

FIFA exerts further control over annual football fixtures

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FIFA is due to vote upon a US\$25bn proposal to introduce two further tournaments:

- 1) a revamped Club World Cup, increasing the number of teams from 7 to 24; and
- 2) a new international league competition for national teams.

The detailed mechanics of each tournament, and the eligibility of clubs or national teams, are yet to be determined but European teams will make up the bulk of the participants.

Perhaps not least on the mind of Gianni Infantino, FIFA's president, is that this proposal will ensure FIFA retains as much control over the fixtures of the biggest clubs and national teams for the next 10-15 years.

At first glance, FIFA's appetite seems oblivious of the current football fixture list each year: a Premier League footballer involved in European competition could already face over 60 fixtures at club level, with a potential further 19 fixtures at national level if involved in a continental or global tournament like the Euros or the World Cup that year – potentially over 80 fixtures in a year.

In fact, filling any existing gap may be exactly what FIFA is after. The decision of the European Commission (the 'Commission') on 8 December 2017 regarding the International Skating Union (the 'ISU') caused waves among the headquarters of sports governing bodies. In June 2016, the ISU introduced restrictive penalties, including a lifetime ban from all major international speed skating competitions, on athletes taking part in speed skating competitions not sanctioned by the ISU. The Commission found that these penalties were 'disproportionately' punitive and such penalties also prevented the emergence of independent international speed skating competitions and so breached Article 101 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union for anti-competitive behaviour.

FIFA's proposals imply a wise decision not to fall foul of the Commission by clamping down on any non- FIFA operated tournaments such as the China Cup, which has helped to promote international football further in China through the participation of Luis Suarez and Gareth Bale. Instead, FIFA is taking steps within the current bounds of legitimacy to ensure that its share of the already lucrative football fixture list, and the revenue derived from such number of fixtures, leaves no gap for the likes of the China Cup and even UEFA, who will view a revamped Club World Cup as a threat to the status of the UEFA Champions League.

FIFA will argue that funding these additional tournaments will help to develop the facilities and resources available to footballing nations who need it most: only time will tell whether the Commission will agree.

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