

Be careful what you wish for Premier League fans by Stuart Fuller

Over the weekend I had a lively debate with a Wolverhampton Wanderers-supporting friend who was venting his anger that eight out of their first ten games in 2019 would be moved for TV purposes. My argument was that he should have known what he had signed up for at the start of the season. Whilst Wolves are the current 'fad' club, fuelled by significant overseas investment from a long line of messiah's who would make the club "the biggest in the world" within a few years.

For all we know, Fosun International's claims may be right. Wolves fans, who have suffered years of boom and bust (significantly more of the latter than the former), are quite rightly full of beans at the moment, blinkered to the pit-falls of their owners current strategy. Unfortunately, they are in a crowded race of other high net-worth club owners, all trying to make their club the biggest in the world.

Few football fans or commentators would have predicted Manchester United's current predicament of looking at a League Cup trophy as a good return from their season, but they are now behind their "noisy" neighbours in terms of on and off field success. Who would have seen that a decade ago? And it's not just City. Add in Chelsea and a resurgent Liverpool. Spurs new stadium could see them finally make the step up to that level too. West Ham, with their 50,000+ stadium they play at for a hugely subsidized fee, could potentially move into that elite category if they find owners who are willing to invest in the squad.

Why? Why are wealthy individuals investing in clubs? Whilst fans may believe it is to deliver on-field success, at the end of the day it is simply an investment, one which they expect to grow substantially over time. Part of that growth is based on success on the field, but the English Premier League is like no other – it is the potential returns off the pitch that fuels that interest.

Most clubs now make more money from TV than from gate receipts, which in its most basic form means that the fans have become less important than the TV slot, which is why you won't see club owners complaining when they have to play on a Friday night 250 miles away. There will be some noises made about "the difficult journey for our loyal fans" but no one involved is prepared to go out on a limb and say "no".

So, the situation for clubs like Wolves, or further down the leagues, Leeds United won't get better any time soon. Success on the pitch means compliance off it. But what if there was no TV revenue of substance? To understand a little how that would look fly 1,375 miles east to Belarus.

In the next few weeks Borisov Automobile and Tractor Electronics, or BATE as they are more commonly known, should wrap up their 13th consecutive title, a European record also held by Norway's Rosenberg. The former works team from Belarusian's biggest tractor manufacturer rose to become the biggest club in the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union after 1992. Dinamo Minsk, funded as most other "Dinamo" clubs within the Soviet Union by the Military, were the biggest club and had won the Soviet Championship back in

1992 but since then their dominance has waned and in 1996 the company, and consequently, the football team were taken over by successful businessman Anatoli Kapski. A decade later and the club had retained their title at the start of their record-breaking run.

That initial investment happened at the right time as other clubs struggled to find their feet in Belorussia's post-independent world, whilst money started to flow from UEFA and their commercial partners into European competition. As each season passed and BATE celebrated another title, the prize money from their forays into Europe got bigger and bigger, which in turn saw them build a stronger and stronger squad.

They became the first, and only Belarusian side to feature in the Champions League Group Stages, a feat they have repeated on four occasions and can include wins against Roma, Bayern Munich and Athletic Bilbao. Each game played in the competition just adds another obstacle to the remaining teams back in the Belarusian Football League.

Without meaningful domestic TV money, no other club stands a chance of competing in the foreseeable future. This is the alternative scenario for fans who feel that the TV companies have too much influence over the Premier League. I'm sure there will come a time when Dinamo Brest, owned by Middle Eastern company Sohra, will challenge for the title but until then, domestic fans will have to make do with the odd domestic cup and a long-shot at the Europa League.

So, what do we want? The devil or the deep blue sea?

Many thanks to Steve Menary for his excellent background on BATE in October's When Saturday Comes.