



## CUTTING OUT THE MIDDLEMAN

FIFA believes its Global Player Exchange (GPX) system will improve transparency in player transfers and, in theory, help clubs save money by avoiding using agents. However, clubs and the agents themselves aren't as supportive of the idea. **David Gold** reports.

**ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHANGES** in football in recent decades has been the growth in the use of agents in player and manager transfers.

Epitomised by Jorge Mendes, the 'super agent' whose clients include Jose Mourinho and Cristiano Ronaldo, these middlemen have come to be reviled by many involved in the game for the huge amount of influence they wield and the large sums of commission they command to broker deals. But no-one becomes an agent to make friends, and if football's world governing body FIFA has anything to do with it, agents simply would not exist.

The battle between FIFA and player representatives is ongoing. In June 2009 FIFA decided on an in-depth reform of the rules surrounding players' agents and two years later said it would no longer license agents globally, leaving it to individual national associations. The latest step, the GPX, is a system FIFA has developed that could enable clubs to avoid using agents altogether, details of which were revealed this January.

Using GPX, there would be a secure and private platform which football clubs can subscribe to, allowing them to access market information and interact with each other. They will be able to search for information about players, including their availability. FIFA claims

the system will "improve transparency" and help smaller, less wealthy clubs who cannot afford to run extensive scouting networks or pay hefty agent commissions (in 2012, there were 11,555 international transfers, with the average rate of commission paid by clubs around 28 per cent).

Unsurprisingly, the GPX has received a backlash from existing player agents. For Rachel Anderson, the first female agent to be licensed by FIFA who came to prominence in the late 1990s representing English Premier League 'bad boy' Julian Dicks, the governing body is taking the wrong approach if it believes football should become an agent-free sport, calling the GPX proposal "nonsense".

"Why would clubs want to cut out agents? Every club uses them and for a reason. There are always going to be agents," she told *SportBusiness International*, adding that football agents are easy targets. "It is possible they [FIFA] think here is a bogeyman and they do not know how to contain it.

"They cannot attack the clubs and players as without them there would be no FIFA, so the only soft option is the agents. But there would not be the industry we have now without agents. Agents also negotiate for the Sky [TV] money, and the buying and selling of clubs. If you say we are not going to have agents...we

would go back to the Wild West and it would be awful. We are not in that world now, we are in a sophisticated world, a big business world with humans involved - they are not commodities."

Given that most players will often refuse to speak to a club without them going through their agent, circumventing them is almost impossible. Players trust agents, and as Anderson points out, it is fundamentally easier to have someone else negotiate for you than to do it yourself.

So what about the clubs? Could they be taken in by such a system? FIFA's Committee for Club Football, the body that considers issues relating to the interests of club football worldwide, was briefed on the development of the system in January, and the chairman of the committee, Jacques Anouma, claimed that GPX "will revolutionise the international and national transfer system".

Loïc Féry, president of French football club Lorient, however told *SportBusiness International* that removing agents from the transfer process is neither realistic nor desirable, although he says FIFA is taking a step in the right direction to limit money going to intermediaries in order to increase liquidity in the transfer market.

"It is clear that the remuneration of agents is something we need to regulate," he says, arguing that FIFA should instead be looking



# Matéria

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at the best way to drive down agents' income.  
"[Commission] is a huge charge for the club.  
When you negotiate the salary of a player in a  
club it would be normal that the player pays the  
agent. They should be paid out of the contract  
you give to a player.

"My view on removing agents is that it is not a  
good idea. Even though there is a player exchange  
market being developed by FIFA, it will not  
remove the need to deal with the representative  
because a player transfer is a tri-party agreement  
[the buying and selling club and the player],

"The player still needs to negotiate with the  
new club and I do not really believe in a situation  
where there is no player representative. It is  
always good not to deal directly with the player.  
Removing player agents is not a necessity."

Yet if agents think that the views echoed  
by Anderson and Fery mean they have little to  
fear, they should think again. Whilst there may  
be disagreement about a way forward, there  
is enough room for consensus between FIFA,  
licensed agents and football clubs to tackle the  
way players' representatives currently operate.

GPX may be an idea which comes to nothing,  
but sooner or later, unlicensed agents taking  
huge commissions for transfers are likely to face  
a real and sustained fight from the authorities  
and the game's stakeholders.