



Wenger slams foul play

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger launched a scathing attack on deliberate foul play in the English game on Friday and blamed referees for failing to spot talented players.

Wenger said he was a great admirer of the bravery and physical contact that was part of the English style of play, but said that some players and teams deliberately kicked opponents and escaped punishment.

"I don't blame the other managers, or the players -- if they are asked to give 100 per cent, then of course, they do -- but it is the referees who have to decide how far they can go," Wenger told reporters.

"We have a young team and they are kicked and punched. And in the end, you are still supposed to say 'sorry, I am not strong enough'?" That is difficult to take, frankly.

"I don't feel it is right to punch people in the stomach and afterwards to say 'ok, they are just babies crying'. It is not the way I see the game."

He said deliberate foul play could hold the English national team back in international tournaments like the World Cup finals.

"And I feel sometimes, if that is football, that's the way we go then it doesn't progress English football. And I am sorry because if you go to the World Cup you cannot say you behave like that -- because you go nowhere," he said.

Wenger also said he had video evidence of well-known players and managers swearing freely at referees and not being punished, despite foul and abusive language being a dismissible offence.

Ferrari receives Chelsea offer

INTERNET, undated

Matteo Ferrari's agent admits he has received an offer from Chelsea, but he has turned it down to stay with Roma.

"Jose Mourinho knows Ferrari well and this is why, when Matteo played against Chelsea for Everton, he spoke very highly of him," explained Gianni Corci on "Teleradiosport Sport".

It would be a prestigious switch for the former Parma central defender, who has made just eight appearances for the Giallorossi this season.

"Ferrari suits the English game, both for his technical and physical attributes, but it's clear he wants to continue with Roma."

It would be a return to the Premiership for the 27-year-old, who had a brief spell on loan at Everton when he failed to find room at the Stadio Olimpico.

"We have a strong rapport with the Giallorossi directors and plan to carry on this relationship. We want to extend our contract, although it has to be said matters haven't improved by much," added Corci.

"Even if in Italy too there are prestigious sides interested in Matteo, who have made some interesting approaches, we are perfectly relaxed. Roma are in our minds."

"We have to be challenging for

TOUCHLINE

No rest for the weary

Football

GABRIELE MARCOTTI

A few years ago I went to see Sven Goran Eriksson, who at the time was the England national team coach. He showed me a power-point presentation he had prepared, illustrating how countries in which there is no midseason break tend to underperform internationally. He was going to use it to persuade the English powers-that-be to introduce a winter break around the turn of the year (as is customary in most European leagues).

No prizes for guessing how he fared. Eriksson was laughed out of the room. Rather than give the players some time off in midseason, the Premiership goes in the opposite direction, doubling their fixtures. This season, most clubs played on December 23, 26, 30 and January 1: four games in nine days. Meanwhile, the rest of Europe's top leagues enjoyed breaks ranging from two weeks (Spain) to six weeks (Germany).

Eriksson's point was that the Premiership's insistence on scheduling additional TV-friendly games during the holidays ends up penalizing English-based players who find themselves staggering tired and battle-weary into international competitions. Cynics -- especially now that the Swede is about as popular as the flu, at least in England -- will say that it's just an excuse.

But take a step back and ask yourself how many Premiership stars played well at Germany 2006? To a man, from Steven Gerrard to Thierry Henry and from Frank Lampard to Cristiano Ronaldo, most underperformed at the World Cup compared to what we're used to seeing, week in, week out. Which suggests that Eriksson may have a point.

Footballers are athletes, of course, but, as Giampiero Ventrone, the legendary former Juventus fitness coach told me, they are unlike most other athletes. First, most athletic training follows a natural peak-and-tough cycle. You plan your physical work in such a

way that you peak a certain number of times per year. For a world-class rower in an Olympic year it may mean peaking just once; for a boxer, three or four times (based on when his fights are scheduled); for a track and field star, the peaks will coincide with whatever Grand Prix events he or she has lined up.

The body is not a machine. You can only reach your peak potential every so often, which is why the most finely-tuned athletes only compete a limited number of times per year. But footballers are expected to turn out and be at their best 10 months out of the year. Simply put, it's impossible.

Soccer players also face a schedule unlike most other team sports. Most top teams play twice a week. It may not seem like a lot compared to, say, Major League Baseball (with its 162-game schedule) or the National Basketball Association, but those are very different sports. Both have offseasons which are twice as long and, as far as baseball is concerned, much of the time is spent standing around (come to think of it, some NBA games are like that, too). NFL football is more physically punishing than soccer, dictating a smaller 16 regular-season game slate. Even then, the NFL requires a different kind of physical effort: a series of short bursts (over a maximum of 35, 40 minutes per week) compared to the constant running of soccer.

And yet the irony is, according to Ventrone, that footballers train a lot less than athletes in individual sports. In fact, compared to swimmers and runners, they are relative softies.

"I work with these Ukrainian swimmers, they get up at 5 a.m. and train for 12 hours a day, every day," Ventrone told me. "That's an athlete's life. Footballers are spoiled brats compared to them. At Juve we worked more than most, but even then, you only got, at best, a couple of hours a day."

An assistant coach at one major Premiership club confirmed this.

"Most weeks we play two games, plus they get a day off," he told me. "And if they don't have the day after a game off, we're usually

taking it easy. Then there's the day before the match. We almost always have light training, either because we have to travel or because we need to do more tactical work to prepare for our opponent. That's two more days lost. Which means we usually have just one day where we can train fully and properly and push ourselves, usually the Monday after a Saturday match."

And training "fully" and "properly" is a far cry from Ventrone's Ukrainian swimmers and their 2,000 daily laps.

"No, we'll start around 10, finish up by 12, 12:30 and that's it. But what can you do? Our only real chance to do serious work, is during pre-season. But that's just four weeks or so. And, even then, there will be tours and friendlies and all that crap."

Would players perform better if they put in more hours? Probably. At most clubs they have the morning or the afternoon off, which makes it a pretty cushy gig (and that's without considering the seven-figure salaries).

The problem with working them harder during the season is that they also need time off to recuperate. And the simple truth is that most simply don't get it. Those who went to the World Cup got, at best, three or four weeks off. At worst, like Andrea Pirlo or Thierry Henry (who had the "misfortune" of reaching the final), they got 12 days. Compare that to the three months most baseball stars get to spend their exorbitant salaries.

There is no easy solution to it, beyond reducing the number of fixtures, which, naturally, nobody wants to do, because you need to maximize profits to pay the massive salaries. Given that this won't happen any time soon, the best one can hope for is a mid-season break, a real one, across the whole continent (even if it means chucking in additional fixtures at other times of the year). And there's no better place to start than the English Premier League.

(Gabriele Marcotti is a columnist for Sports Illustrated)

Trezeguet fancies Boca move

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

France international striker David Trezeguet admitted Friday that he would be tempted to join Argentine side Boca Juniors if asked to by football legend Diego Maradona.

"If Diego asked me to come to



Boca it would be difficult to say no to him," Trezeguet, who plays for Italian Serie B side Juventus, told sports daily Ole.

"I see the passion that he has for Boca and he was an exceptional player. Because of this passion it would be hard to say no, even if up until now I've never really thought about it."

Trezeguet, 29, was born in

France to Argentine parents. He started his career in top flight Argentine side Platense, but played just five matches before being signed by Monaco and then Juventus.

"I'd like to experience Argentine football. I left here very young and played very little in the first division. It would be an interesting experience on a personal level if not a financial one," he said.

"Talking to Maradona I'd like to play here some time."

Trezeguet said that he was also tempted by a move to Spain.

"I've always liked it (Spain). I come from the culture of Argentine football which is very similar. My priority is Juventus, but I've already told the management I want a competitive team."

Juventus were stripped of the first division title they won last season and relegated to the Serie B for match fixing.

Maradona, the 1986 World Cup winning captain, won his first league title with Boca Juniors in 1981 before moving on to Barcelona and Naples.

The 46-year-old quit his post as vice-president of Boca Juniors last August but said he would be ready to take up a management post early in 2007.

Strachan feels for Le Guen

INTERNET, undated

Celtic manager Gordon Strachan admitted sympathy for Paul Le Guen and claimed Old Firm bosses inhabit a 'fantasy' world.

Since arriving at Parkhead in the summer of 2005, the former Coventry and Southampton manager has seen off two of his Ibrox counterparts.

The Frenchman left after meeting chairman David McLeish on Thursday only seven months after taking over from Alex McLeish.

Strachan was keen to stress the peculiar pressures under which he thinks Celtic and Rangers managers operate.

He said: "If you can manage either half of the Old Firm without losing your sanity then you can go anywhere in the world."

"The physical and psychological toll that's taken of you by the time you leave depends on what kind of state the club's in at the time."

"The hardest part of working with the Old Firm is the fantasy that attaches itself to the clubs."

"By that I mean everything that is unreal. I can deal with my players and how we handle the opposition, everything else is unreal to me."

"So I can sympathise with Paul or any other manager when they lose their jobs because it's a hard business."

"Graeme Souness told me that when he was at Ibrox he knew the fight was on to keep hold of his sanity and he was right."

