Soccer-UEFA Brushes Off EU Threats
by Philippe Naughton

GENEVA, Jan. 17, 1996 (Reuter) -- European soccer’s governing body UEFA stood firm on the question of foreign player limits on Wednesday, setting itself on an ever-faster collision course with Brussels.

Ignoring threats from European Commission officials that it could be either fined or taken to court for ignoring a European Court judgment against the limits, UEFA said again that it was sticking by its “3+2 rule.”

In a statement it said “a legal examination by UEFA and FIFA” has confirmed its interpretation of the judgment, namely that teams participating in European competitions were also representing their countries and the limits should thus apply.

The “3+2 rule” limits teams to fielding a maximum of three foreign players and two “assimilated” foreigners. Senior EU officials have already rejected UEFA’s argument about teams representing their countries.

FIFA and UEFA, whose legal experts met in Zurich on Monday, also agreed that domestic transfers were not affected by the December 15 ruling, which came after a five-year legal battle by Belgian player Jean-Marc Bosman.

They said that no fee was payable for international transfers as long as the player was not under contract, was a national of a European Economic Area (EEA) member state and he was being transferred between EEA states.

The EEA groups the 15 EU member states with Iceland, Liechtenstein or Norway in a vast free trade zone.

UEFA conceded, however, that the 3+2 rule was no longer enforceable for national championships in EU or other EEA states.

UEFA said it would continue its dialogue with official players’ union FIFPRO to achieve a transfer system “which serves the interests of football and which is compatible with existing FIFA regulations.”

“In the meantime, FIFA has clearly stated that it will declare invalid any international transfer which is used as an artificial device to avoid payment of a legitimate transfer fee…” it added.

UEFA concluded by saying it would contact the European Commission to review the situation and continue to lobby senior national politicians to make sure that sport’s “specificity and national character” was recognized in revised EC treaties.

A UEFA spokesman pointed out that the 3+2 rule was originally the result of a “gentlemen’s agreement” between UEFA and the Commission in 1991.

“It’s worked well in recent years, there have been no problems,” he said. “We don’t see the need to change it.”

The rule was brought in by UEFA to harmonize regulations between various European leagues and prevent those clubs whose national federations set no limits on foreign players having an unfair advantage.

The English premier league has already come into line with the European Court ruling, allowing teams to field as many European Union nationals as they want and other major European clubs have begun lobbying for the rule to be scrapped.

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