

Where will it all end? By Stuart Fuller (@theballisround)

The Transfer Window - the easiest period for some journalists who can simply make stories up (draw player name from pot one, club from pot two and then add a word such as "rumour has it" or "according to sources" and you have a story). China will undoubtedly be mentioned time and time again, just as it was last year and the year before.

We all know that the footballing has gone mad. There's been numerous examples over the past few seasons, whether it be a step 5 club like Salford City paying a player £4k a week or last season's saga involving Oscar's transfer to Chinese side Shanghai SIPG, ratified on the 1st January, which meant he left these shores to become the (allegedly) richest player in the world, with an estimated salary of £400k. And for Chelsea? Well they will get £60 million as "compensation", £35 million more than they paid for the 25 year old Brazilian or in terms of games played, a profit of £172,414 for every game he played for the Blues.

Oscar kept the "richest player" in the world for almost an hour as Carlos Tevez agreed to join cross-city rivals Shanghai Shenhua on a weekly wage of £615,000, or in layman's terms, £1 per SECOND.

This is a very similar conversation to what we were having a year ago when the likes of Ramires and Alex Teixeira joined the league for tens of millions of dollars yet that hasn't destabilised world football has it? So, the scaremongering about this being the beginning of the end is pure hyperbole.

In the history of football in England there have been five clear compelling events that have shaped our game today. Whilst some people may consider other events in a similar vein, football is today a global business rather than a game of the people. How have we got to this point?

Back in 1888, William McGregor, a director at Aston Villa wrote to a small number of other football clubs and suggested the creation of a league competition, based on the structure of "football" in the United States college system. The league kicked off in September of that year, the first organised football league-based competition in the world.

At the turn of the century, the Football Association passed a rule at its AGM that set the maximum wage of professional footballers playing in the Football League at £4 a week, and banning any payment of match bonuses. The concept of the maximum wage stayed in place for sixty years until it was abolishing it in January 1961, the second compelling event in British football.

Money has been the root of all evil in our game and the third tipping point came in 1990 after the publication of the Football Association's "Blueprint for the Future of Football" which essentially laid out the concept of the Premier League. There's little debate that the Premier League was created to ensure that the clubs at the top of English football were able to maximise revenues potentially on offer of the next TV deal. The heads of terms agreement was signed in July 1991, with the First Division clubs giving notice to resign from the Football League a few weeks later.

Hot on the heels of the formation of the Premier League came the next compelling event – the first BSkyB Television deal, signed in May 1992, for £191 million paid over five years. Five years later that amount more than trebled to £670 million. Now, twenty five years later that amount is over £5 billion.

The huge amounts being offered by the TV companies also had a knock-on effect, one that today is still the most emotive subject for the fans and the media alike. Overseas ownership of clubs. Whilst some may point the finger for the huge sums paid for players today at the door of Blackburn Rovers, and what owner and life-long fan Jack Walker did in the early years of the Premier League by buying the best of British and delivering an unlikely Premier League title to the Lancashire club. Walker invested nearly £100 million of his own fortune to bring a redeveloped, modern stadium to Rovers along with the league title for the first time in 80 years.

However, it was the arrival of Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich in West London that really changed football as we knew it. It's not public knowledge how much exactly Abramovich has invested into the club but it will have run into hundreds of millions. What his investment has proved is that money does buy success and it is with some irony that Blues current manager Antonio Conte has issued a stark warning about the impact of the cash being spent on players in China could have on the rest of football.

To me, they are the five moments in the history of English football that have shaped our game more than any other events. Like it or not, the TV deals now dictate how our football clubs think and act, with managerial careers now at the mercy of the riches on offer for simply keeping a team one place above the Premier League relegation zone.

But let's assume for one minute that the transfer market in China does accelerate and they start making serious offers for the most talented players in the Premier League. What are the potential ramifications for our game should we start leaving these shores?

Scenario 1 – Investment into Premier League clubs from foreign ownership comes to an end

In this case, the growth in Supporter-owned clubs would increase. Is that a bad thing? We only have to look at the Bundesliga, often used as the 'model' for successful leagues. In Germany all clubs in the Bundesliga are issued with a licence which is based on financial criteria as well as the fact that no one individual can own more than 49% of the shares in a club. Football clubs are incredibly resilient. Out of the 88 clubs that played in the Football League ninety years ago in the 1926/27 season, only two of the clubs completely cease to exist today (Aberdare Athletic and New Brighton). In that same period, huge numbers of companies have gone to the wall. Football does have a Teflon coating and any withdrawal of funds from one source will be replaced from elsewhere.

Scenario 2 – Clubs are forced to play home-grown talent

With Chinese clubs happy to raid the Premier League on a regular basis perhaps the clubs will invest more in the pathway for the development of their players. Instead of simply stockpiling young players who are loaned out until their value drops to a point where they are simply released, clubs will give the youngsters a chance. The more young English players that are given the opportunity to play in the Premier League, the better it will be for our National side. In addition, clubs will be more willing to work with grassroots clubs in the development of players through that channel. With potentially less cash available for wages, hopefully the players that come through will be more “balanced” and more in touch with the fans. Again, look at the situation in Germany where the majority of the team that won the 2009 UEFA Under21 Championship were also part of the 2014 World Cup winning squad – all of whom bar one (Mesut Özil) plied their trade in the Bundesliga.

Scenario 3 – Premier League TV rights are devalued

With an exodus of the “best” players, the Premier League is no longer seen as the best league in the world and when the parties sit round the table in 2021 to renegotiate the three year deal due to expire in 2024 the offer will be significantly less than we saw in 2018. Bear in mind that initial viewing figures for the last Premier League season saw a decline by nearly 19% in the first two months, hardly the result the winning bidders expected for the record TV deal. If the product is devalued by the exodus of players then what bargaining chips will the Premier League clubs have? Less TV revenues coming in will reduce the level of commercial agreements and thus clubs will once again have to look at alternative revenues or cost-cutting measures. Fans may then start to see the value of the grassroots game, and attendances may will rise in the Non-League game.

Scenario 4 – Absolutely nothing changes

In all honesty, it would take a massive investment within the Chinese league to make an impact on English, Spanish, German or Italian football. The whole reason for the increase in investment by the Chinese clubs is to increase their talent pool. The concept is that you bring in overseas coaches to help develop Chinese coaches, you bring in world-class players that will also hopefully increase the skill levels of home-grown players which in turn strengthen the Chinese national team. That’s the ultimate aim. Having played in just one World Cup (back in 2002 where they lost every game and failed to score a goal), they are significantly behind the countries who they would consider rivals. Japan have qualified for the last five World Cup Finals, reaching the knock-out stages twice, whilst South Korea have qualified for the last eight and finished fourth in 2002. If they cannot improve their performance on the world stage then this whole phase will go down in history alongside the ultimately failed North American Soccer League in the 1970/80s where some of the best players were tempted for one last hurrah.

Of course, there may be other consequences, but I think scenario 4 is the most likely to play out. Whilst the headline numbers are all round how much some of these players will be paid, the pressure and media scrutiny they will be under to perform will be intense. Footballers such as Tevez are already millionaires multiple times over. They could retire tomorrow and never have to worry about money every again. So, what is their

motivation to move? Only they can answer that, but I do not feel a small handful of players heading east is the next compelling event in our beautiful game.