

The Beautiful Game

Football is a religion. To many fans, not a lot can conjure up the same love and passion that they feel for the beautiful game, it's special. Your team is one of a kind and you follow them through thick and thin, league matches and cups. So why is it that within this sport, rightfully known as *The Beautiful Game*, time upon time changes are suggested or made to ruin the very thing that makes it so incredibly beautiful?

I think most football fans would ideally like the people within the governing bodies of the game to want to preserve it, whether it is within their country or internationally. Despite this, time upon time it appears they indeed are doing their best to destroy it. Officials have been working to take the passion out of the game for years. Sepp Blatter, the President of FIFA, is a firm believer of ruining the game. Since the Swiss took over from Dr. Joao Havelange in 1998, he has managed to become one of the most despised people in football, his career being surrounded by criticism and controversy. Some of Blatter's more notable rules implemented on to the game have been put forward to, in his opinion, elevate the moral standards of the game. Players should be booked for removing their shirts after scoring a goal (2004) as well as being punished for "over-zealous celebrations". His argument for implanting this rule on the game was that "Football is a global sport, and thus the sensibilities of conservative nations and spectators must be respected." In all my life as a football fan, I have never watched a country in the World Cup where the teams and fans aren't extremely excited when their team does well, and I think that the passion shared by fans and players world-wide more than renders his argument not only invalid, but incredibly ignorant. It seems growing up in a country where the standard of football is mediocre, except for a few players, has indeed made Sepp develop an unhealthy amount of hatred for those daring to love the team they play for, or in the fans', case watch.

There's a slight irony in a Swiss leader taking the moral highroad, even if his arguments are less than convincing. All in all, it's disgusting that someone put in power of world football is someone who's been in the papers for disgracing the game rather than helping it. Then I am sure he had good reasons for his behaviour after the tragic death of Marc Vivien Foe or for his comments made to the press during last summer's World Cup, where he never even made an appearance at the final. On the bright side, he has always been working hard to ensure women's place in football, most notably in 2004 when he suggested that female players should "wear tighter shorts". All in all an excellent representative for the governing body of World Football.

Now, you would think that if a governing body was controlled by an ex footballer, whose passion for the game made him capable of relating to both players and fans, this would be ideal for the sport. When Michel Platini was elected UEFA President on the 26th of January of this year, I was relieved to see that we would finally have someone who cared about the sport in control of the governing body of European Football. Not that I have any doubts that Johansson didn't have great passion for the sport. Sadly it has taken less than two months for Platini to convince me that he has no place in football beyond his

playing and brief coaching career. During a recent media briefing in London, Platini revealed his plans for the future of European club football, some changes logical and interesting, others radical and raising concern for the future of the clubs under the rule of the UEFA.

Platini's wishes to create an equal voice in deciding changes in European club football is something I imagine will gain a lot of support, although his plans sounds suspiciously based on the way the European Union is run. He also proposes a rule preventing European clubs from signing players who are still owned by agents or companies, an example being the West Ham signings of Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano. Both of these, along with his proposal to remove seeding from the European Cup and replace it with a fairer system are suggestions I think will benefit European football, if actually followed through in a decent manner. Sadly the good proposals are in my opinion more than overshadowed by those created by the politician in Platini.

To start off with, Platini wants to ban players from going on loan to teams playing in the same competitions as the club that owns them. I'm afraid that it has not become clear to me just who he thinks this rule is going to benefit. Not only will he be robbing some teams of talented players they might not be able to afford otherwise, but he is removing one of the biggest reasons teams lend players out. When a team lend their player to another club, the main reason (if it is a young player) is often for the player to gain experience. For a young player it is important to not only gain first team experience, but to also achieve this in the league that they hope to spend the beginning of their professional career in. Although this is not always possible, removing this opportunity completely, does not only ridicule the whole concept of loan deals and undermine the clubs' knowledge of what will be beneficial to them, but in a worst case scenario it can seriously damage someone's career. Young players are incredibly adaptable, and their will to learn is something incredibly important for their development. Removing the possibilities for them to achieve this under the best conditions possible is nothing less but a crime against the game.

Speaking of crime... Platini has also asked for tougher penalties to be put in place for those involved in unsavoury incidents such as mass brawls. Of course, as all politicians know, you have to act on the present and following the incident between Valencia and Inter Milan, that is just what Platini has done, reacted. I expect that as with any good politician this will be completely forgotten within the next one to six month(s).

Now the next one really is a strange one. Platini is backing the introduction of a rule where clubs can only spend a percentage of their turnover on player wages and transfers. Once again I am left stunned as to what exactly Platini is expecting to achieve by this. If he is hoping to make the game fairer by restricting the money spending of the richer clubs, then he fails to consider he will even more so restrict the clubs with minimal turnovers, leaving it pretty much impossible for them to improve their status. Sure it is unfair that teams such as Chelsea can spend unlimited amounts of money, but a) it doesn't ensure lengthy success and b) if teams choose to overpay for names rather than players that can play a vital part in their team, then in my opinion that is their

business/problem depending on how you look at it. Of course as Platini seems to have become increasingly friendly with Mr Peter Kenyon, I doubt that this, as with others among his list of suggestions, will turn into reality.

The final point I will make on Platini's suggestions is that of encouraging referees to abandon matches where there is overt racist abuse. In football today racism is still a big problem, in some countries worse than others. Time upon time acts of racism has been acted upon in such a weak manner it has made the "Kick Racism Out Of Football"

campaign seem a complete and utter waste of time. Platini's answer to the problem of racism is abandoning the match, telling those uttering racist chants or whatever to go home and then inviting them back the next week. It's the solution of a coward. Someone who doesn't want to deal with a problem that football association officials are running away from at every chance they are given. It is not going to improve the game, if anything it would be just another half-hearted attempt by a governing body so they can say "we're trying to solve the problem", despite the fact that like everyone else they know it will crash and burn.

So I give you these men, the protectors and keepers of the Beautiful Game. Blatter and Platini are very powerful men, but they are not the only ones in powerful positions who are turning football into their own little sandbox to play in. Whether it is by the Italian, Spanish, English, French or German FA, there are rules being changed and altered as to best go with what the champagne drinking and caviar eating brigade sees as being high society enough for something that used to be the game for the man on the street. Platini played football, he briefly coached France, yet seems ignorant to the basic thoughts of the average football fan, or player. Blatter is a business man, he's got the education to be working in a bank and maybe doing a bit of local politics. Although I am sure that his background in economics was a great help when dodging the bullets of the corruption allegations, his ignorance for football is amazing for someone who has been working within the FIFA organization for over three decades. With friends like these, the game doesn't need enemies, and it frightens me to consider what the future holds for one of, if not the most popular sport in the world.

