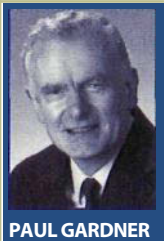


# In G14, the G means Greed



PAUL GARDNER

**NEW YORK**— I'm not exactly unveiling a deep secret when I announce that money, particularly lots of money, does strange things to the people who have it.

Example: the effects of the tremendous wealth that has descended on pro soccer over the past two decades — virtually all of it, let it be noted at the outset, from television. We know where most of that goes — into the pockets of highly paid, astronomically paid, stars. And coaches, let's not forget.

What they do with it — well, you could argue that's their business. I would argue, rather, that it is *our* business, the business of the whole worldwide soccer community.

What we have been seeing, with increasing stridency, is the rich getting richer and the poor getting shafted. Not a pretty scene — so before descending to the squalid depths of high finance, let us raise ourselves up to the minor level of one single player.

Javier Zanetti is an Argentine who plays for Inter Milan. A very good player whose name never gets into the headlines for off-the-field shenanigans. A quiet 29-year-old man who evidently has problems revealing much about himself. Asked where his nickname, Pupi, came from, he replied rather lamely that he had inherited it, somehow, from his older brother.

He's been in Italy for eight years now, and has made a lot of money. If you go to [www.fundacionpupi.org](http://www.fundacionpupi.org), you'll find out where some of that money has gone.

The Pupi Foundation, set up and financed by Zanetti, helps pay for food, education and health care for some 60 poor kids back in Argentina, in the district of Lanus, near Buenos Aires, where Zanetti grew up. Take a look at the photographs of the smiling kids — and try to keep them in the mind as we delve into the unacceptable side of soccer's wealth.

As a contrast to those smiling, happy faces, we can start with the acidic coun-



KIN CHEUNG/REUTERS

**A non-sporting event? That's how Europe's richest clubs described the February friendly between China and Brazil. Rivaldo outjumps China's Zhao Junzhe during the 0-0 tie.**

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tenance of Arsenal's French coach, Arsene Wenger. This is the man who, along with his chairman, David Dein, always protests bitterly when Arsenal players are wanted for national team duty.

Following Arsenal's lead, the G14 group of rich European clubs recently had the towering gall to blast Brazil's exhibition game in China as a non-sporting event, played solely for money. This is an official statement from G14: "National associations are abusing the regulations in order to take players to another continent just to make money and that is not the purpose of international friendlies."

G14. An ugly name for an ugly group. Not even accurate any more, there are now 18 of these rich and privileged clubs that would have us believe that they are part of a philanthropic organization with "sporting considerations" as its

only concern.

As that is a fiction that is obvious to even the biggest idiot, G14 must disguise its greed. So it's not greed — the G14 clubs are merely protecting their players from the "unfair burden" of these international friendlies.

Clever — yes, because it happens to be true. Sort of. It's also rather dishonest because it fails to mention that the rich clubs are never averse to increasing the number of club games in the profitable European Champions League — which has already been so far bloated that it includes more non-champion than champion teams (the all-Spanish 2000 final featured Real Madrid and Valencia, neither of which was the Spanish champion — that honor belonged to Barcelona).

The problem with G14 is that it is precisely what it claims not to be. When rich

people or organizations or clubs or whatever get together to protect their own interests, you can be 100 percent certain that the only thing that really matters is money.

The G14 clubs' talk of "sporting considerations" can be dismissed as sheer hypocrisy. Concern for their players? Yes, it's there, but with the players seen as investments. Another official

for, I suppose, physiologists, would be to investigate why friendly internationals place "an unfair burden" on players, whereas club tours in no way affect the very same players.)

It seems likely that, for the moment, G14 will get its way. Of course, money talks. And bullies. The G14 power has already coerced UEFA into greatly increasing the percentage of

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G14 statement gives the game away, as it tries to accuse others of greed: "Some national associations are trying to do business out of friendlies and if they are forced to give some of that money back to the clubs it will not only be fair but may also act as a deterrent."

I am not about to say that the clubs, which pay the players, do not have a case. But soccer has a worldwide structure in which the rich should be helping the poor, not trying to crush them. European clubs, flush with money, short on home-grown talent, think nothing of buying up the world's best players. But when Brazil wants a handful of its players back to play a friendly — and, yes, to make some money, but for Brazilian soccer rather than G14 — then Wenger and his G14 plutocrats whine as though they are being bankrupted.

To take another angle on that China-Brazil game: why should Chinese fans be denied the rare chance to see the world champions? When Manchester United undertakes its U.S. tour later this year, will Ferguson & Co., position that as "trying to do business" or will they glow with altruistic pride at performing for their worldwide fans? Need I ask?

(An intriguing field of study

money from the European Champions League that goes back to the clubs.

UEFA is evidently in no position to complain. Instead, its secretary, Gerhard Aigner, goes on about the dangers of a European super league being set up — outside of UEFA control. He warns: "Money attracts people who don't have a sporting spirit, who talk about shareholders and profit but don't know anything about football and only think of their own interest."

Either Aigner is being decidedly sly, or the irony has escaped him, but those exact words would serve, perfectly, as a description of the G14 mentality. Not for the first time, one wonders: is the G14 group a member of UEFA, or is it the other way round?

The relentless arrogance of the G14 members springs, of course, from buckets of television money. Just how much "sporting spirit" the TV moguls have, Herr Aigner can no doubt tell us, as well as informing us whether they "only think of their own interest." Surely not?

Bah. A plague on the lot of them. I shall return — and I recommend you to do the same — to the smiling faces of the kids who are part of Javier Zanetti's Pupi Foundation. Thank you, Javier. ■