

## What football fans think about the professional game

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### 1. Introduction

Since its creation in 2005, the CIES Football Observatory has progressively become a reference when it comes to the analysis of professional football. As keen as ever on innovation, for its fifteenth anniversary, its research team has decided to use its increasing renown to let football fans have their say. Over 27,000 subscribers were invited to express their views on different problematics concerning professional football.

This Monthly Report presents the principal results of this questionnaire survey carried out between December 2020 and January 2021. Except for questions relative to the profile of respondents, the questionnaire was built up from 36 statements from which the people asked had to position themselves on a scale with four gradings (not, rather not, rather yes, yes).

Four different statements were elaborated for each of the nine thematic areas investigated: match events (protests, fouls, diving, time-wasting), scheduling (number of matches according to competition), spectacle (number of goals, player fatigue, refereeing, VAR), access to the spectacle (entry tickets, TV subscriptions, VIP, match schedules), revenues (clubs, players, agents, officials), inequalities (balance according to competition), abuses (racism, homophobia, match fixing, doping), gender (sexism, women's game and status), as well as transfers (team composition, prices, transparency).

The report focuses on the percentages of respondents showing their agreement about each of the 36 statements (answers "rather yes" and "yes"). However, the online version allows readers to access the percentages as a function of participants' age (under 40 vs over 40 years) and origin (Europe, outside Europe).

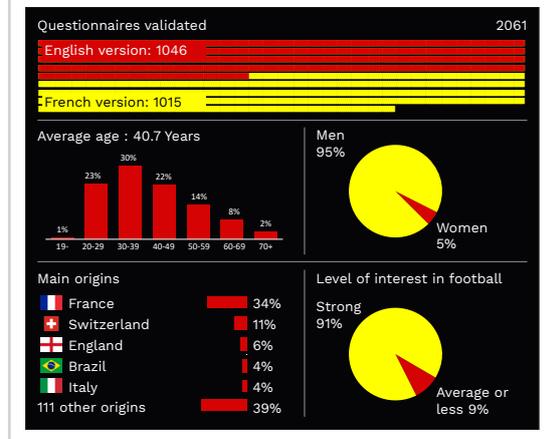
## 2. Conduct of the survey

The survey was carried out online on a free sample using the software qualtrics. The questionnaire was put online on the 08/12/2020 and was accessible for about one month until the 10/01/2021. The link to the questionnaire was sent initially to the subscribers of the CIES Football Observatory newsletter. It was first sent out on the 09/12/2020, followed by a reminder on the 28/12/2020. The questionnaire was also put out on the research group's social media channels (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). It was also directly accessible on the football-observatory.com website.

We considered validated forms for which answers were given for at least four fifth of questions (it was possible, after having received a warning message, not to answer) and for which the gender was known. In addition, an analysis based on ip address and the respondents' profile has allowed us to disregard the questionnaires having most probably been filled out several times by the same person. In this case, only the last questionnaire entered was selected.

The final sample is made up of 2,061 individuals, of which 1,046 answered the English version of the questionnaire and 1,015 the French one. The persons having participated in the survey were, for the vast majority, men (95%). The average age of respondents was 40.7 years. Nine out of ten of them declared themselves as being very interested in football. Individuals having grown up in France are overrepresented in the sample: 33.9% of respondents (747 individuals).

Figure 1: sample



### 3. Match events

The first group of statements on which the participants had to position themselves concerns events directly linked to occurrences on the pitch. While a minority of respondents are of the opinion that the number of fouls committed by players is too high, almost three quarters of them consider that there is too much diving. Moreover, nearly four fifths are of the opinion that referees are subject to too many complaints from players and that the latter have too much of a tendency to waste time.

These answers indicate that complaints, diving and time-wasting annoy many football fans. From this point of view, we can assume that a less tolerant approach towards these behaviours from referees would receive a favourable welcome from fans. At the same time, to prevent these abuses, it would be an opportune time to put into place initiatives of an educative nature targeting young players, while making professional footballers aware of the impact of their own behaviour on the latter's one.

**Figure 2: perception of match events**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
There are too many complaints against the referee	79.2% 
There is too much time-wasting	79.0% 
There is too much diving	74.9% 
There are too many fouls	46.4% 

## 4. Schedule

Since several years and even more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the match schedule is extremely tight. Furthermore, no organiser seems inclined to reduce the number of matches in their competitions. Almost six out of ten respondents think that there are currently too many matches. The answers confirm that the overly busy schedule is a source of concern, especially if we consider that the target audience of the survey is made up of people with a great interest in football.

More specifically, the respondents think that the number of matches is too great regarding national teams (61.5% of persons asked). Despite the recent decision taken by UEFA to create a new competition – the Nations League – in order to replace friendly matches, fans still believe that the number of games between national selections is excessive.

As for club matches, the percentage of people who believe that the number of games is too high is greater for international club competitions (45.4%) than for domestic leagues (32.7%). From a political point of view, in particular in the European context with the supposed possible creation of a continental super league, this finding can be interpreted as a standing by football enthusiasts in favour of national championships.

Figure 3: perception of the schedule

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
There are too many matches between national teams	61.5%
There are too many matches	59.4%
There are too many matches in international club competitions	45.4%
There are too many matches in domestic (national) leagues	32.7%

## 5. Spectacle

The participants also had to express their views according to statements regarding the spectacle observed on the pitch. A clear minority among respondents think that the number of goals scored is insufficient (35.8%). On the other hand, a small majority are of the opinion that there are too many refereeing errors. At the same time, almost 60% of fans think that there are too many VAR interventions. On this subject, the percentage of people having a clear-cut opinion is particularly significant (32.8%). This brings us back to a widespread philosophical position considering video refereeing as a negative element to the spectacle of football and to what this game represents.

The answers to the question regarding excessive player fatigue indicate the existence of a consensus among football fans. Almost three quarters are of the opinion that there is too much player fatigue and nearly one third are in full agreement with this statement. Fans are aware of the difficulties encountered by footballers to maintain an optimum fitness level. This also highlights the necessity to rethink match schedules to let players rest up. Such progress would most probably have a positive impact on the spectacle on offer.

**Figure 4: perception of the spectacle**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
There is too much player fatigue	72.8% 
There are too many VAR interventions	57.9% 
There are too many refereeing errors	53.2% 
There are not enough goals	35.8% 

## 6. Access to the spectacle

Regarding the access to the football spectacle, fans have expressed their discontent mainly because of the price of TV subscriptions. Nearly nine out of ten fans think that the latter are too expensive, and more than six out of ten have a clear opinion on the question. This answer raises the issue of the increased segmentation of the offer that obliges fans in many countries to have several subscriptions and spend more money to view matches. This situation is a major challenge to the future popularity of football, especially concerning the new generations.

The vast majority of participants are also of the opinion that the stadium entry tickets are too dear. However, only a small majority think that VIP seats are too numerous. The percentage of fans who think that there are too many matches at inconvenient viewing times is also only slightly above 50%. Almost one in two fans does not have a negative overall view on match scheduling despite the increasing tendency of organisers to programme them so as they occupy all the time slots.

**Figure 5: perception of the access to the spectacle**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
The TV subscription fees are too high	88.4% 
Stadium tickets are too expensive	82.9% 
There are too many VIP stadium seats	56.4% 
There are too many matches at inconvenient times	54.1% 

## 7. Revenues

The earnings of football stars are often the source of debate. This is even more the case given the difficult economic situation that we are currently experiencing. The answers gathered from fans confirm that most of them consider that the sums earned are excessive. This opinion holds for the major players (65.7%), as well as for the major clubs (68.7%). On the other hand, the fans express a less critical view when it comes to the earnings of football officials (50.6%).

The strongest consensus concerns the agents. Almost nine out of ten participants think that they earn too much money and nearly seven out of ten fully agree with this statement. This is the clearest result among all the statements in the questionnaire. Even though the agents' market is strongly segmented and those who earn a lot of money are relatively few, this answer shows that FIFA's efforts at regulating, with notably a cap on commissions, have the fans' approval.

**Figure 6: perception of revenues**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
The football agents earn too much	88.6% 
The big clubs have too much money	68.7% 
The big players earn too much	65.7% 
The football officials earn too much	50.6% 

## 8. Inequalities

Over time, football competitions have lost balance. This is particularly true for club competitions. The vast majority of fans that took part in the survey expressed concern with regard to the situation. Nearly four fifths of respondents think that there is not sufficient diversity in teams that win trophies and a similar percentage consider that domestic leagues are not sufficiently even.

Fans have a less negative opinion when it comes to international club competitions, even if 63.5% of respondents believe that there is not enough competitive balance in this case too. These answers show that the sporting inequalities between teams, reflecting economic gaps that are constantly growing, must be reduced in order to prevent fans from turning away. From this point of view, the competitions between national selections are relatively spared with 63.4% of fans finding them sufficiently balanced.

**Figure 7: perception of inequalities**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
There is not enough competitive balance in domestic leagues	79.3% 
There are not enough different clubs winning trophies	78.8% 
There is not enough competitive balance in international club competitions	63.5% 
There is not enough competitive balance in national team competitions	36.6% 

## 9. Abuses

Football is often perceived as a domain involving numerous excesses, either for problems linked to the sport itself (doping, match fixing) or for phenomena widely present in the society and finding a particular expression in football (racism, homophobia). The participants questioned think that the latter problems are much more widespread than the former.

Almost seven respondents out of ten consider that racism is too prevalent in the world of football and 37.6% have a clear opinion on this subject. These percentages are also relatively high when it comes to the problem of homophobia: a little over six out of ten surveyed and 31.2% with a clear-cut opinion. On the other hand, the fans having taken part in the survey are relatively confident of the fact that there is not too much doping in professional football (67.0%) and that the number of fixed matches is not too great (69.7%).

**Figure 8: perception of abuses**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
There is too much racism in football	68.3% 
There is too much homophobia in football	61.3% 
There is too much doping in football	33.0% 
There is too much match fixing	30.3% 

## 10. Gender

Questions surrounding gender are increasingly debated within society and football is no exception in this regard. The majority of respondents consider that women do not yet occupy a sufficiently favourable position in the football milieu. Six out of ten are of the opinion that there is too much sexism in the game, almost two thirds think that women footballers should be paid more and almost seven out of ten consider that women’s matches should be broadcast more widely. These results suggest that fans are willing to accompany with enthusiasm the development of women’s football.

The answers to a fourth question relative to the problematic of gender shows the existence of a real consensus among those passionate about the game: there should be more women in positions of power in football. Like Fatma Samoura, the FIFA General Secretary, fans are of the opinion that more women should be given their chances at the highest levels in the spheres of executive power. From this point of view too, football enthusiasts show a progressive attitude that probably surpasses that of the institutions concerned.

**Figure 9: perception of gender**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
There should be more women in leadership positions in football	79.8% 
Womens' matches should be more broadcast	67.8% 
Female players should earn more money	65.6% 
There is too much sexism in football	60.2% 

## 11. Transfers

A final problematic for which we ascertained the opinion of fans is that involving transfers. The answers obtained indicate a palpable unease with this subject. Almost nine out of ten respondents think that the level of transparency surrounding transfers is insufficient. This plebiscite should encourage football's governing bodies at national and international levels to act in an even firmer manner to lessen the opacity surrounding the transfer of payers.

A very large majority of those questioned also think that the transfers fees are too high (84.9%) and that the presence of local players in teams is insufficient (79.6%). Fans would thus be happy if clubs gave more chances to players from their own academies instead of to footballers recruited from other teams. In this regard, two thirds of the respondents are of the opinion that there are too many player transfers.

**Figure 10: perception of transfers**

Statements	Agree (Rather yes/Yes)
There is not enough transparency in player transfer operations	88.3% 
The transfer fees are too high	84.9% 
There are not enough local players in clubs	79.6% 
There are too many player transfers	66.4% 

## 12. Conclusion

The first ever football fans' survey conducted by the CIES Football Observatory aimed to probe the opinion of those passionate about the game on professional football. The survey has been very warmly received as 2,061 answers were finally validated. Aimed principally at our newsletter subscribers, the questionnaire was filled out by people from 130 countries worldwide. The majority of responses were nevertheless given by European fans (81.1% of the total), where our research group enjoys more popularity.

A strong consensus was observed for several of the aspects analysed. The most shared opinion in absolute terms concerns football agents: 88.6% of people asked think that their earnings are excessive. In fact, a relatively small number among them have very high revenues, but the opinion is very clear-cut on this subject. From this point of view, even if it is strongly opposed by some dominant agents, the commissions cap decided upon by FIFA is fully justified in the fans' eyes.

The second most clearly expressed opinion by survey participants concerns the lack of transparency surrounding transfers. The statement according to which the level of transparency is insufficient had 88.3% positive responses. The respondents would certainly view favourably any initiative with the goal of rendering transfer operations less opaque. The obligation to communicate the financial details for player transactions – as it is already the case for clubs listed on the stock market – could be a very welcome step in this direction.

The clear majority of fans also are of the opinion that the costs involved in viewing matches, whether at the stadium or via television, are too high. Almost four out of five supporters also think that there is not enough diversity in teams who win trophies and that domestic leagues are not balanced enough. The same proportion of persons believe that there are too many complaints to the referee and too much time-wasting by players during matches. Furthermore, the fans are very much in favour of the development of women's football and urge an increase in the number of women in positions of power.

Finally, to end on a positive note, almost seven out of ten participants in the questionnaire think that there is not too much match fixing, nor doping, in professional football. Regarding these two aspects, the confidence of the fans in the beautiful game remains intact. With respect to many other issues, however, many reforms should be carried out to maintain fan support, improving the image of the game and stimulating the positive effects of football on the society.