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Born April 18, Died April 20: The Spectacular Fall Of European Super League And Its Aftermath

The European Super League was supposed to be the saviour of football according to one of its founders: Real Madrid president Florentino Perez

 **Subhrajit Chanda**
10 May 2021



FILE - In this Friday April 23, 2021 file photo, fans protest against Arsenal owner Stan Kroenke outside the Emirates Stadium in London. The fans want owner Stan Kroenke to leave the club over its bid to join the failed Super League.

AP Photo/Prank Griffiths, File

As iconic moments in football go, this was one of the finest. Just 72 hours after the European Super League was officially announced on Sunday, April 18, 2021, thousands of Chelsea fans started protesting outside Stamford Bridge blocking the team bus before their scheduled Premier League

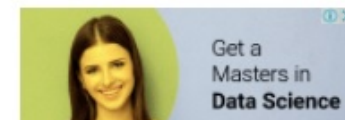
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and negotiate with the fans. This was a part of **ongoing protests by fans** of other English Super League clubs: fans burning club jerseys and removing banners from their stadiums in Liverpool and Manchester. This highlighted that there was no appetite among the fans for a new competition like the proposed Super League, especially in England. Tuesday, April 20, 2021 will go down in history as the day football was won back by the fans: a win of football over the greed of the clubs' owners.



This new league was in talks for many years but was brought forth in April 2021. The Super League was meant to overtake the UEFA Champions League and this is the reason why it was announced before Europe's premier club championship was set to **announce its new format**. This is the reason why everything was fast-tracked, despite some participating clubs still being apprehensive.

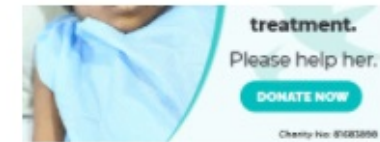
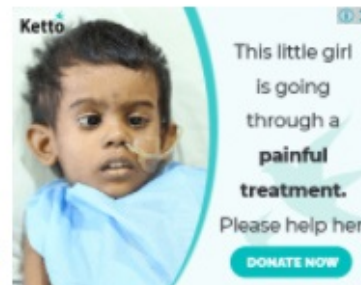
UNITED OPPOSITION

Even though the players from clubs were mostly quiet, some 'liked' the criticism that was being offered to these plans on

social media. Meanwhile, in a bid to show a united force of opposition among the footballers themselves, Liverpool FC's captain Jordan Henderson called for a meeting of the Premier League clubs' captains. Soon after the meeting, Jordan Henderson and all the Liverpool FC players publicly stated their united opposition to the Super League. Players like James Milner, Ander Herrera and Patrick Bamford had openly spoke against it, as did coaches like Jurgen Klopp (Liverpool) and Pep Guardiola (Manchester City). This showed where their loyalties lied – firmly against the competition.

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Even after that, Florentino Perez (Real Madrid's chairman and the poster-child of the Super League) kept stating that **no one would be leaving** the newly formed league. After all, the 12 participating clubs had all left the European Club Association (ECA), signed binding agreements to join the Super League and had obtained court orders from Madrid to prevent the blocking of the competition. However, Perez failed to understand that any footballing competition cannot work if the fans are not behind it.



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A selection of scarves of the English soccer Premier League teams who were part of the proposed European Super League, laid out and photographed, in London, Monday, April 19, 2021. AP Photo

Perez said the move **would 'save' football**. He was to be proven wrong as hours later, the clubs starting developing cold feet and started to step back. The first one to go was Manchester City and by the end of the day, all the six English clubs had bid adieu to the European Super League. Atletico Madrid and Inter, did the same the next day, followed by AC Milan. Even though Juventus kept on backing this idea, they too admitted defeat, with Barcelona and Real Madrid left standing behind. Thus, in a matter of 72 hours, the ship of this epic project witnessed the fate of the Titanic.

ESCHEWING MERIT

It is perhaps not surprising that the Super League failed. It failed in upholding sporting merit and promoted elitism. As per its Press Release, the 12 'Founding Fathers' would automatically play in the competition, irrespective of their domestic league finish the previous season. This goes against the notions of 'qualifying' for a European competition like the UEFA Champions League, which it tried to challenge, as exemplified by the Leeds players wearing T-shirts printed with a 'Champions League - Earn it' message.

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The authors believe that the Super League in its proposed format would have eliminated the Champions League's predictability, particularly of the group stage. This would have left the fans uninterested in watching the games, which has been the recent problem for Champions League games. There is a need to understand that fans become jaded by watching the biggest clubs clash multiple times in a season. This is what the precursor European Cups and Champions League have been tapping on till now as they brought excitement with them.

This is one of the reasons why the Champions League was being modified, i.e., to keep the fans interested. It can therefore be interpreted as a move by these clubs to further solidify their hold as the European elite in a sport that is rapidly becoming unequal financially with every passing day. Many saw this as a move to refinance the clubs who were in massive debt as every member joining the Super League was promised a sum of 200-300 million Euros.

UNHOLY NEXUS

The Super League could have led to cartelisation of revenue via broadcasting rights (which has made the English Premier League the richest league in the world). Moreover, the format of the Super League as was suggested and would have gone forward would have breached Article 101 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Since football is largely self-regulated, distorting internal competition in the way the Super League envisaged would have landed it in hot waters with the TFEU.

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UEFA ratifies new Champions League format amid European Super League backlash. Photo - AP.

Even though UEFA was able to deal with the threat posed by the new league, the storm of football has not passed till now. A possible revival of this league, in case it garners the support of fans, would land the UEFA in big trouble. At present, it was saved just because the fans did not like the idea of the clubs enriching themselves at their expense. But when they get bored of the present formats of the game, a change could always bring them to the other side of the table.

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The Super League's demise might also have brought about some structural changes to football governance. For instance, soon after the Super League's demise, the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) adopted a rule that would ban Italian clubs from participating in Serie A if they took part in a breakaway league and changed its rules to mandate every club wishing to register with the national Italian league to agree against participating in private, unauthorised competitions.




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The English government, meanwhile, is also on the reform agenda and it has garnered bipartisan support. Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour Party leader, advocates for the German 50+1 fan majority ownership rule to be adopted in the UK, though its implementation in the UK is maybe difficult.

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Ultimately, the authors believe that the biggest losers in this project are the Super League clubs themselves. They stare at the barrel of impending legal and financial sanctions. The six English clubs have broken Rule L9 of the Premier League that prohibits its members from entering unsanctioned competitions and may have financial sanctions imposed upon them.

The other clubs in the respective leagues are now emboldened by this and the soft power exercised by the elite clubs over their respective leagues has been potentially destroyed. The Founding Fathers have also destroyed their relationship with the ECA, the UEFA and the other governing bodies, and therefore they will not be able to exercise the influence they once did.

However, for football as a sport, this is perhaps for the better. The Super League was a testament to what happens when the elite clubs are left unchecked for years. With owners pleading forgiveness of the fans and governments adopting measures to keep the elite clubs in check, there is perhaps hope yet for the beautiful game and its fans worldwide.

(With inputs from Kingshuk Saha, a Law scholar. Chanda is a lecturer and a PhD scholar. Views are personal)

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