

# Sportsbooks: Professor fears for game's future

By Andrew Baker



Blatter

**A**t a time when the Premier League are apparently determined to achieve world domination, and Fifa are determined to deny any such ambition, it is useful to come across a book which explains exactly how the economics of football work. This is a topic that has hitherto been little understood by anyone except the Telegraph's David Bond, but comprehension of the forces at work will help many football fans to see the way that the game is going.

According to John Samuels, the author of *The Beautiful Game is Over* (Book Guild Publishing), the road signs currently indicate rampant commercialisation. The wheeze of the Premier League to play a 39th game every season on foreign soil was dressed up as a diplomatic mission to sell our game abroad, but the key word here is "sell". Having seen gridiron American football attract a full house to Wembley, the elite of English football dreamed of exporting their product in turn.

Samuels, who is Emeritus Professor of Business Studies at Birmingham University, is probably the only football fan in the country

qualified to commentate on this process. The subtitle of this important book is *The Globalisation of Football*, by which he means not just that the game is played in an ever-increasing number of countries, but that the ownership of clubs and therefore the direction of the game, especially in Britain, no longer recognises borders.

This will not be news to fans of clubs that have already been acquired by foreign nationals, and those who have noticed that more than half the players in the Premier League are not qualified to play for England. But while the facts are fairly obvious, the implications are not, and this is where Professor Samuels comes in useful.

There is a general, shrugging acceptance in English football these days that the top four clubs are the most powerful and will remain so. That the structure of the game seems inclined to perpetuate this situation causes less of a stir than it should. The Big Four make the most money, so can buy the best players, so continue to win, so continue to make the most money.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Other leagues in other countries, sometimes

playing different codes of football, are arranged to promote "competitive balance", one of Samuels' favourite phrases. The starkest comparison is with gridiron in the United States, where salary caps and control of player recruitment ensure that no small, elite group can achieve dominance.

The professor puts forward a couple of proposals for the adaptation of similar policies in English football: nothing radical, at first, but the gradual introduction of a system in which clubs which are able to pay their players more than, say, £50 million a year would be "taxed" on the amount that they pay over that limit, with the revenue being redistributed among less wealthy clubs.

It is hard to see such a proposal, modest though it is, passing a vote of Premier League chairmen. But as Samuels points out, history shows that dominant sports do not always remain dominant if they overlook the interests of their spectators.

Football in England is approaching another transformation. The biggest clubs are now so big as to render continued competition increasingly less rele-

vant. Previously charismatic events (the FA Cup, the Carling Cup) are becoming less and less important. The Champions' League is becoming, de facto, more important than any national contest. And ordinary fans are being priced out of their seats by a passionless corporate crew.

Governing bodies seem unwilling, or unable, to do anything about this. As the author reminds us, Fifa are only in charge of world football because they say they are, and their concerns are driven by self-interest. The same is true, on lesser scales, of Uefa and the FA. None of these bodies seems likely to act in the best interest of ordinary fans so long as the money and the votes keep rolling in.

Samuels' is a gloomy vision, but backed up by an impressive and wide-ranging stack of research. This is not a book for every football fan: but those conversant with business practice and with a smattering of economic knowledge should find it both enlightening and invigorating. Those with their hearts in the right place should also find it enraging, but to what purpose it is hard to say.

## Ballack: Grant is the axe man

By Ian McGarry

**M**ICHAEL BALLACK has admitted the days of being a Chelsea untouchable are over.

Blues boss Avram Grant surprised many on Tuesday with his decision to leave big names Frank Lampard and John Terry on the bench against Olympiakos.

And German midfielder Ballack, who was preferred to Lamps, faces an anxious wait to see if he keeps his place for Sunday's Carling Cup final against Spurs.

Ballack, 31, enjoyed a run in the team under Jose Mourinho after joining on a

Bosman free from Bayern Munich in 2006.

But his selection seemed to have more to do with the manager's whim than the midfielder's form.

Under Grant, he has recently returned to the line-up after eight months out injured.

Ballack said: "John and Frank have been injured for a long time and it was a big game against Olympiakos so it was a decision from the coach.

"I'm not sure if anyone is untouchable now. I think they are both still very, very important players for us but you have to be careful after injuries.

We're frustrated but professional

"I know this myself, having had eight months out. It's not an easy time when you come back — you can't play every game straight away.

"The coach has a lot of experience. He knows what he's doing."

Lampard came on for Ballack in the goalless draw with Olympiakos in Athens, while Terry was left on the sidelines.

Lamps accepted the manager's decision but is targeting a quick return to the starting line-up at Wembley this weekend.

After three draws in their last four games, Chelsea will need to improve if they are to win the first trophy of the season.

And England midfielder Lamps pointed out that the Blues have won silverware in the last three years with a settled side playing good football.

Lamps said: "JT and I understood the reasons for not playing.

"You have to be mature as a professional and understand that.

"But it doesn't mean you can't be frustrated — that's what the manager would expect.

"He'd be disappoint-

ed if we weren't frustrated. Maybe we're in better shape than in previous seasons as we've had so many injuries, which means those players are now fresher. But it remains to be seen.

"There have been years when players have played a lot of games and we stayed strong until the end of the season. We need to show that again.

"It's easy to talk about having fresh legs which we have at the minute but we need to perform as a team.

"The great thing is that we've got a lot of strong players fit and ready to play."



Grant