

The 39th Game

(4/2008)

On 7 February 2008, the Premier League issued a press release, announcing that it was considering the introduction of an 'international round' to its football season, extending Premier League clubs' current 38 game season to 39.

Key points of the proposal

Under the Premier League proposal, each club would play a 39th game abroad over a weekend in January, starting in 2011, creating an additional round of matches. Cities all over the world would bid to become hosts for the matches. Five cities would each host two games over a weekend. These additional games would most likely be determined by a draw, potentially and controversially with the top five teams seeded to avoid playing each other.

Advantages of Game 39

The Premier League currently receives £625 million from selling its broadcasting rights abroad. This figure is a sharp increase from the £178 million that the Premier League received back in 2001. With an international round further raising the profile of the already popular league, the amount of money the Premier League could receive from the sale of overseas rights may again rise substantially. The extra games were also estimated to generate an additional £5 million for each club.

It's advocates, including Premier League chief executive Peter Scudamore have explained that more money could be reinvested in the game, meaning better players, grounds and facilities. Prime Minister Gordon Brown even suggested that some of the money that the clubs make could be used to lower ticket prices.

Such a scheme could also be good for the host cities. The NFL game at Wembley, for example, earned London more than £20m as visitors from the US flocked to the capital for the game. Die hard football fans could even use the game as an excuse for the annual family holiday. Indeed, Arsene Wenger, manager of Arsenal and former Newcastle manager Kevin Keegan both thought the idea of providing live stadium access to fans who could only watch Premier League games on television was a noble gesture. Keegan said:

"it will give everybody in the world a chance to see it in areas where they don't get a chance to see football like that".

Disadvantages of Game 39

Despite the obvious financial incentives for staging the international round, the Premier League proposals have been met with much hostility. 'GAME 39', as it has been dubbed has in fact been roundly criticised. Critics argue the plans will alienate fans whilst seriously affecting the integrity (and importantly) the structure of the football season.

The draw method to determine the Game 39 set of fixtures has been questioned. Specifically it may be especially unfair on the teams battling relegation, to suddenly have to play a third match against the champions elect. It could be seen as particularly unjust if two teams were battling against relegation and one of those teams was drawn against Liverpool with the other drawn against Fulham. Changing the fixture format by adding an additional game would be a difficult policy to justify.

The Sunderland manager Roy Keane who was broadly in favour of the extra game tellingly explained that "change is good but that depends who you are playing in that extra game. If it's one of the top four, I might argue." Sir Alex Ferguson was also unhappy over the way the Premier League dealt with the press release, saying consultations with managers and players should have taken place on a substantive level before announcing the idea to the world.

Commentators have also raised concerns about player burn out, saying that some clubs play too many games already. An interesting point was also raised by ex-Fulham manager Lawrie Sanchez who argued that as well as English Premier League fans being unhappy about their league being taken on tour, foreign national associations could well view the Premier League 'soon coming to a country near you' as a threat to their own leagues viability and popularity. He said:

"other national associations won't be happy about the Premier League coming into their game, taking

sponsors, taking advertising, taking revenue from their game".

Indeed the Japanese football association called the project "problematic" and whilst chief executive Richard Scudamore has admitted that the proposals are very much a "work in progress," he accepted that they had received "a hostile reaction."

The governing bodies of football

Within a week of the press release, various national and international football associations publicly rejected the idea. UEFA president Michel Platini described the idea as "comical," and "a nonsense idea". Sepp Blatter the FIFA president labelled it an "abuse of association football" whilst the Asian Football Confederation was one of many to refuse the Premier League to play competitive games on their grounds. The Korean FA expressed "strong reservations" and the Japanese FA opposed the plan. Conversely, United Arab Emirates Football Association and the Hong Kong Football Association backed Premier League plans.

Indeed FIFA went as far as saying that the Premier League was jeopardising England's bid to host the 2018 World Cup. Given the threat to England's bid to host the World Cup 2018, the FA have been very careful to distance themselves from the proposal. As many foreign associations are opposed to the Game 39 idea, the Premier League may not in fact even have the necessary number of national associations on board to stage the games at present.

What is certain is that Game 39 has provoked much protest, support and criticism in equal measure and will not be put to bed any time soon. Whilst there are such interests at stake like increased exposure to a global audience leading to further broadcasting and sponsorship opportunities for the Premier League and its members, it remains to be seen whether the interests of English fans are listened to.

The Football Supporters' Federation has launched its 'No to game 39' poll to fight the Premier League's plans. Some have argued however that such a policy line would be to the detriment of the millions of fans who can only watch the Premier League live on television. Access to the live stadium Premier League competition has certainly entered the global debating arena.

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