

The IFA Team (left to right): Michael Stracke, Antje Hembd, Marcel Schmid, Johanna Roskosch.



# INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL ARENA

The International Football Arena (IFA) will hold its annual IFA Zurich conference this October. Two top sports journalists explain why IFA is always on their agenda.

**T**he International Football Arena (IFA) has been hosting events, fostering debate, and inspiring exchange between decision-makers in the business of football for over ten years. It started in 1999 with the IFA conference in Zurich, which has taken place annually ever since. Around 200 global decision makers in football congregate in Zurich for cutting-edge information, high-level networking and bilateral meetings.

Since 2007, the IFA has also been present in Asia (2007/08 in Beijing, 2009 in Kuala Lumpur and 2010 IFA roundtable in New Delhi).

Today, IFA enjoys the reputation of being one of the leading organisers of exclusive events for football's global players.

**Simon Kuper, Financial Times sports columnist and author of Soccernomics explains why the IFA is on his agenda:**

It has become an autumn ritual for me: get ticket to Zurich and learn

enough about the football business in two days to keep me going for months. And what you learn in the actual sessions of the International Football Arena (IFA) is only half of it. Last year I showed up on the Sunday night before the conference, and in the bar of the Park Hyatt hotel in Zurich got talking to a charming Spaniard (or Catalan?). He turned out to be the coordinator of FC Barcelona's youth academy, the Masia. We ordered beers. Displaying none of the regrettable caution that football people habitually put on in the presence of journalists, he told me all about his job and the people he dealt with. Lionel Messi was a "lovely humble kid", he said, but his problem was that like any 'super-gifted student' he sometimes got bored in class. Even training sessions with the first team were too easy for him. Andres Iniesta was lovely and humble full stop.

The next day at the conference Albert, as my new friend was called, gave a startling power-point presentation in very decent English on how exactly the Masia worked. Essentially training was all about passing, he

Simon Kuper, Financial Times sports columnist and author of Soccernomics.





explained. The academy didn't care how big a kid was, or even particularly how fast he could run, and they barely did any fitness training without a ball. The whole place was pretty much a university of the pass.

"Of course, the players must always find triangles," Albert told the roomful of club bosses, agents and lobbyists, many of whom must have been eagerly making notes.

It so happened that a few weeks later I was coming to Barcelona to celebrate my fortieth birthday, and I asked Albert to show me around the Masía. I think he must have viewed me as a fellow member of the IFA secret society rather than some tacky journalist, because he opened all the doors. I walked into the Masía, an old brick farmhouse right next to the Nou Camp, straight off the street — no security here. Instantly I was served excellent espresso. Then Albert and two of his colleagues took me into a tiny office and answered every question I had. As they went on and on about passing, I began to realise that the Masía was really an updated copy of that other great European academy: Ajax Amsterdam's De Toekomst. Johan Crujff — the father of Dutch football who had emigrated to Barcelona — had simply imported the knowledge from one place to the other.

Nine months later in Johannesburg, I saw Spain beat Holland in the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ final. Seven boys raised in the Masía defeated seven raised in De Toekomst, playing Crujffian passing football. In short, a chance meeting in the Hyatt bar had given me a new insight into how the World Cup™ was won.

*Franz Beckenbauer (FIFA Executive Committee) and Joseph S. Blatter (FIFA President) at the IFA Zurich in 2008.*



## IFA 2010

The next IFA will take place 25-26 October 2010 at the Dolder Grand Hotel, Zurich, Switzerland.

Topics include "The Future of Football Stadiums" and "The Future FIFA World Cup™ Hosts" — Bidding Nations for the FIFA World Cup™ 2018/2022 present their bids.

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## Best Practice & Knowledge Exchange

The International Football Arena has been good for me — I haven't missed one since I was first inducted into this secret society in 2004 — but it hasn't been bad for football either. In this historically dumb business, the annual IFA conference in Zurich has become a key venue for transfer of best practice. How to run a youth academy that produces the world's best footballers is just one of the many things you learn in your day and a half in autumnal Swiss suburbia.

For those who have never been, you first need to try to picture the scene. We all have fantasies about discovering the room full of people who control everything. The late British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, coined the phrase "the gnomes of Zurich" to describe the unseen rich men in dark rooms who make the big decisions. In football, those gnomes are at the IFA. The conference feels like the headquarters of a global conspiracy, gathered to chart the future of the game's business.

The IFA is an example of the knowledge exchange that has always characterised Western Europe. Because of our region's mild and rainy climate, the land is fertile, which means that hundreds of millions of us can live, packed together, in a relatively small space. We have a lot to talk about, and historically one of the best places to discuss it has been comfortable and neutral Switzerland. The Swiss may have a fantastically boring national team, but they have turned themselves into the headquarters of football, and the IFA is part of their dominance.

Conversation is surprisingly frank for a public event, and that's probably because there are few of us journalists around. A bane of life for those of us who write about football is that the sport attracts so many uncivilised media. Anything that anyone from a big club says typically gets distorted and turned into a big headline the next morning. So people in football learn to say nothing, which of course hampers the exchange of useful information. Until they get to the IFA. Only a handful of us civilised journalists get invited, and we know we're there on sufferance, so we do our best not to embarrass anyone. The executive of a giant club



Hostesses at the IFA Zurich in 2009.

who told me last year: “We’re an excellent business — except for our players’ wages,” and then proceeded to spell out just what a problem those wages were, but you can rest assured that his club’s identity will remain a secret with me.

I hope we invited journalists haven’t been corrupted by the club that is the IFA, but we do want to be invited back, and the event’s format (including the beers in the bars) encourages us to view the other participants as colleagues rather than adversaries. You learn so much sitting on the inside that we don’t want to be thrown out.

### Learning Through Others Experiences

How frank the forum is was brought home to me at the very first one I attended, back in 2004. It’s hard to remember now, but in those days the subject of the most intense media coverage in Europe was a balding bespectacled Swede who happened to manage the England football team. This scrutiny, accentuated by Sven Goran Eriksson’s natural understatement, ensured that he never said anything interesting. Imagine my surprise, sitting in the hall at the IFA that year, to see him turn raconteur. He announced that he had a “good story” about his time managing Lazio Roma, and launched in.

“The Chairman I had was very good,” Eriksson recalled. “If I wanted a player, he would try to get that player. One day I phoned him up and I said: Vieri.”

Christian Vieri was then playing for Atletico Madrid. Eriksson and Lazio’s Chairman Sergio Cragnotti (later briefly jailed over another matter) flew to Spain to bid for him. Atletico told them Vieri would cost 50 billion Italian lire. At the time, in 1998, that was about £17m. Eriksson reminisced: “That was the biggest sum in the world. No player had been involved for that.”

He says the talks then went as follows:

Cragnotti: “That’s a lot of money.”

Eriksson: “I know. Atletico said they might accept some Lazio players in part-payment for Vieri.”

Cragnotti: “Can we do that?”

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Eriksson: “No, we can’t give away these players.”

Cragnotti: “What shall we do then?”

Eriksson: “Buy him.”

Cragnotti: “OK.”

Eriksson recalled in Zurich: “He didn’t even try to pay 49. He just paid 50.”

Nine months after Vieri joined Lazio, Inter Milan wanted to buy him. Once again, Eriksson reports the conversation as follows:

Cragnotti: “What shall I ask for him?”

Eriksson: “Ask for double. Ask 100.”

Cragnotti: “I can’t do that.”

Eriksson recalled: “So he asked 90. And he got 90. That’s good business.” (Or perhaps the ultimate example of the greater fool principle.)

Like so much of what I heard at the IFA, it was a fascinating insight into how decisions actually get made in football.

Then I go off and write about it. I always expect to return from my thirty or so hours in Zurich with two columns for the Financial Times, and several leads to pursue. Other people, I imagine, go off and use what they learn to make football work better. At the IFA, executives from giant clubs like Arsenal, Barcelona and Inter Milan meet, in a relatively soothing neutral setting — there’s no game at hand, no transfer to haggle about, no pow-wow of clubs each pursuing its own interests — and they actually learn something about how the other thinks. They debate the art of making transfers, or running leagues, or structuring the ownership of clubs. Sometimes the participants annoy each other — Barcelona can be seen as smug, Chelsea as greedy — but they all go home with new ideas.

Now the IFA is extending that knowledge-exchange to Asian countries such as Malaysia and China. It means that the Zurich conference, too, has become a venue for running into amiable well-informed people in bars who will tell you just what is going on with football in surprising bits of Asia. The conference is not just a place for understanding the present, but also for glimpsing the future. Another secret: it’s quite jolly too, and the beers are cold.



*Rowan Simons, debating at IFA Beijing in 2008.*

**Rowan Simons, Football Expert in China and Author of Bamboo Goalposts, gives his insights into the IFA in Asia:**

Despite impressive public stadia, China has languished in the bottom division of international football for decades. Largely isolated from global developments and controlled by a government stuck in a Soviet sports bubble, the PRC football sector has traditionally been ignorant of the inter-connected world of public and private stakeholders, which contribute to the game's success. In fact, Chinese stakeholders have been noticeable by their absence from international conferences since the professional game launched in 1994. It was only once the full extent of corruption and bribery was revealed earlier this year that we found out why. Most Chinese clubs had very little in common with those committed to building businesses and respecting community values. When playing away from China, they found few opportunities to sell matches, place illegal bets or conduct a range of immoral activities.

It was against this rather depressing background that, in 2007, Marcel Schmid boldly decided to turn the tables and bring his IFA movers and shakers to Beijing. Along with all those who believe China must learn from other countries, I welcomed his initiative and was honoured to speak alongside such luminaries as Peter Kenyon (former CEO, Chelsea FC) and Tim Leiweke (CEO, Anschutz Entertainment Group). Although some observers were sceptical, the support of China's lead-

*Mohammed bin Hammam (AFC President) and Marcel Schmid (IFA Chairman) before the IFA Kuala Lumpur event in October 2009.*



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ing sports publisher, Titan, and formal recognition by the AFC and CFA, made it the first professional head-to-head conference on why Chinese football is so weak and what the world can offer by way of solutions.

Not surprisingly, the opening panel sessions were lively and, over two days of frank exchanges, something important changed. The Chinese media, famed for its cowardice in reporting all other sensitive subjects, found new inspiration, reporting in depth and with passion on the very different views presented by experts at the IFA. They have not stopped since.

## Asian Football in Focus

By 2008, the stakes were even higher as China counted down the days to its great Olympic jamboree. Only football threatened to ruin the gold medal charge and, once again, it was the IFA, with headline speakers including Danny Jordaan (CEO, 2010 FIFA World Cup™ Organizing Committee South Africa), Richard Scudamore (CEO, Premier League) and Mohamed bin Hammam (President, AFC), which came to Beijing to provide support, but also to keep Chinese footballing feet firmly on the ground.

The IFA Beijing in 2008 also gave this first time author the official platform to finally raise the burning political issue of government interference in Chinese football; the fundamental contradiction between FIFA's constitution and China's Sports Law. No CFA organised event could have addressed such a topic and, once again, the Chinese media reacted with admirable honesty.

IFA Asia moved to Malaysia for 2009, but the impact of the two Beijing events is still being felt here. Many of the local delegates who first met in that rare atmosphere of openness remain in close contact and our presentations have been scrutinised at all levels of government. As post-Olympic China finally opens its eyes, the value of those landmark IFA events in fearlessly pushing forward the debate and bringing stakeholders together cannot be underestimated. ☆