

Clubs concerned over Euro kick-off times

GENEVA, Feb 26 (Reuters) - Top European soccer clubs expressed their concern on Thursday over planned kick-off times for next season's re-timed Champions League and UEFA Cup competitions.

UEFA, European soccer's governing body, said at a workshop of Europe's top 50 clubs here that it wants to streamline kick-off times to maximise TV coverage and not have matches going on for several hours across the three European time zones.

UEFA General Secretary Gerhard Aigner said that all matches in the Champions League were planned to kickoff at 2045 Central European Time (usually 1945 GMT) while matches in the UEFA Cup would kick-off between either 1700-1800 CET (usually 1600-1700 GMT) or between 2000-2100 CET (usually 1900-2000 GMT).

The earlier time slot would, it is planned, be for matches in the east of Europe, while the later time would apply to matches in the western half of Europe.

"There are still some anomalies to be sorted out, but in general all matches will kick-off in the time slots," said Aigner.

The clubs cannot choose their kickoff times in the Champions League -- that time is fixed. We are trying to create a better pattern with some minor flexibility involved."

"As far as the UEFA Cup is concerned we are trying to group all the matches into two time slots."

The fear among the clubs is that cultural differences and other traditions are being ignored.

In Portugal, for example, matches traditionally kick off around nine in the evening local time (2200 CET) after families have eaten their evening meal together. The Portuguese clubs were unhappy about the proposals and want UEFA to think again.

Also by UEFA's logic, if all Champions League matches kick off at 2045 CET, that would mean the kick-off time in Moscow 2245 local.

Pete Kenyon, the deputy executive director of Manchester United, was among those worried by the proposals.

Although United are likely to be in the Champions League next season, if they were to compete in the UEFA Cup, he did not want the possibility of United being forced to kick off in an empty Old Trafford stadium at 4 p.m. British time while fans were still at work, school or office.

Kenyon said: "Obviously this causes us grave concern. It is unthinkable we could be kicking off at four o'clock in the afternoon in midweek, but under these proposals that could happen. It presents huge problems."

Charles will attend FA Cup final

LONDON, Feb 26: Prince Charles will present the famous jug-eared trophy at this year's FA Cup final. It was announced Thursday, reports AFP.

It is the 71st final at Wembley and the 118th in the history of the world's oldest football competition.

This year's final, on May 22, will be the last at Wembley before building work starts on a new 320-million pound (500 million dollar) state-of-the-art stadium.

The day before the cup final the Prince of Wales will entertain VIP guests from the world of football for lunch at Highgate, his home in the Gloucestershire countryside.

Representatives of the six football confederations will be joining the Prince for lunch and then attending the cup final the following day.

The Prince, whose protruding ears have often been likened to the FA Cup by British satirists, last presented the FA Cup in 1995 when Everton beat Manchester United 1-0.

His sons Prince William and Harry are keen supporters of last year's winners Arsenal.

Toshack to be tested by Betis



MADRID, Feb 26 (Reuters/Internet) - Less than 72 hours after he signed to become the new coach of Real Madrid, John Toshack will find out the true colours of his new team.

The European champions face a difficult away trip to Real Betis on Saturday.

The Seville side's 13th place

make immediate changes but he indicated Real's shaky defence needed some adjusting.

"Thirty-six goals is a lot to have conceded. After a few games I'll have a better idea of what needs to be done."

What he declined to add was that the Real who won the 1989-90 Spanish league title under him only let in two more goals all season than the current squad have in just 23 games.

Against Betis, Toshack will rely on the advice of caretaker coach Toni Grande, a Real stalwart who was Guus Hiddink's assistant prior to the Dutchman's departure in the early days of last October.

"I've got to be honest and say I have not got much idea about Betis," Toshack admitted on his arrival in the Spanish capital on Thursday.

He said that other than one television match "I don't know very much about them apart from their defender Filipezinho who used to play in Turkey."

If he is not familiar with Real Betis, at least Toshack knows Clemente well.

"We are actually good friends although we were rivals when both of us were coaches in the Basque country and the last time I was at Real Madrid, the rivalry carried on here because Javier was coaching at Atletico," Toshack added.

The Welshman's first task will be to gain the trust of his players in what little time he has before Saturday afternoon.

Club captain Manuel Sanchis and Spanish international defender Fernando Hierro are survivors from his last spell at Real Madrid.

But the widely-respected Sanchis had some harsh words to say about Toshack after he was sacked by the club in November 1990.

"I lost my confidence as a player under Toshack," Sanchis said shortly afterwards.

Toshack, though, does not carry grudges back to the seven times European champions, citing former Real president Ramon Mendoza as the reason for the breakdown in the relationship.

"He must be stopped!" the Barcelona-based sports daily Sport exclaimed on Friday, over a full-size two-page picture of Lopez.

Barcelona captain Luis Figo is suspended but Louis van Gaal has not said who will replace him, with a dearth of right-sided players in the squad. Valencia will miss Jocelyn Angloma to a hamstring injury and former Barcelona midfielder Luis Milla is doubtful of playing against his old club.

Toshack does not expect to

Hamed-Bungu bout may be in July

LONDON, Feb 26 (AFP): Prince Naseem Hamed's summer agenda could be filled by South Africa's Vuyani Bungu.

Hamed's brother and business manager Riath is in talks with Bungu's promoter Rodney Burman over a WBO featherweight title defence in South Africa or America, possibly in July.

Both Hamed and Bungu are contractually tied to American cable network Home Box Office, so television politics would not hinder negotiations.

Discussions are positive," Riath Hamed said today.

"But there are a lot of things to be sorted out. Bungu is a very respected boxer with a fine reputation, and we are interested in the fight taking place.

"It could go ahead in America or South Africa. It is a country which Nas would like to go to fight, a place with a different flavour, a different spice.

"It would be good for Nas to defend in another continent, but of course he enjoys fighting in the UK."

Hamed must first overcome the challenge of Scarborough's Paul Ingle in Manchester on April 10, a bill which could include Bungu — described by Burman as South Africa's greatest fighter — involved on the undercard.

Bungu's statistics back Burman's glowing assessment. He has just successfully defended his IBF super-bantamweight title for the 13th time but is soon to move up a division.

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