

## Sports

# Football industry embraces crypto as Messi helps 'fan tokens' take off

**PARIS:** When Paris Saint-Germain signed Lionel Messi, the salary package included something previously unheard of for a player — a one-off payment, understood to be worth around one million euros (\$1.15m), made in PSG 'fan tokens'.

It was the result of a partnership signed by the French giants in 2018 with Socios.com which sees fans use a cryptocurrency called 'chiliz' to buy tokens allowing them to vote on issues related to the club. These issues have tended to be rather mundane, for example Juventus asking what music they should play in their stadium, but the concept has caught on.

The company has grown quickly since signing its first partnerships with PSG and Juventus to being involved with 56 football clubs and around 100 sports teams worldwide, says CEO Alexandre Dreyfus. Messi has brought more publicity, and Dreyfus believes the Argentinian will "set a trend".

"This is more a top-up that is never going to replace any compensation. It is more like a bonus, but it is a bonus that at some point players will start to ask for," Dreyfus tells AFP from his office in Malta. "We hope that in two years, during the 'mercato' (transfer window), a player will say: 'Yes I am going to that team but they had better give me a million dollars of fan tokens'."

Dreyfus admits the pandemic and resulting economic crisis has benefited his company, allowing them to multiply their partnerships. "The fact is that clubs suddenly lost 50 or 70 or 80 percent of their revenue, and they realised: 'Hey, we have fans all over the world, what can we sell them?'" They now have shirt sponsorship deals with Inter Milan and Valencia, promoting their fan tokens.

## Sponsorship bonanza

New analysis by KPMG Football Benchmark shows that over 40 shirt sponsorship deals have been signed in Europe's five biggest leagues since the pandemic's onset. It says Inter doubled income by switching from Pirelli to Socios.com and a deal worth \$23.57 million.

There is a mini-revolution happening as businesses related to

cryptocurrency have started appearing on shirts. In July, Roma announced a three-year deal worth \$14 million annually that sees their shirts carry the name of DigitalBits, "an easy-to-use open-source blockchain used to power consumer digital assets". "Not only can fans witness history, but they can now own part of it," boasted Roma. "Get ready to trade and collect. Join us as we step into the future of football."

The emergence of crypto-related businesses in football comes as countries are introducing regulation to clamp down on gambling sponsorship — a ban is in place in Spain, for example, while the UK government is considering one. "The door is ajar for new companies to stick their foot in," say KPMG.

"Something has to fill the void and fan tokens, or something which is not defined as gambling but is gambling, are likely to be the big ticket in town," Kieran Maguire, a lecturer in football finance at Liverpool University, tells AFP.

## Concerns

There are concerns about curious punters being drawn into using crypto-related products without having a proper understanding. To highlight their volatility, the value of 'chiliz' — a less well-known cryptocurrency than, say, Bitcoin — shot up 58 percent in the four weeks after Messi's arrival. "Ultimately these are speculative products. Someone described them to me as gambling with a small G," says Maguire. Meanwhile, some supporter groups have criticized their clubs for embracing fan tokens. Aston Villa Supporters Trust told Joe.co.uk their club's agreement with Socios.com was "wholly inappropriate" and questioned why fan engagement should be monetized.

Maguire says: "The clubs are targeting the 'non-legacy fans' and asking: 'Can we make some money out of these new fans?' If we take Manchester United, they claim to have 1.1 billion fans and in a normal year they will make around 600 million pounds (\$805m) in revenue. So that works out as about 55 pence per fan per year. That's pretty bad."



**PARIS:** This file photo taken on October 29, 2021 shows Paris Saint-Germain's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi reacting prior to the French L1 football match against Lille at the Parc des Princes stadium, in Paris. — AFP

For the clubs, this is where Dreyfus — a founder of French online gambling and poker company Winamax — comes in. "We are talking about two different generations that are not fighting against each other, they just don't see the same things," he insists. "I always joke saying we are not targeting a guy who has a tattoo and lives next to the stadium. Our market is really more about the digital fans, casual fans all over the world that consume sports differently to you and me historically." — AFP

## Moyes renaissance has West Ham dreaming big

**LONDON:** West Ham manager David Moyes is enjoying a long-awaited renaissance after years in the wilderness as the Scot masterminds his club's unexpected bid to reach the Champions League. Moyes has the Hammers flying high in the Premier League and a win at Wolves on Saturday would consolidate their position in the top four.

West Ham have won their past four league games and climbed to third place with a surprise 3-2 victory over Liverpool before the international break. Sitting just three points behind leaders Chelsea, Moyes' men have their fans dreaming of a first-ever Champions League campaign. And for the first time since 1985/86, when John Lyall's side finished third, West Ham could emerge as dark horses in the title race. Not only has Moyes ended Liverpool's 25-game unbeaten run this season, he also ended Manchester City's reign as League Cup holders after knocking out Manchester United earlier in the same competition.

Those scalps are tangible evidence of the remarkable overhaul carried out by Moyes, both on his club and his own reputation, since he returned for a second spell at West Ham in December 2019. Back then, West Ham were one point above the relegation zone, while Moyes was regarded as damaged goods after his nightmare period at Manchester United.

When Moyes was hired by United in 2013, the Scot was seen



**David Moyes**

as one of the Premier League's brightest young managers after his impressive 11-year reign at Everton. Although he was unable to deliver any silverware at Goodison Park, he led Everton to a top-four finish in 2005 and consistently kept them in the top half of the table on a limited budget.

Moyes' appointment at United had been endorsed by Alex Ferguson, who recommended his compatriot before retiring. Inheriting a title-winning team, Moyes was expected to maintain the success of the Ferguson era but he never looked comfortable in the harsh glare of the Old Trafford spotlight.

## Back in fashion

He was criticized for his cautious tactics and ridiculed after signing Everton midfielder Marouane Fellaini, a player whose

rudimentary style contrasted with United's purist principles. Moyes soon wore the anguished expression of a man who knew his dream was fading before his eyes.

After less than a season in charge he was sacked in April 2014, with United languishing in seventh place and destined to miss out on a Champions League place for the first time since 1995. Moyes was back in management at Real Sociedad just months later, but once again he was a fish out of water. That lost year in the Basque country was followed by an even more chastening experience at Sunderland.

Taking over at the Stadium of Light in 2016, Moyes' team were relegated from the Premier League in his first and only season, while he was forced to apologize after telling a female interviewer she might "get a slap". At that point it was hard to imagine him salvaging his crumbling career. But he rescued West Ham from relegation in 2018 and, while that was not enough to keep him employed at the time, Moyes stayed true to his principles and is finally back in fashion.

Revamping his squad with bargain signings Tomas Soucek, Vladimir Coufal and Jarrod Bowen in his second spell at the club, Moyes has molded West Ham in his disciplined and feisty image, leading them to a sixth-place finish in the Premier League last season. At last the London Stadium — derided as soulless by West Ham fans following the move there in 2016 — is becoming a vibrant home to a team on the up.

"I think we're there on merit. You can see the quality and attitude of the players," Moyes said. "I want us to challenge the teams in the top four. I've laid down that challenge to the players. Hopefully one of them could be us." West Ham are aiming high and whether they reach the Champions League or not, Moyes' remarkable rehabilitation is one of the stories of the season. — AFP