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EN GARDE

A CHAMPION STIRS THE GIANTS

HE DRIPPED class on a football field, maestro most called him, he lit up Juventus and became the inspiration for a nation.

Michel Platini was the supreme conductor of his football orchestra, his right foot the baton as France were crowned European champions in 1984.

Long before anyone had ever heard of Zinedine Zidane the mid-field wizard lay waste to so many of the world's best defences as Les Bleus reached successive World Cup semi-finals in 1982 and 1986.

Adored by millions, recognised from Addis Ababa to Manila and Lima, he was the face of football for the first half of the '80s, until Diego Maradona exploded into prominence.

These days Platini is the top administrator in one of football's most powerful governing bodies, Uefa. Life in a suit is not as easy for the president of European football.

At a meeting between Uefa representatives and officials from European leagues and clubs in August, Platini submitted proposals to change the format of the Champions League.

Weeks later, Europe's most powerful clubs – the G14 – issued a statement saying they would not support the plan.

The G14 represent 18 of Europe's top clubs including the likes of Liverpool, Arsenal, Manchester United, Real Madrid, Barcelona, AC Milan and Bayern Munich.

If Platini has his way, no domestic league will have more than three clubs qualifying for the Champions League.

England, Italy and Spain currently have four clubs each qualifying for football's top club cup competition based on the Uefa coefficient, a ranking computed by reference to the results of clubs from each country in European competitions over the preceding five seasons.

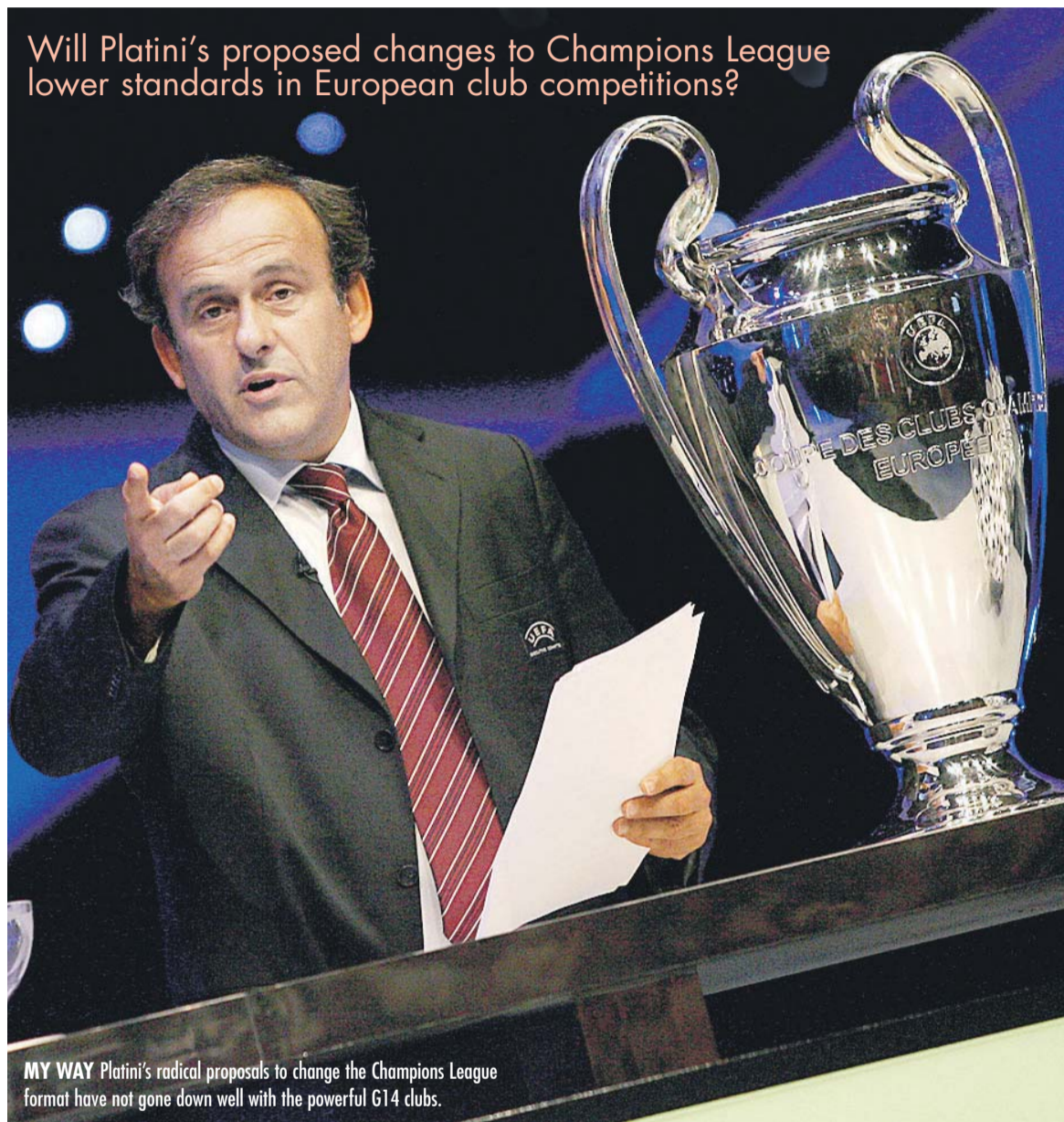
Even more controversial is Platini's proposal that domestic cup winners qualify for the Champions League.

At present, domestic cup winners qualify for the Uefa Cup.

Platini's plan also includes reserving six places in the Champions League group stage for lower ranked leagues. At present, only the nine highest ranked countries are guaranteed at least one place in the group stage.

The top three ranked countries are guaranteed two clubs in the group stage, while the other two teams from those countries have to play in the qualifying rounds.

Will Platini's proposed changes to Champions League lower standards in European club competitions?



MY WAY Platini's radical proposals to change the Champions League format have not gone down well with the powerful G14 clubs.

second-ranked club competition on the continent.

Inaugurated in 1955 as the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup, it started off as a competition between European cities to promote international trade fairs and was to be played every few years.

In the first competition, a representative XI from London clubs were beaten by Barcelona in the final.

The competition became an annual affair in 1960.

Later in the 1960s, qualification was restricted to clubs finishing runners up in their domestic league and in 1971, it became known as the Uefa Cup.

Until 1991, each of the three European club competitions had a clear identity of their own.

Changes in the qualification rules since then have seen the Cup Winners' Cup abandoned, while the identities of the Champions League and the Uefa Cup have been blurred.

The Champions League is hardly a competition between champions these days.

With many clubs finishing second, third or even fourth in their domestic league qualifying for the competition, the name is a misnomer.

This in turn undermines the Uefa Cup's raison d'être – a competition for clubs that finish immediately below the champions in their domestic league.

Yet, insofar as the Champions League remains a competition for the top clubs in Europe, it retains a strong identity.

And Platini's proposals will only serve to undermine this identity. Allowing domestic cup winners to qualify risks having much weaker teams in the competition and reserving six places in the group stage for clubs from the lower ranked countries is effectively a quota-based form of reverse discrimination.

Such quotas generally result in a lowering of standards, as the teams are nowhere near the quality of sides from the top European leagues.

Little wonder that a number of the top leagues and the leading clubs in Europe have come out to oppose Platini's proposals.

Ultimately, Platini's proposals lack direction and rationality.

For years, many of the top European clubs have itched to form a breakaway league.

If Platini forces through such an ill-conceived plan it may well be the catalyst that could change the face of club football forever.

Rajiv Nair has longstanding interests in football, history, geography, law and business. He is writing in his personal capacity.

At present, 16 clubs qualify directly for the group stage, while the remaining 16 places comprise clubs that come through the qualifying rounds.

A two-time World Player of the Year (1984, 1985) and European Footballer of the Year on three occasions (1983, 1984 and 1985), Platini was elected Uefa president in January 2007, defeating long-time incumbent Lennart Johansson by 27 votes to 23.

While many accepted he had the good of European football at heart, his candidacy was long on aspiration but short on detail.

His speech in January in Dusseldorf just before elections sought the promotion of "solidarity" and "universality", but there was little detail and no concrete plan.

At least in the course of his candidacy he did make known his desire to see the number of clubs from any one league qualifying

for the Champions League to be capped at three.

The precursor of the Champions League, the European Cup kicked off in 1955 as a competition for the champions of all leagues on the continent, the idea of a French sports journalist and the editor of *L'Équipe*, Gabriel Hanot.

Renamed the Champions League in 1991, the competition adopted various group stage formats in place of the previous knockout system.

After 42 years, in the 1997-98 season, the runners-up of the top leagues qualified for the competition,

This was with the express intention of improving the quality of the competition by having more leading teams from the best leagues doing battle.

The number of clubs from the top leagues was subsequently increased to three, and today four teams from each of the top three nations (England, Italy, Spain)

can qualify for the Champions League first group stage.

From 1960 to 1999, the winners of the principal domestic cup competition from each European country played in the Cup Winners' Cup.

After the competition was discontinued in 1999 (as part of the revamp of European club competitions agreed upon in 1998), the winners of domestic cup competitions qualified for the Uefa Cup.

The Uefa Cup has for a long time been the competition for the top clubs from each domestic league that did not qualify for the Champions League, and where the domestic football association so decides, the winners of any secondary domestic cup competition.

As a bigger pool of quality sides from the major European leagues have participated in the competition, the Uefa Cup has traditionally been regarded as the