

Triesman drives another nail into Game 39

FA on collision course with Premier League
Plan to play overseas is 'not sustainable'

By Matt Scott



Triesman

The Football Association's chairman, David Triesman, yesterday set himself and his organisation on collision course with the Premier League by shooting down plans to take fixtures overseas.

In a calculated announcement delivered from inside the FA's headquarters after a board meeting, Lord Triesman told the world that the English game's governing body had all but rejected the international-round proposal. And, with an explicit reference to England's incipient bid for the 2018 World Cup - which the FA fears could be fatally undermined by the league's scheme - there was a heavy hint that Triesman's intended audience was the Fifa president, Sepp Blatter.

"At the moment we have not seen a sustainable plan to which we can agree," he said. "If the Premier League has things it wants to say about changes or new variants, well then they will come forward. But personally I would prefer it happened sooner rather than later because I don't want this to drift on, particularly as we are to launch our World Cup bid. In general I think uncertainty is not very helpful if it goes on for any length of time."

A spokesman for the FA last night

tried to clarify that Triesman's statement was not a definitive dismissal. But one source present at the meeting insisted that the plan could be revived only if the Premier League's chief executive, Richard Scudamore, could persuade Blatter during a meeting next Thursday.

Triesman will accompany Scudamore on the trip to Fifa's HQ but there are certain to be tensions. The league appeared publicly supportive of the FA's position but close reading of its response reflected a private sentiment that Triesman was grandstanding by highlighting the same four areas of concern that Scudamore had acknowledged on its launch.

"We are pleased that the FA shares our opinion that the [proposal] merits full consideration and consultation," said a league statement. "The issues raised - sanction, fixture calendar, sporting criteria and stakeholder consultation - remain the ones we identified, with our member clubs, as being critical to progress."

The league is particularly dismayed by references to "changes or new variants" when it has already made clear that its plans will take shape only after a consultation period.

However, Triesman's statement came as a result of a meeting that included Manchester United's chief executive, David Gill, and Bolton's Phil Gartside, who were two of the architects of the proposal a fortnight before it was announced. Support now appears to be melting away even from Scudamore's own member clubs. As one FA board member noted, the silence of the Premier League's chairman, Sir Dave Richards - also present at yesterday's meeting - has been conspicuous.

Scudamore has often described himself as a "lightning conductor" for the clubs and he is certainly taking the hits for his organisation today. But the biggest blow to him is that the period now allowed for canvassing opinion is to be curtailed from the hoped-for 12 months to little more than a few days.

"The initial reaction from the governing bodies poses the league a bigger challenge than two weeks ago," said Chelsea's Peter Kenyon, who as a member of Uefa's strategic board is an influential voice in the game. "The logical conclusion might be after that meeting next week with Blatter. That's the reality of it. It's not about waiting 12 months."

Rafa shows his class, but are the players behind him?

By Andy Townsend

What a great result for Rafa Benitez and Liverpool. It's clear Rafa doesn't have the support of everybody who should be supporting him. His body language on the touchline and media outbursts suggest a man under serious pressure.

He's a classy guy who handles the press well and has always backed his players — but are the players 100 per cent with him?

When you look at Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger — and Jose Mourinho during his time at Chelsea — the players were clearly fully behind them. I just don't get the same vibes from the Liverpool players.

Despite that, Rafa dealt with the pressure on Tuesday and his tactics were absolutely spot on. Playing an Italian side — and cast as the underdog — suited Liverpool.

Although they're the weakest of England's Champions League representatives, Liverpool are also the most dangerous and, if they get through, will be the team everyone wants to avoid, particularly Chelsea.

The result was more than they could ever have hoped for, but I was really disappointed with Inter Milan. They were so poor even before Marco Materazzi's red card.

Roberto Mancini's team are emphatic in Serie A, but so bland in Europe and have been for years.

Did Fernando Torres dive for Materazzi's second yellow? Absolute nonsense. It was a harsh sending off, but Torres was not to blame and I have no problem with Rafa's touchline behaviour either. It's not as if he was shouting at the ref to get the Italian sent off.

Benitez shows his class in the Champions League, but Liverpool must stop limping between European matches. They need to show greater quality and consistency between Champions League nights. Focus on the Premier League like you do in Europe and you won't go far wrong, Rafa.



Benitez

Gerrard has transformed our season, says Kuyt

By David Maddock

Dirk Kuyt has revealed how Steven Gerrard's inspiration transformed Liverpool's season.

The Anfield striker yesterday offered an insight into the drive and ambition of his skipper, even amid the euphoria of a magical night against Inter Milan.

It was Kuyt who provided the goal five minutes from time that finally broke the deadlock in a tense Champions League tie. At that moment, the Dutch striker and his team-mates were thinking only of protecting their lead to take to the San Siro.

But Gerrard had other ideas, and it was his goal that gave Liverpool a vital two-goal buffer. "It's funny because when I scored, we celebrated, and I said to Stevie maybe now we just need to keep the ball and get a clean sheet," he explained.

"We were happy to get a lead, but he turned to me and said 'no, we want another goal, we can get another' and he was right.

"We got another, and that is really important because it made it a great result, and we are obviously really happy with the way it turned out.

"We lost three days ago to Barnsley when everyone expected us to beat them easily. Then you saw a totally different team, but with many of the same players. I suppose that's the magic of football." Jamie Carragher also heaped praise on Gerrard.

He said: "In the Champions League all the top teams come and you see some of the names they've got. But Stevie's the one who does the decisive thing in the end, who provides the big moments," he said.

"That is what makes him one of the best players in the world."