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JACQUES FERRAN

'LAUNCHING THE EUROPEAN CUP WAS A GAMBLE'

More than 60 years ago, a group of journalists from L'Équipe had the idea of creating a cup competition for Europe's clubs. Jacques Ferran, now aged 96, still remembers the fantastic adventure that led to the creation of the world's greatest club competition as if it were yesterday.

Back in the 1950s, most of UEFA's founding members were focusing on national teams. How did you and Gabriel Hanot, journalists working for L'Équipe, come up with the idea of creating a European club competition?

The starting point for Gabriel Hanot's big idea was his feeling that the clubs deserved more than they were getting. In terms of seniority at the newspaper, Jacques de Ryswick was head of department at the time, then there was Gabriel Hanot, and I was the most junior. But it was Gabriel Hanot who first said that the clubs did not have the standing or status they deserved.

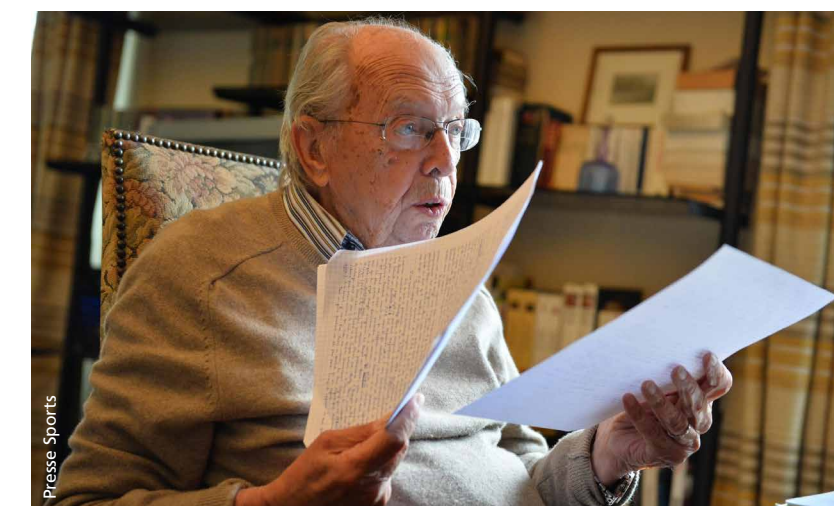
What state was club football in at that time?

The big European clubs were making a considerable effort to attract crowds to their stadiums, and that was happening on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Don't forget that the USSR, Yugoslavia and Hungary, who were dominating world football at the time, also had big clubs. De Ryswick and Hanot thought that a club competition would be easier to organise and was more warranted than a competition for Europe's national teams. The national teams had their national associations to take care of them, but we didn't know who was going to take care of a European club competition. The clubs themselves were not in a position to organise it, so we came to the conclusion that it was up to us at L'Équipe to do it.

What triggered that idea?

From time to time, Gabriel Hanot went abroad during the week to pick up information for the newspaper. In December 1954 he went to watch the English champions, Wolverhampton Wanderers, who were playing a couple of friendlies at Molineux against clubs from Eastern Europe. Wolves beat Puskás and Kocsis's Budapest Honvéd, as well as Spartak Moscow. That was enough for an English journalist to describe Wolves as the "world club champions". Gabriel Hanot, with his wisdom, calmness and legendary humour, wrote a long article in the next day's edition saying: "Before we can say that Wolves are the world club champions, they have to play Real Madrid or AC Milan – and play them over two legs." →

Jacques Ferran in his office at L'Équipe in 1957, and at home in Paris in 2015.





It all came together very quickly ...
This business of ‘creating the European Cup’ happened very quickly, because we, as journalists, were not like those administrators and politicians with time on their hands. We thought that if a competition needed to be established, it should be established immediately. So, the very day that Hanot’s article was published, Jacques de Ryswick, the head of the football department, wrote a remarkable article in which he sketched out the future competition – including the role of television. That was in 1954. Can you imagine? He actually designed the European Cup and said, “Why don’t we set this competition up?” The very next day, we got to work. We consulted the big European clubs to see whether they would buy into our idea and would be interested in taking part in the competition. Nine times out of ten we got a response, either via the special reporters that we dispatched to foreign capitals and major cities or through the post or over the phone, and we published the responses as we received them.

How did the clubs react?
They were very amenable to the idea, with the exception of a few clubs. Barcelona were reluctant. But Real Madrid, led by Santiago Bernabéu and Raimundo Saporta, sent us a letter saying that they would open up their stadium – which was still called Estadio de Chamartín at the time – to all the big clubs that came to contest the European Cup, including those from Eastern Europe. They could see, right from the outset, that this competition had to reach beyond the Iron Curtain and involve clubs from both Eastern and Western Europe.

Otherwise, it would not have the necessary status.

How did the international federations react to this proposal for a European Cup?
We weren’t proposing it. We were inventing it – creating it. Why? First of all, because the FIFA President, Rodolphe Seeldrayers, had told us that FIFA was favourable to the idea, but could not organise a club competition – especially not a European one. We thought that the only possible organiser was UEFA, which had just been established [in June 1954]. By a historic stroke of luck, UEFA and the European Cup were being created at the same time. Without UEFA, I don’t think it would have been possible to launch the European Cup. Who would have organised it? Gabriel Hanot and I attended the first UEFA Congress in Vienna, Austria, on 2 March 1955, just two months after that famous article. We were welcomed by the UEFA Executive Committee, which had just been established. It was chaired by a Dane called Ebbe Schwartz. We told them why we wanted this competition, explaining that it needed to exist and that we were convinced that it would be a fabulous success ... but that nobody wanted to organise it and it was obvious that UEFA should do it. They said no, because they couldn’t see why federations should organise club competitions. That seems incredible now. These days, if the clubs wanted to organise it, UEFA would be up in arms. But no – back in early 1955, UEFA said no.

So, you returned from Vienna empty-handed. What did you do then?



With 38,000 spectators assembled for the inaugural final at Parc des Princes in Paris, Jacques Ferran shares a quiet word with Stade de Reims star turn and soon-to-be Real Madrid player Raymond Kopa.

Gabriel Hanot and I returned from Vienna thinking that it was up to us – i.e. L’Équipe – to organise it. We wanted to help, but in fact it was the clubs themselves that wanted to organise it. We drew up a list of 16 clubs and invited them to Paris – all expenses paid. Jacques Goddet, the owner of L’Équipe, never forgot that, as it cost him a fair amount. They weren’t all domestic champions, as we couldn’t possibly know who would win their leagues in three or four months’ time.

How did you pick them, then?
We picked them based on how good they looked ... Real Madrid from Spain, of course, Milan from Italy, Chelsea from England ... We sent them a letter of invitation – all expenses paid, travel, rooms at the Ambassador Hotel on Boulevard Haussmann in Paris, close to L’Équipe, the Lido cabaret club, restaurants, etc., and two days of meetings chaired by Jacques Goddet at the Ambassador Hotel.

Other than the clubs and L’Équipe, who else attended those meetings?
We wanted to have someone running the competition who was not from a club. We didn’t ask the French Football Federation, which was run by Henri Delaunay and his son Pierre at the time and wasn’t too keen on the creation of the European Cup. The federation wanted to set up a cup competition for Europe’s national teams instead. So, we turned to the association of French clubs that would later become the French Professional Football League, which was chaired by Paul Nicolas at the time. Its deputy chairman, Ernest Bedrignan, chaired the meeting that established the European Cup, adopting regulations that I had written. The regulations were approved by an organising committee chaired by Bedrignan, with Santiago Bernabéu and Gusztáv Sebes – a giant of Hungarian football – acting as deputy chairmen. All of the five or six members of that committee were club administrators, such as the chairman of Chelsea. They took it all very seriously, and arranged a meeting in order to organise and contest the European Cup.

Without any FIFA or UEFA involvement, then?
No – but very quickly, FIFA and UEFA started to think: “What’s happening here? Here’s a competition that has the potential to be the biggest of them all, and it’s going to be organised by the clubs and a newspaper? We can’t be having that.” FIFA said that, in its opinion, UEFA should organise it. But on one condition: the competition could not be called

the ‘Coupe d’Europe des clubs’ [European Clubs’ Cup], because the [French] noun ‘Europe’ could only be used for the ‘Coupe d’Europe des nations’ [European Nations’ Cup]. So, the competition was called the ‘Coupe des clubs champions européens’ or European Champion Clubs’ Cup – until it was later renamed the UEFA Champions League. But I don’t like using the English name; I prefer ‘Ligue des champions’. Given that we French invented it, it annoys me that it has an English name!

Was there a lot of discussion about the competition format and regulations?
No, not really. We went through each of my points, one by one, discussed them a bit, and then they were approved. The regulations were unanimously approved in their entirety. We had another meeting the next day to discuss the first round.

And to organise a draw?
No, we decided not to have a draw because we didn’t want to end up with the two favourites playing each other in the first round. I think it was the only round of a European Cup that didn’t involve domestic champions or a draw. But, of course, as soon as we turned our backs, UEFA – at the behest of FIFA – decided to take over after all, and since that day it has done a pretty good job of organising it. We took a gamble, because there was no way we or the clubs could organise such a big competition. How would we appoint referees? How would we punish players or the clubs themselves? It simply wasn’t possible. We would have had to establish a committee, and so on. It was much better for UEFA to take care of it.

Was the competition an overnight success?
Yes. There was great excitement right from the start, with average crowds of almost 30,000 during the first season. That’s quite something →

“No sooner had we entered the second round than the completion of the competition was in doubt, because their respective countries – Franco’s Spain and Tito’s Yugoslavia – would have nothing to do with each other.”

Robert Jonquet and Miguel Munoz shake hands in the presence of English referee Arthur Ellis. Madrid claimed the cup that night, and found it a permanent place in their trophy cabinet after their fifth consecutive win in 1960.



for a new competition, especially as we had no English club, because Chelsea – under pressure from their national association – had decided to wait and see how the first edition worked out.

And so the first draw was held ahead of the second round?

After the first round there were eight teams left. UEFA had the nice idea of inviting me to Brussels to perform the first European Cup draw. I'm rather proud of that. It was UEFA's way of paying tribute to us. I conducted the draw and the first two names I pulled from the hat were Real Madrid and Partizan. No sooner had we entered the second round than the completion of the competition was in doubt, because their respective countries – Franco's Spain and Tito's Yugoslavia – would have nothing to do with each other. And yet football was strong enough to bring the two teams together nonetheless. Bernabéu's assistant, Saporta, was an extremely intelligent, well-connected man, and rather than getting visas for the players who would be travelling between Madrid and Belgrade, he managed to secure them free passage through obscure border posts without visas.

What do you remember of that first-ever final?

It was played in Paris, at Parc des Princes, on 13 June 1956. There was a joyful atmosphere – no acrimony, just celebration. It was good. We were hoping that Reims would win, but nobody was disappointed to see Madrid come out on top. It was a beautiful summer's evening, with the perfect line-up: Real Madrid, who had been the main proponents of the competition, and Stade de Reims, the big team of the moment, with Raymond Kopa. Reims put up a really good fight and took the lead twice, but then Madrid took the upper hand and dominated the game with their liegeman and champion all-rounder, Alfredo Di Stefano.

Was Di Stefano as special as they say? How was he different from the other players at the time?

There's a lot of debate nowadays about whether Messi and Ronaldo are the best players of all time. When I think of Pelé and Di Stefano, I rank them one and two without hesitation, well above Messi. Pelé won three World Cups and was the only player capable of winning a match single-handedly. Di Stefano was second to Pelé but still greater than Messi because he had the whole team looking to him. He was a real leader, which Messi is not. Messi is a great solo artist, dribbler, goalscorer, the lot, but he doesn't control his team the



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way Di Stefano did. He was Real Madrid. When people tell me nowadays that the Neymar-Messi-Suárez forward line is unparalleled worldwide, I say that I saw Di Stefano, Puskás, Gento and Kopa play together, which wasn't bad either.

Who presented the trophy to the winners?

At the end of the match, we were ready with the trophy, which we had had made at a silversmith's on Rue de la Paix in Paris. Jacques Goddet handed it to Santiago Bernabéu, saying: "I'm giving you this trophy because it is the child of love." It was beautiful. That day was the crowning moment of our magnum opus: the creation of the European Cup.

Did you ever imagine, back in 1955, that the competition would achieve the size and status that it has today?

Yes. I thought it would have a strong start and keep on growing. How would it evolve, and in what circumstances? That, we didn't know. And would it end up a victim of its own success? That was our concern. Would UEFA organise it with equanimity, doing everything it could for the competition and keeping it on a tight rein from a sporting perspective in terms of the appointment of referees and the fight against doping? Would UEFA be up to the task? Would the clubs one day try to take control, as happens with competitions in the USA? That has indeed happened, but UEFA resisted it well. 🇪🇺

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Alfredo Di Stefano and Santiago Bernabeu keep a firm hold on the celebrated cup.



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JOURNALISTS WRITE HISTORY

It was a group of journalists at L'Équipe who first came up with the idea for the European Champion Clubs' Cup. Jacques Ferran remembers it well.

At L'Équipe back then, much more so than today, we journalists really wanted to play a part in sport. We saw ourselves as stakeholders. I remember, for example, when the World Cup was held in Brazil in 1950. The French team had failed to qualify, but a few months before the tournament, because they didn't have 16 teams, the Brazilians invited France to take part. The team were in pretty poor shape at that time and the clubs pushed the federation to decline. Our reaction at L'Équipe and France Football – the reaction of people like Hanot – was to say: "How can this be? We have been given the opportunity to play at the World Cup and we are turning it down."

That was in 1950. I'd been working as a journalist for just two years, and I went to see Henri Delaunay, the general secretary of the French Football Federation and the most powerful man in the French game. "We at L'Équipe would like to ask you if there's a chance you might reconsider your decision," I said. He was very nice about it – we had met before – but he said no, there was no chance: "The clubs have made their decision and the players have already been released on leave." So we didn't go. As you can see from that, we felt we had a part to play, that we were stakeholders in sport as a whole. We organised the Tour de France – we organised all sorts of things, in fact – but we also had a part to play more generally. That's the first thing. Secondly, more so than today, we believed it was important to come up with new ideas. We invented the European Footballer of the Year award, for example, one year after creating the European Cup. That's quite something. We also established the Golden Boot award for Europe's best goalscorer. We came up with all sorts of things. We, at France Football, were the first to give players stars (i.e. to rate them), which everyone does nowadays. We had so many ideas that we tried to bring to life.

It was the journalists at L'Équipe who created the European Cup, not the paper. I really must stress that. It wasn't the owner, the director or the boss. No, it was journalists who created the European Cup and the European Footballer of the Year award. We needed to get the boss's approval if we wanted to invent a competition,

but when we went to see Jacques Goddet he welcomed us with open arms, because he thought primarily in economic terms. L'Équipe was a sports daily and we sold very few copies during the week – there was no football to write about on Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Thursdays.

We rehashed old news, looking back on what had happened the previous Sunday and announcing as early as possible what was coming up the following Sunday. But there was no reporting, no news. There wasn't enough to write about, so the creation of a European Cup to be contested during the week was a godsend. In fact, Jacques Goddet wrote in his autobiography that if he had asked UEFA for a dollar for every match played as a result of us and our ideas, he would have been a very rich man, which is true.

An editorial meeting at L'Équipe in 1984, led by Jacques Ferran shortly before his retirement.



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