smaller clubs whose teams will be left facing an uncertain future.

If it goes ahead as planned, the only real winners would probably be the 20 clubs forming the Super League (and to some extent, their fans). Its success could also determine whether club football finally manages to surpass international competitions in terms of popularity, competitive level, and perhaps more importantly, revenue.

This seems like a wild idea to think about as of now, but considering how a league like the NBA has become the most important and profitable basketball competition not only in its home country but also around the world, there is a possibility that a tournament pitting elite football teams against each other could one day become the most popular in the home of the sport and globally, and surpass the popularity of tournaments like the UEFA European Championship (or who knows, even the World Cup), the way the Champions League never could.

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