

European Club Association expands to 500 members to head off club revolt

- ECA will increase its full voting membership of 109 by 40 per cent and bring nearly 500 clubs under its umbrella.
- Move comes amidst discontent about representation among its own members and as Union of European Clubs launch approaches.
- Why it matters: ECA has traditionally been seen as the preserve of Europe's elite clubs after its creation out of the members of the G14. Its leaders say these changes end that "perception".
- The perspective: Some ECA delegates spoke of their discontent at the way decisions are made, saying that it still favours the elite and suggesting that smaller clubs are starstruck.

(Budapest) The European Club Association (ECA) will increase its membership base to 500 members from later on this year amidst discontent about representation and the launch of a rival organisation.

Next month the Union of European Clubs (UEC) officially launches, offering a one member one vote platform to Europe's 1200 professional clubs.

Under the reforms the ECA's ordinary membership – which confers full voting rights for members – of 109 will increase by 40 per cent, its associate membership base of 136 will increase by 50-60 per cent. In addition, its "network" members, which have access to some ECA services will rise from 90 to 200.

Women's clubs will also have a pathway to full membership, with the top 40 female teams in Europe being invited to join as ordinary members, although clubs with both male and female teams will only have one membership of the ECA. The body's CEO Charlie Marshall told Off The Pitch that it would "open up the way to around 20 women's clubs that aren't open to membership".

Dariusz Mioduski, the Legia Warsaw president and ECA board member who was responsible for the governance changes, said that the expansion was led from the

“ground up” with clubs from lower ranking leagues taking the lead in a task force that he chaired.

“That work has resulted in a package of reforms that we approved today which I think makes the ECA a completely different organisation to the way that I think it was perceived to be in the past,” he said.

“We all know it was perceived as an organisation that was built around the interests of the big clubs. For the last two or three years in particular it has not been working that way, but today we actually made sure that in the future the structures and elective structures of the ECA is going to be making it a very representative body.”

He said that the package of reforms is about membership, participation and engagement and certain balance and consensus building in the decision making.

“The organisation will continue to grow. Over the next few months it will reach close to 500 clubs, which is a huge step up – it’s at least doubling in size if not more. And actually putting the proper structures in place to ensure the proper representation – all the sub divisions, all the membership groups, including new categories like women, and devising new structures and seats to address that in full.”

He believes that ECA have built a structure that will allow the organisation to be representative and modern and respect all clubs of Europe in what they perceive to be a time of change of several years in football.

“As ECA we will be very well placed to participate in those discussions.”

Growing dissent

Whether this is enough to head off growing dissent in its member ranks remains to be seen. Nor is the dissent just among small and medium sized clubs.

“Personally, I think a lot of this is for show,” a club executive of one of Europe’s biggest clubs told Off The Pitch.

It was a reference to the grand surroundings, the lavish hospitality, the attendance of a group of “legends” - John Terry, Andriy Shevchenko, Patrick Kluivert and Robbie Keane – who staged an on stage Q&A at Tuesday’s plenary session.

The implication was that a lot of it was to wow delegates from smaller clubs from which ECA takes its legitimacy as a representative of all of European club football, but the executive was unimpressed.

It's no longer just a few clubs participating each year – it's a lot of clubs impacted by European competitions

"A lot of the politics is taking place at a much higher level," admitted the official. "Even the clubs that have a vote don't have a say."

Another said: "The real business is conducted by the board before most delegates ever arrive."

An executive at a club that regularly competes in the Champions League told Off The Pitch: "It has become too big. It's not the same. UEFA, which it is tied up with, does a lot of good work, but you can't see it in there."

Next month the UEC, which is led by the former Everton and Ireland player Gareth Farrelly, officially launches. It comes with backing from at least one of the biggest stakeholders in European football. Clubs from the big five leagues – along with many others – are also expected to attend the launch in Brussels.

More responsive organisation

In an interview with Off The Pitch, Charlie Marshall denied that the changes were a reaction to the UEC.

Marshall said that it was part of a reform package "that has been worked upon for two or three years – before anyone had heard of that. There's been an awareness for some time, almost as part of the evolution of the association and what we're driving, that club football is becoming much broader and much deeper."

“It’s no longer just a few clubs participating each year – it’s a lot of clubs impacted by European competitions. That awareness has been there for a long time.”

Marshall added that the best response to other forms of representation was what he described as “self remedy and evolving your own structures and governance to a way that was more representative and appropriate.”

Nevertheless the question – “Will we see you in Brussels next month?” – became one that went from being whispered by delegates over the course of 24 hours to one that was openly asked. The answer was often affirmative.

The ECA and UEFA along with other stakeholders will be invited too. Would they attend?

“They haven’t contacted us,” claimed Marshall.