

On American fundamentals



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European soccer is booming, it would seem.

Big crowds. Expanded television coverage. New money pouring into the game.

But when you scratch the surface, you discover

a sport in trouble.

Real Madrid, Europe's top team, has run up debts in the tens of millions of dollars.

English soccer is finding the pay-per-view money on which it's been counting may not be there.

The passport scandal spreading across Europe is symptomatic of the impulses of clubs to cut corners.

European soccer so very much wants to emulate the big-money American sports, but it lacks American fundamentals.

To wit:

COMPETITIVE

PARITY. You can say all you want about the American draft system, but it does, by and large, keep teams even.

It's worked better in the NFL and NBA than baseball, which traditionally relied

upon farm systems to produce talent.

In Europe, there's no mechanism to stop the big clubs from hoarding all the best young talent.

Consequently, few teams have a shot at winning.

CENTRAL CONTROL. Pete Rozelle is considered the greatest of commissioners. His genial move: convincing NFL owners in the early 1960s, when TV was just entering the sports picture, to share TV revenues equally.

Commissioner David Stern rescued the NBA in the 1980s and built it into the most international of American leagues.

Name me, if you can, one president of a European league.

The trend in Europe is for clubs, not leagues, to negotiate their own TV deals. Great for the big clubs. Lousy for the overall business.

LABOR HARMONY. Yes, the last two decades have been marked by lengthy work stoppages. But the historical trend is for labor and management to work together (e.g., NBA in the early 1980s).

European soccer is on the verge of across-the-board free agency.

American sports already crossed that bridge. Players agreed to restricted free agency and salary caps in return for a share of revenues.

European soccer unions are not bargaining agents and therefore weak.



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Commissioner David Stern (left) is credited with leading the NBA to new heights during the Michael Jordan era.