

DO FAIR PLAY OVER FOREST



JUST for a minute join me in a bit of football fantasy. All it requires is a little excitement (real or imagined) about the game itself. Imagine that Brian Clough had discovered a new Pele - a young lad playing in a little known outpost of Africa, with footballing skills that oozed out of his feet; someone whose talent simply mesmerised you. Imagine him, in Forest's programme of work with young people and schools, bringing a sense of ex-dement and flair and artistry into the dullness of the game in Britain.

Perhaps, like me, you'd think it would be great for Forest to sign him up immediately ... but that's where you'd run into real difficulties.

I discovered as much this week when I publicly supported Forest's bid to get a work permit for Brad Freidle, the young American goalkeeper

they wish to sign. The Professional Footballers' Association object to this, apparently on the grounds that:

- He hasn't the necessary international experience;
- They want Forest to look for their extra players in Britain;

They argue that signing foreign players undermines the chances of youngsters in Britain getting a fair chance of League recognition.

But the more I look at the issue, the more the picture changes. Forest have looked all over the country for an extra keeper to strengthen their squad. The trouble is that none is available at a price Forest can afford. Hence their look overseas.

BRAD FREIDLE is a young goalkeeper with five international caps to his name. The trouble is that he plays for the USA. This, it is argued, cannot count because the USA mainly plays "friendly" matches. The Department of Employment is under pressure to grant work permits only to established internationals from countries which play in organised competitions.

What troubles one is that misruling could turn out to be extremely discriminatory. It favours those in white, European countries and disfavors those coming from emerging nations. It judges the organisation of the nation rather than the talent of the individual. And it draws dubs into the top bracket of transfer fees, both domestically and abroad.

I don't want a return to the days when footballers were revered on the field but paid pittances. There is nothing glorious about the great footballers who ended their careers in abject poverty. But there is now a stratosphere of pay levels among the football elite which has a different impact on the game. For every mega-bucks transfer that clubs take Forest get drawn into, the price gets paid else- I where. It is paid

through turnstile prices, through cuts in youth or schools programmes, and areas not immediately essential to a club's survival but essential to the future of the game as a whole.

If just seems crazy to me that the signing of foreign players should be restricted to precisely this end of the market.

But the case of Brad Freidle raises other issues as well. In January, Blackburn were able to sign a Norwegian with the same number of caps. There was no objection. Leeds made a similar signing, successful after an appeal was lodged. Now Forest find themselves blocked — and if the work permit application is turned down, any appeal would not be heard until after the transfer deadline.

I HAVE been pestering the relevant minister with a very simple argument Forest should be treated no less fairly than other clubs in the Premier League. The outcome of the League should be determined on the field of play, not by behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings which favour some and not others.

We should also look again at the rules about who the clubs are allowed to sign. A maximum number of foreign players at any club is all we need. But beyond that I want the decision made by Brian Clough, not the Football League or Department of Employment

Forest have a really good record of recognising young talent and bringing it through. And if they find another Pele - in Bangkok, Beirut Botswana or wherever - who can bring back the crowds, excite and inspire his team mates, lift the hearts of youngsters in schools, then I say you should be able to sign him.

It's all a question of judgment. And on this matter, I'd rather be backing Brian than bureaucracy.