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Mihir Bose: Schmid on getting more for less, a winter World Cup and managing social media deluges

Last Sunday Marcel Schmid was at Wembley to watch the New England Patriots play the St Louis Rams. Nothing remarkable in that you may think, some 84,000 others were also there as NFL made its annual foray outside its homeland in an effort to reach a worldwide audience.

But for Schmid, chairman of the International Football Arena (IFA), it provided renewed focus for one of the themes that will dominate this year's conference in Zurich on November 12–13. This is a subject that has often puzzled him: how do NFL teams get more out of their sport despite playing a lot fewer matches than most British or European club football teams?

Schmid (pictured below) readily admits he has no great attachment to America's national sport. "I do not find the game very appealing. But what is fascinating is they have a much shorter season, 18 competitive matches in a season. Imagine how many competitive matches Chelsea or Manchester United have in a season: 60/70. These teams have something like 35 home games, NFL teams have just nine."



"Look at the Forbes list of the top clubs and you will always find Dallas Cowboys and Manchester United almost equal. Dallas Cowboys in their nine home games get as much money as Manchester United from their 30 odd home games through match day, ticketing, sponsorship rights. But how on earth can Dallas Cowboys create so much money when practically for many months in a year there is nothing going on in the field of play? This is what I find amazing.

"What is happening is that NFL, and the whole of American football, establish an interest for their clubs through their own television channels and lots of show business events. They keep their fans alert and interested even when there are no matches. We would have a huge problem to do that in football. Americans know how to sell their sport."

Schmid admits that European clubs, particularly English clubs, are not novices when it comes to marketing but insists, "Americans still seem to be more advanced when it comes to selling sport. We can learn from them."

Schmid is aware that in looking to learn from the Americans European clubs do face a danger. In many parts of the world, particularly Asia, as European clubs seek to exploit the growing Asian market, they are seen as football's new colonisers. In the old outposts of the European empires, such as Singapore and Kolkata, people now regularly change their sleeping habits on match days to make sure they catch the live broadcast of Premier League matches. Singapore is eight hours ahead of the UK and on Premier League match days people go to bed around 7pm and get up at 3am to follow the evening match being broadcast live from England. Much the same happens in India. For some critics in Asia this is the return of the European empire, at least in football.

Schmid, who has organised three high-level roundtable conferences on football in New Delhi says, "I understand the point people make of the recolonisation of Asia. I know there are clubs that like touring there every year to enlarge their fan base. They look on the fans there as customers and don't try to share some of their experience and knowhow and human resources with the local clubs and associations to help them make progress."

With Sepp Blatter, President of FIFA, describing Indian football as a "sleeping giant" what Schmid "would like to see is a big Indian corporation becoming a partner of one of the top English or European teams. It would provide them worldwide visibility at the same time use some of the money to take the knowhow of the club to



develop regional teams in India. That would make a lot of sense. Some clubs are just using Asia, particularly China and India as a platform to make themselves bigger.”

Schmid then tells a story of how at one of his Indian conferences a businessman with an interest in football described the less than welcome impact of European club football in his country. “What he said was many of them create youth academies which are completely based on commercial ideas. They are asking money from families to send the kids there. But is the talent in India in a position to pay to attend a four week course? The Indian Maradona or Messi is not coming from mid level family with some business that could allow such fees. The kid is probably living in a slum. You can look at the markets in Asia to enlarge audiences for your own purposes or say, ‘No we can support that country and give something to them before we take something out.’”

Schmid is, understandably, reluctant to name the clubs who play in Asia just to make money. But there is one club he will name: Chelsea. However for Schmid Chelsea is a paragon, “Chelsea is not acting like one of those teams just going there taking the money and running away. They have a very different policy with their Vision for Asia.”

It would be easy to dismiss this as Schmid merely praising his partner. Chelsea’s association has been crucial for IFA and thanks to the link up with the west London club IFA has been able to go to Asia and provide a discussion platform for the industry with conferences not only in India but also in China and Thailand.

But when I make this point Schmid laughs and says, “That is not the case. Their blue pitch programme ‘here to play, here to stay’ is not something other clubs have. It would be fantastic if football’s club-giants can travel and fill the world’s biggest stadiums with excited fans. But at the same time, the local and national teams in less developed football countries should get real support from the giants in order to develop their game and become a competitive partner over the years. To see countries like China, India, Thailand – to name a few – merely as a target to enlarge your own fan base seems very short-term thinking.”

One way of putting your country on the map is, of course, host the World Cup as Qatar (pictured below) is doing in 2022 .The conference will hear about the desert kingdom’s sporting ambitions and gets what Schmid hopes is “an inside-view from the Qataris on finding and forming their talent. A small country with a huge event coming up wants to have a national team ready to be competitive. How is this process on its



way? And how does such a situation compare with less centralised countries in terms of forming national team players?”

The big debate about 2022 World Cup is when it will be held and here Schmid agrees with Michel Platini. “I personally would love to have it in the winter.”

But where he would disagree with many of the leaders of world football is his belief that World Cup and national team matches continue to decline in value. “This is something I have been saying for some five years. The quality of World Cup matches does not match that of Champions League matches. The standard of national team in most cases cannot be as good as that at club level. Big clubs do have the scouting system and they have the knowhow and money to bring the best players from all parts of the world. If your sheik or oligarch, or may be fans, create such high income then you can pick the best players in the globe in one team. You have them play in 70 matches in a year with additional training and preparation. Then, of course, they have a different quality as a team. They can see where their colleagues are moving on the pitch in their dreams. If you play in the national team five or six times a year it is not the same. Spain is a good national team but it is mostly two teams Real Madrid and Barcelona.”

In many ways, the most interesting event in the conference may be the discussion on how to deal with social media shit storms. The term, Schmid explains, “comes out of Germany and it is not so much used in England. It means that when something is happening you get flooded with emails and tweets and then the club has to deal with them.”

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FIFA President Joseph S. Blatter has confirmed his appearance. IFA Zurich on November 12/13 at The Dolder Grand Hotel.
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Schmid, himself, does not Tweet, his company does, but says, “The power of fans in the age of social media is something we need to understand. How do clubs, associations, sponsors but also players/managers deal with these instruments. How can they handle them? Social media is a relevant factor in most parts of our life. But football delivers such an emotional platform, that it has to know how to manage social media.”

Mihir Bose is one of the world’s most astute observers on politics in sport, particularly football. He wrote formerly for The Sunday Times and the Daily Telegraph and was the BBC’s head sports editor.

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