



UNION OF EUROPEAN  
FOOTBALL  
ASSOCIATIONS  
BACKGROUND GUIDE

# BACKGROUND GUIDE 1

## Union of European Football Associations

Addressing issues regarding player welfare and haphazard scheduling structures with inherent damage to player well being.

### LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

Greetings Delegates! It is indeed an honour to welcome you to this simulation of the Union of European Football

Associations (UEFA) at SHISMUN 2025. We sincerely hope that being a part of the conference is an intellectually stimulating experience for you as well as for us. For all procedural purposes of this meeting, we shall adhere to the **UNA-USA Rules of Procedures**. The purpose of this background guide is to equip you with the required knowledge about the committee as well as the agenda, therefore make sure you read and understand this background guide judiciously. However, **at no point assume that only the content of the background guide can substitute for further research**. Please also note that **nothing written in the background guide can be quoted or used as proof for any claims/allegations in the committee**.

Additionally, for this committee – and MUNs in general, **we do not wish to know your research or the statistics you may read; we are particularly interested in the meaning of the statistics and numbers you may have read, and its analysis**. Keeping that in mind, we cannot emphasize the need for analysis and evaluation in your arguments and speeches any further. We also implore you to go through the “**Questions to Consider**” as these are some questions which we as the Executive Board would want the delegates to go through and implore to find answers to in the committee proceedings.

Please feel free to contact us via e-mail in case you have any questions or queries, or if you wish to seek any clarifications. We shall be happy to assist. All the best!

Regards,

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## ABOUT THE COMMITTEE

The Union of European Football Associations – is the governing body of European football. It is an association of associations, a representative democracy, and is the umbrella organization for 55 national football associations across Europe.

UEFA is a society entered in the register of companies under the Swiss civil code with its headquarters located in Nyon, Switzerland. It is a continental confederation recognized by the world football governing body, FIFA. The sitting president of UEFA is Aleksander Čeferin, followed by Vice-President Karl-Erik Nilsson and Treasurer David Gill. UEFA's Policy is shaped by 19 different committees.

UEFA conducts a total of 3 Tournaments for Men football clubs, which consist of the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, and UEFA Conference League.

## History of Football Scheduling

Football's scheduling structure has evolved dramatically over the past century, influenced by shifts in governance, economic imperatives, media rights, and international expansion. Once a seasonally-contained, relatively straightforward framework, the football calendar has transformed into a highly congested, overlapping matrix of domestic, continental, and international competitions, leaving little room for player recovery and preparation.

### Early Foundations: Simplicity and Structure

In the early 20th century, football was organized around domestic leagues and cup competitions, typically running from **August to May**. The calendar was predictable and manageable:

- Each country had a premier league competition (e.g., England's First Division, Spain's La Liga).
- One or two domestic cup tournaments were held concurrently (e.g., the FA Cup).
- International football was limited to sporadic friendlies and major tournaments like the FIFA World Cup (1930 onwards) or continental championships such as the Copa América and UEFA European Championship.

During this period, players often had **ample rest** between matches, with travel and off-season breaks respected due to logistical constraints and less commercial pressure.

### Mid-Century Developments: Continental Integration

The formation of continental tournaments in the mid-20th century, notably:

- **UEFA Champions League** (1955, originally the European Cup),
- **UEFA Europa League** (1971, formerly the UEFA Cup), and
- **Copa Libertadores** (1960),

introduced a new layer of competition. However, these tournaments followed a **knockout format**, involved fewer teams, and took place over longer intervals, limiting the strain on players.

### The Commercial Boom: 1990s–2000s

The 1990s marked a critical shift in football's economic and organizational landscape:

- The **Bosman ruling** (1995) liberalized player transfers, accelerating the globalization of squads and increasing club ambitions across multiple competitions.
- Sky Sports and other broadcasters revolutionized media deals, transforming matches into premium content. The result was **expanded league sizes**, more cup replays, and prime-time fixtures to suit global TV audiences.
- UEFA revised the Champions League into a **group stage format** in 1992, dramatically increasing the number of matches required to win the tournament.
- New international events, such as the **FIFA Confederations Cup**, were introduced, and youth tournaments proliferated.

These changes created an increasingly packed calendar, with top players often involved in **club football for 10 months**, followed by national duty in summer tournaments, leaving little time for recovery.

### 2010s–Present: Fixture Congestion and Welfare Crisis

By the 2010s, the effects of this expanded structure became more apparent:

- Top players were involved in **60+ matches per season**, across multiple competitions.
- Clubs began voicing concerns about insufficient pre-season preparation, injury risks, and the growing financial disparity that encouraged prioritizing certain competitions over others.

- Managers such as Jürgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola frequently criticized the “**relentless scheduling**,” arguing that the welfare of players was secondary to profit motives.
- Despite repeated warnings, major organizations continued expanding competitions. UEFA introduced the Nations League (2018), revamped the Champions League format, and FIFA announced the expanded Club World Cup (2025).

This led to **overlapping calendars**, mid-season international travel, and shorter off-seasons —particularly damaging to players’ mental and physical health. As international windows increased and travel demands rose, so did injuries, burnout, and mental fatigue.

### The COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020) compressed entire seasons into shorter windows. While some tournaments were canceled or postponed, others were rescheduled into tighter timeframes. Players faced:

- **Back-to-back games every 3–4 days,**
- **Minimal recovery time between seasons,** and
- Bio-secure bubbles that added psychological stress.

This period made the issue of **fixture overload** even more visible, yet also demonstrated how quickly football bodies could adapt when necessary.

### 2020s and Beyond: Ongoing Evolution

Today, the scheduling debate continues to intensify. Key trends include:

- The **Champions League (2024–25)** expanding to a **36-team “Swiss format”** with more group-stage games.
- The **Club World Cup** expanding to **32 teams**, further reducing rest periods.
- Clubs, players, and unions increasingly demanding:
  - **Guaranteed off-season rest** (e.g., 3–4 weeks),
  - **Limits on international matches,** and
  - **Injury prevention protocols.**

Despite these calls, the financial incentives attached to expanded competitions and global broadcasting rights still dominate decision-making.

## The Current Scheduling Process

Modern football scheduling has become a deeply intricate system, shaped by the competing priorities of governing bodies, clubs, broadcasters, and commercial interests. At its core, the process attempts to balance **domestic league requirements**, **continental competitions**, and **international fixtures**—all while addressing club obligations, media commitments, and increasingly vocal concerns over player health.

## Key Stakeholders in Scheduling

1. **FIFA** – Governs the **International Match Calendar (IMC)**, which dictates when national teams can call up players. This includes designated windows for qualifiers, friendlies, and major tournaments like the **World Cup**.
2. **UEFA** – Manages all European competitions (Champions League, Europa League, Conference League), and works with national associations to prevent calendar clashes, particularly for club vs. country disputes.
3. **Domestic Leagues and Associations** – Such as the **Premier League (England)**, **La Liga (Spain)**, **Bundesliga (Germany)**, etc., which schedule weekly league matches and local cup competitions.
4. **Broadcasters and Sponsors** – They exert significant influence over match timings, rest days, and tournament expansions, often prioritizing global primetime slots over player welfare.
5. **Clubs and Club Management** – Must manage player rotations, travel logistics, medical support, and training across all competitions, often with little control over the broader calendar.

## Core Components of the Modern Football Calendar

1. **Domestic Leagues**
  - Run from **August to May**, typically consisting of **38 league matches** in most top European divisions.
  - In leagues with relegation and promotion battles, every match carries sporting and financial weight.
2. **Domestic Cups**
  - Examples: **FA Cup**, **Carabao Cup (England)**, **Copa del Rey (Spain)**.
  - Involve multiple rounds, often including **replays**, which add to fixture congestion, especially in England.

### 3. UEFA Club Competitions

- **Champions League (UCL), Europa League (UEL), and Europa Conference League (UECL).**
- Feature midweek games during the league season, involving **6 group matches** (expanding to **8–10** in 2024) and multiple knockout rounds.

### 4. International Breaks

- Occur in **September, October, November, March, and June.**
- Players must travel globally, sometimes intercontinentally, for 1–3 matches within 10 days, returning to club action almost immediately.

### 5. Pre-Season and Tours

- Usually held in **July**, these include promotional tours in Asia, the US, or the Middle East.
- Clubs focus on building fitness and marketing their brand, leaving little time for proper rest or tactical preparation.

### 6. Post-Season International Tournaments

- In even-numbered years: **EUROs** (UEFA), **Copa América** (CONMEBOL), **AFCON** (CAF).
- In odd years or every four years: **FIFA World Cup**, **Nations League Finals**, and now, **FIFA Club World Cup** (from 2025).
- These tournaments often **cut directly into players' rest time**, especially for clubs with many internationals.

## Key Structural Changes: Further damaging the Schedule

- **UEFA Champions League Expansion (2024)**

The move to a **Swiss-style league format** will see:

- 36 teams (up from 32),
- Each club playing **8–10 matches** in the group stage (up from 6),
- Increased travel and match intensity due to more elite matchups.

- **FIFA Club World Cup Expansion (2025)**

- Will feature **32 clubs** in a **summer tournament**, potentially replacing traditional off-seasons for participating players.
- Held every four years, but its overlap with recovery windows is highly controversial.

## Complications in Coordination

### 1. Competing Commercial Interests

- FIFA and UEFA both chase global sponsorship and TV rights.
- National leagues push for weekend dominance, while UEFA claims midweek.
- Clubs want to maintain competitive advantage but also seek profit via international fan bases and friendly tournaments.

### 2. Rescheduling and Fixture Bottlenecks

- Weather disruptions, cup replays, or deep runs in multiple competitions force matches into tight windows.
- Example: A club in contention for the **league title, two domestic cups, and the UCL** may play **65–70 games** in a season.

### 3. Player Welfare as a Secondary Concern

- Despite calls for regulation, **no unified enforcement exists to limit player match load.**
- FIFPRO and other players' unions have lobbied for rest mandates (e.g., **minimum four-week offseason**), but implementation is inconsistent.

## The Core Problem: Fragmentation of Authority

There is **no single governing body** responsible for harmonizing the entire football calendar. FIFA, UEFA, national leagues, and clubs operate under independent commercial frameworks. This **lack of centralization** causes overlapping schedules, contradictory priorities, and scheduling overload—particularly for elite players involved in all tiers of the game.



## The Impact of the Current Scheduling Process

**The Club World Cup, previously a niche event with seven teams, is set to become a 32-team mega-tournament held every four years, starting in 2025. While FIFA projects massive revenue—estimated over \$1 billion—many European clubs and player unions have criticized the move.** As Toni Kroos bluntly stated, “It’s all about squeezing every last drop of money out of the sport, even if it burns out the players.”

**Similarly, the UEFA Champions League will see its group stage replaced by a league phase, resulting in a minimum of 8 games instead of 6 for each team. With additional knockout rounds and qualification stakes, top clubs may end up playing close to 15–17 matches in a single European season.**

These changes amplify already-existing congestion, especially for players from successful clubs who regularly compete in domestic and international tournaments. The mental and physical toll of playing over 60 games in a season is unsustainable.

Other impacts include:

**Congested Calendars:** Players in top European clubs can play upwards of 60 matches per season, not including international fixtures. Recent years have seen the introduction of more games rather than fewer, even as player associations and clubs warn of burnout.

**Lack of Off-Season:** The introduction of tournaments during the traditional off-season (e.g., UEFA Nations League, AFCON rescheduling, FIFA Club World Cup) has significantly reduced rest periods. This inhibits both physical recovery and mental refreshment.

**Insufficient Pre-Season:** Players often return from international tournaments just weeks before the new season begins, missing essential pre-season training and tactical preparation.

### Impact on Players:

#### 1. Physical Health and Injuries

Data from UEFA and FIFPRO suggests a correlation between fixture congestion and a rise in muscular injuries. For example:

- In the 2022-23 season, Premier League teams reported a 30% increase in injury-related absences compared to pre-pandemic seasons.

- According to a FIFPRO study, elite players have a 60% higher risk of injury if they play two matches within five days.

## **2. Mental Health and Burnout**

Footballers have increasingly spoken out about the mental toll of constant travel, media pressure, and lack of downtime.

- Prominent players like Kevin De Bruyne, Toni Kroos, and Raphaël Varane have expressed concerns over unsustainable schedules.
- A 2021 study by FIFPRO revealed that 38% of male players and 47% of female players report experiencing mental health issues during or after congested periods.

## **3. Long-Term Career and Life Quality**

- Players are retiring earlier or experiencing long-term injuries post-career due to insufficient recovery.
- The lack of career longevity not only affects players' health but also impacts their long-term earnings and post-retirement transition.

## **Case Studies showcasing Impact of Current Scheduling:**

Expanding on the broader impact of fixture congestion, the following case studies illustrate how over-scheduling affects elite clubs and individual players in quantifiable terms:

- **Manchester City (2022-23):**
  - Played 61 competitive matches across all competitions.
  - Reported 26 injury-related absences during the season.
  - Featured in every possible competition: Premier League, FA Cup, Carabao Cup, UEFA Champions League, and FIFA Club World Cup qualifiers.
  - Their players returned late for pre-season training due to national team commitments, forcing tactical improvisation and conditioning issues.
- **FC Barcelona (2021-22):**
  - 14 players had fewer than 15 full rest days in the year, due to a combination of La Liga, Copa del Rey, UEFA competitions, and international duties.
  - Several players, including Pedri and Gavi, were involved in nearly back-to-back tournaments (e.g., Euros, Olympics, Nations League), playing over 70 matches in a calendar year.
- **Kylian Mbappé (2021-2023):**
  - Featured in over 150 matches across Ligue 1, UEFA Champions League, domestic cups, and international tournaments.
  - Recorded fewer than 25 full rest days over two years, including shortened breaks due to World Cup and Nations League involvement.

- Publicly criticized the excessive match load, stating it leaves "no time to breathe or prepare."

- **FIFPRO's "At The Limit" Report (2023):**

- Identified that more than 30% of matches played by elite players occur with less than five days of recovery, breaching established medical guidance.
- Concluded that high workloads increase the likelihood of both short-term injuries and long-term degenerative health conditions (e.g., joint deterioration).

These data points reflect a systemic issue that affects all levels of football—from the club medical staff to the highest tiers of administrative planning. The toll on player fitness, team performance, and national squad readiness cannot be overstated.

## Domestic Competitions

Domestic competitions are often the most adversely affected by international scheduling demands. To accommodate international tournaments and global commercial ventures, national federations frequently compress league schedules, eliminate cup replays, or shift matches to midweek slots, reducing rest days for players.

- In **England**, the festive season "fixture pile-up"—where clubs often play 3–4 matches in the space of 10 days—has long drawn criticism. Liverpool manager Jürgen Klopp once remarked, "If we don't start talking about the welfare of players, it's not going to stop."

The FA Cup, a cornerstone of English football tradition, has historically allowed replays for drawn matches. While replays are a financial boon for lower-tier clubs, they add strain to the already tight schedules of top-flight teams, prompting debates over whether tradition should yield to practicality.

- In **Spain**, the **Copa del Rey** is now mostly contested in single-leg knockout fixtures to reduce scheduling stress. However, clashes with UEFA fixtures often force top clubs to play three matches in a week. Additionally, the **Spanish Super Cup** has undergone a dramatic transformation:
  - It now features four teams instead of two and is hosted in **Saudi Arabia** as part of a lucrative deal.
  - Held in January, right in the middle of the domestic season, it requires international travel and adds up to two extra matches per team involved.
  - The tournament's commercialization has sparked criticism from players and fans alike for placing revenue generation above athlete well-being.
- In **Italy** and **Germany**, although winter breaks are more established (especially in the Bundesliga), the increasing number of domestic and continental fixtures still forces teams to rotate squads heavily. This often leads to inconsistent performances and a higher risk of injury, especially among younger or fringe players.

These domestic disruptions reveal a broader issue: while national federations attempt to maintain tradition and competitiveness, they are simultaneously forced to adapt to external scheduling pressures. The result is a precarious balance where player welfare is often the first casualty.

## Players and Managers Reactions

- **Manchester City midfielder and Ballon d'or winner Rodri** famously said "I think we are close to that [Going on strike] and if it keeps this way, there will be a moment where we have no other option, I really think, but let's see."
- **Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta** mentioned how he has players who have played 130 games in 2 seasons and how it's "an accident waiting to happen"
- **Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola** said "More than 50 games is too much for the players in the season. The human body cannot sustain it."
- **Former Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp**, when talking about the new Fifa club world cup, said "We cannot carry on like this. We have to sit down at the table and at one point find solutions."
- **Toni Kroos (Real Madrid Midfielder)**: "At the end of the day, we players are just a product. Football is being sold ever more and more and we are the ones who have to play through it."
- **Raphaël Varane (Former France International)**: "We are overloaded. Mentally and physically. The schedule is cruel. I left the national team for this reason."
- **Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City Midfielder)**: After suffering multiple injuries: "I had no proper rest for two years. We are treated like machines."
- **Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid Goalkeeper)**: "UEFA only cares about money. They don't care about the players. They want more games, more competitions. We are not robots."

## CONCLUSION

The intensifying football calendar has become a defining issue in the modern game, raising serious concerns about player welfare. While the global popularity of football and the financial incentives behind more fixtures are undeniable, they have come at a growing cost — with increased injury rates, mental and physical fatigue, and shortened careers now commonplace. The current trajectory risks prioritizing commercial gain over the human element at the heart of the sport.

Looking ahead, the challenge lies in finding a sustainable balance — one that protects the health and longevity of players while preserving the competitive and commercial value of the game. Ethical responsibility must take precedence, ensuring that football remains not only profitable, but also just, humane, and respectful to those who make it possible. The

future of football depends not only on revenue streams and broadcasting rights, but on recognizing that the sport's most valuable assets — its players — are not machines, but people.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Should UEFA and other governing bodies introduce a cap on the number of matches a player can play per season to protect player welfare?
2. How can the football calendar be restructured to balance commercial interests with the physical and mental well-being of players?
3. What ethical responsibility do federations and clubs have when prioritizing profit-driven expansions (like the new Club World Cup) over player health?
4. What role should player unions, medical experts, and athletes themselves play in decision-making around scheduling and tournament design?
5. Can practical reforms like mandatory rest periods or off-season protections be realistically implemented without undermining revenue or competitive integrity?
6. Should there be a cap on the number of matches a professional footballer can play annually?
7. Should UEFA impose mandatory rest periods or health checks?
8. How can federations and clubs be financially compensated for reduced match schedules?
9. What role should players' unions play in negotiating scheduling reforms?

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