

Members of the European Parliament;  
Friends;  
Ladies and gentlemen;

First of all, I would like to say how grateful I am for the honour that has been granted to football, represented by my humble self, through this invitation to address the political groups of the European Parliament.

I think that, in two years as UEFA president, I have given more speeches on the subject of football and the European Union than I took free kicks during my whole career as a midfielder.

Now, since football is a simple game, I will give a simple speech. Without any pretence. Simply by telling you what I feel and believe about this sport that I love so deeply, that I love more than anything, and that I know you love too. I will therefore get straight to the point.

I have been a footballer since I was a child, but before I wore the number 10 on pitches across Europe and the world, I spent my school years in my native Lorraine. Lorraine is in many ways a melting pot of Europe:

home of one of its founding fathers (Robert Schuman),  
land of immigration (my grandparents came from Piedmont),  
scene of endless armed conflicts,  
border between northern and southern Europe  
and, finally, birthplace of the steel industry on which the European Union was founded.

My two vocations as a footballer and a staunch European are a result of my origins.

Football extends beyond borders, football irons out differences and football unleashes passions.

And, of course, I am speaking to you today because football, the sport that has brought me to where I am today and has given me the greatest emotions of my life, both positive and traumatic, is in danger.

The game of football is not really under threat, since a narrow street, a group of children and a pair of rolled up socks or an empty tin can is enough for football to come alive. However, the values that football represents are in danger.

You, who lead the fight to build a stronger Europe on a day-to-day basis, know how difficult it is to mobilise people around an idea, even one as exciting and forward-looking as that of European unification. Well, football has that rare gift of being able to generate enthusiasm and mobilise big and small, rich and poor, black and white, believers and non-believers.

At a time when everyone is asking lots of questions about identity, belonging and community, the national football associations – which are non-governmental organisations – are organising and funding grassroots football in your suburbs and local neighbourhoods.

How many immigrant children have become European on a muddy, makeshift football pitch between two industrial wastelands?

How many children from different parts of the world have started to learn our languages with the words corner, offside or penalty?

It is this Europe of football, this constantly evolving Europe, this Europe of hope that I have the honour of representing.

For many people, the magnificent EURO 2008 tournament epitomised football in Europe, but for UEFA the European Championship is above all the means by which we are able to distribute around EUR 500 million to the 53 national associations, whose extraordinary social programmes at grassroots level give your children and grandchildren – and I am speaking as a young grandfather myself – the chance to kick a ball on a beautiful spring Saturday.

Elite football, the football played at European Championship and Champions League level, is only the tip of the iceberg, or rather the top of a virtuous pyramid.

This elite represents less than 1% of people who play organised football, only a few thousand players, compared with the tens of millions of registered men, women and children. Nevertheless, elite football and the income it generates is the instrument that enables us to support and strengthen grassroots football in our villages and neighbourhoods. But for this solidarity between rich and much less rich to be effective, it is vital that the values represented by elite football are in unison with the social and educational objectives of grassroots football.

I have always been of the opinion that my role at the head of UEFA comes with a clear mission: the unification of the wider European football family with a respect for financial and moral solidarity between the top and the bottom of our pyramid.

For a number of years now, the European Parliament has been firmly committed to safeguarding these essential values of European football.

Through the Belet and Mavrommatis reports, through a historic declaration on fighting racism in football and thanks to the efforts of the Friends of Football group, the Parliament has always expressed its unshakeable support for our essential values.

Whether with regard to the specificity of sport, the autonomy of the European sports movement's freely elected governing bodies or the defence of the European sports model itself, this Parliament has always stood up to be counted. I must tell you today how grateful I am to you for this unflinching support.

Through its 2007 White Paper, the European Commission embarked on the same route although, because of its function, it is often more tentative than directly elected representatives such as yourselves.

At this point, I should pay tribute to President Barroso and Commissioners Figel and Spidla. Thanks to them, we have managed to make progress in virtually every area where there may have been slight disagreement between UEFA and the European institutions.

There is no doubt that we are now on the right track. On the right track, but not yet at the end of it! We are not there yet because there is still a slightly perverse tendency within the European institutions to deny the unity of the football pyramid and to isolate the professional game at the top.

And this is done in order to give substance to the false notion that professional football is an economic activity just like any other.

Unfortunately, this refusal to recognise the specificity of sport – a refusal that is refuted by this assembly as well as by the governments of the member states - still exists in certain circles, in certain sectors, which consider competition law to be the fundamental law of Europe.

Let me be clear, unequivocal and perhaps even a little brutal: we refuse categorically to be held in a straitjacket or tied to prefabricated models that are based on the false equation that professional sport = a purely economic activity. The whole sports community recognises that professional sport is an integral part of sport and shares its specificity.

Professional football is no more a financial service than it is an agricultural activity. It is just as absurd to want to regulate football through the automatic application of competition law as it would be to do so through the Common Agricultural Policy!

Although I do admit that we also help the grass to grow!

There is a fundamental, organic link between the bottom and the top of the football pyramid. The measures taken at the top, whether financial or sporting in nature, often have rapid repercussions on the training clubs - often amateur - that make up the basic structure of grassroots football. Even the golden summit of our pyramid is occupied by clubs that are no larger than medium-sized businesses.

We must not delude ourselves, for even huge clubs like Manchester United or Real Madrid are financial dwarves compared with Microsoft or Exxon. The turnover of most European first division clubs is smaller than that of their city's largest supermarket!

For the past 15 or 20 years, we have grown tired of hearing that there is no need to regulate, that the market regulates itself perfectly, that excesses and imbalances will disappear of their own accord, and that the growth of income in football is an endless upward spiral.

We now know that none of this is true: that in football as in the economy in general, the market is incapable of correcting its own excesses, and it was not the UEFA president who said so, it was Barack Obama!

During this year's festive season, one club which had suddenly become very rich made various astronomical bids in the transfer market. Of course, there was a tremendous outcry in the football family, people called it outrageous and scandalous. Is it morally acceptable to offer such sums of money for a single player? Many people have responded by talking about limiting players' wages by introducing a European salary cap.

Our American friends have known for decades that sports competitions are only attractive if they are well-balanced and if no one team possesses the ultimate weapon. Over the decades, they have introduced countless measures designed to maintain this competitive balance, sporting measures combined with financial regulations that ensure the clubs are properly managed.

There are two things we need to think about:

- The first is that the American professional sports system seems to have coped with the financial crisis better than the stock market, financial and industrial systems of the United States.
- The second is that, although the American sports system can certainly give us food for thought, it is completely different from the European model of sport in a number of fundamental ways.

The European model of sport is based on open leagues, independent clubs and promotion and relegation.

The American sports system is based on franchises that are owned by closed leagues.

While taking these fundamental differences into account, there are nevertheless some lessons that we can learn and that we are currently looking at with the support of experts in all kinds of different fields. One thing is certain: European clubs are currently telling us that our system is in danger of financially imploding in the medium term.

In consultation with them, but also, I should remind you, spurred on by the reports of this Parliament, we are currently looking at the idea of limiting, to a certain degree, a club's expenditure on staff - salary and transfer fees combined – to an as yet undecided percentage of its direct and indirect sporting revenue.

I believe that it is reasonable that UEFA should be able to decide independently under what conditions clubs may participate in the competitions that it organises.

Of course, we will not impose any kind of diktat. That has never been and never will be how I work.

At the end of the day, we are only at the beginning of this discussion, but it will continue in the form of dialogue with the clubs about the future of our licensing system and any changes will be made on a consensual basis and with a view to strengthening this system.

Whatever happens, please do not stop us, on the basis of inappropriate legislation, from establishing financial fair play.

Do not stop us from putting in place mechanisms that foster the integrity of our competitions and more transparency in the management of our affairs.

Do not stop us from acting morally.

Especially when all the stakeholders – clubs, players and national associations – agree with my proposals for greater financial transparency and better governance.

It is a question of ethics.  
It is a question of credibility.  
It is a question of survival.

I would now like to mention another subject that is particularly close to my heart and which is very clearly linked to the specificity of sport.

Everyone is quite rightly shocked when they find out that children are employed in a factory that makes footballs. But when, the next day, a television programme shows young nine-year-old prodigies dribbling like Garrincha on a dusty pitch in Brazil and explains that big European clubs are prepared to invite one of these whizz kids to sign a contract, nobody seems to bat an eyelid. This is a typical example of double standards.

Paying a child to kick a ball is not that different from paying a child to work on a production line. Both amount to exploiting child labour. And when you pay a child or their parents to travel overseas, when you uproot them from their home environment, when you make them emotionally disorientated, I call that child trafficking. This is a sort of procuring for the purposes of sport!

Most youngsters who are brought to Europe from third-world countries do not become Ronaldinhos or Eto'os. Often enticed by a shady agent, they stagnate for a few years in a semi-professional club in eastern or southern Europe, usually ending up with no qualifications, no future in sport and no identity papers, doing odd jobs for paltry wages.

Fortunately, the conclusions of the French Presidency of the European Union clarified the situation, talking of a two-part project, an educational part and a sporting part. A two-part project that fully prepares the young person for a career in sport but which does not neglect the general education that will enable them to succeed in further education if their sporting career does not work out as well as they had hoped. For its part, the European Commission talks of free movement of workers from the age of 16. This might have seemed reasonable in the 1950s, but is that still the case today for most skilled jobs, at a time when many European countries have raised the school-leaving age to 18?

What about young footballers who have spent two or three years in a training academy that fully adheres to this famous two-part project of sport and education? Experience shows that the failure rate is much higher when a young player's school education is disrupted by an untimely move abroad and, after being uprooted in such a way, very few have flourished in a sporting and psychological sense.

In particular, if such a youngster fails in their quest for sporting success, how can we be sure that they will be properly integrated into student or professional life when there is still a lack of common European standards to ensure that the professional future of young athletes is fully taken into account?

But let us leave young footballers to one side for a moment. Providing suitable sports training alongside an appropriate educational programme is indispensable for the future of young athletes, but it also represents a heavy burden for a training club. The required investment in qualified staff and infrastructures is huge. If such a club loses its best players at a very young age, it will find it extremely difficult to continue making a serious commitment to this kind of work.

Ladies and gentlemen, free movement from the age of 16 considerably undermines training clubs and encourages international trafficking of children. Besides, how does the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child define a child? The first article of the Convention states, and I quote: "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years."

I repeat: below the age of 18 years! This Convention, which has been ratified by all European countries, mentions all the subjects I have just talked about, including the exploitation of parents' weakness. It is important, I think, to remember this.

I have therefore thought about this problem a great deal and I am now convinced that the international transfer – yes international - of players under 18 should be prohibited, fully in accordance with the FIFA statutes.

Some people talk about the free movement of workers. I am talking about the protection of children.

Some talk about competition law. I am talking about the right to respect human integrity. A child's right to grow up surrounded by their friends and family.

So let us be rational, ladies and gentlemen, and let us try to speak the same language. The language of the heart and the language of reason. It is here that you can help us.

As I have already said, I am a staunch European and UEFA aspires to be a good European citizen. We are not fans of unilateralism. We have already begun talking to the European Commission about this issue and I hope that, with your support, we will be able to assert football's point of view and the need to protect the interests of our young people.

The European Parliament has always been very mindful of important social issues. The 2006 declaration on tackling racism in football was certainly a significant milestone. These days, football is a powerful force for integration and tolerance in a Europe that is full of pessimism, unsure of itself and haunted by financial crisis. I believe that it is football's duty to lead the way in confronting social issues and that it can even play a part in solving difficult political problems.

Since last year, thanks to football, Armenia and Turkey have been talking to each other and are even beginning to like each other.

UEFA recently received the World Fair Play Trophy for its organisation of EURO 2008 and its respect campaign.

Respect has many different aspects and facets: respect for the rules, respect for the referee, respect for opponents, self-respect and the fight against doping, respect for others and diversity, respect for the environment.

UEFA funds programmes in all of these areas.

With EURO 2008, we proved at least two things:

- Firstly, that it was possible to organise a major international football tournament in Europe in the best possible spirit; and
- Secondly, that Gary Lineker was wrong:

...Germany do not always win in the end!

That was EURO 2008. By taking EURO 2012 to Poland and Ukraine, we have accepted the challenge of staging our largest competition in two countries which have never organised events of this magnitude before. I am sure that, with Poland and Ukraine, we will successfully rise to the challenge.

Football transcends borders, cuts across barriers, does away with prejudices and fights discrimination wherever it needs to be fought. Tolerance of racism, exclusion, sexism or homophobia is unacceptable.

Skin colour is invisible under a football shirt. Political convictions and religious beliefs have nothing to do with football; the sexual preferences of a number 9 are irrelevant when he takes a free kick.

Football is a breeding ground for fraternity and diversity: we are all equal with a ball at our feet and we must remain so!

The European Parliament is the largest democratically elected institution on our continent; UEFA organises and gives structure to something Europeans are extremely passionate about: together we can restore confidence in the positive values that Europe has to offer.

There we are. That brings me to the end of my 90 minutes. I hope I have not spoken for too long, or been too alarmist.

For me, football remains a magnificent sport. The beautiful game, as it is so aptly named in the country that invented it.

But if we want everything to remain as it is, everything must change.

If we want to prevent football from losing its soul and being eaten away from within, we need to take the initiative and radically change certain types of behaviour and, in particular, certain rules.

I will do all I can to make this happen. I will do all I can for the sport that I love and the values that it represents.

Members of the European Parliament, I will do all I can, but I urge you to do the rest.

Thank you!