

World Cup fans cry foul over Fifa tactics

Hugh Williamson says the governing body's pro-business strategy is seen as an own goal by many football enthusiasts



GLOBAL VILLAGE

The shelves of Tülin Duman's shop in Berlin's multi-cultural Kreuzberg district are bulging with enough football memorabilia – from games and books to T-shirts and tea cups – to keep even the most hardened fans happy.

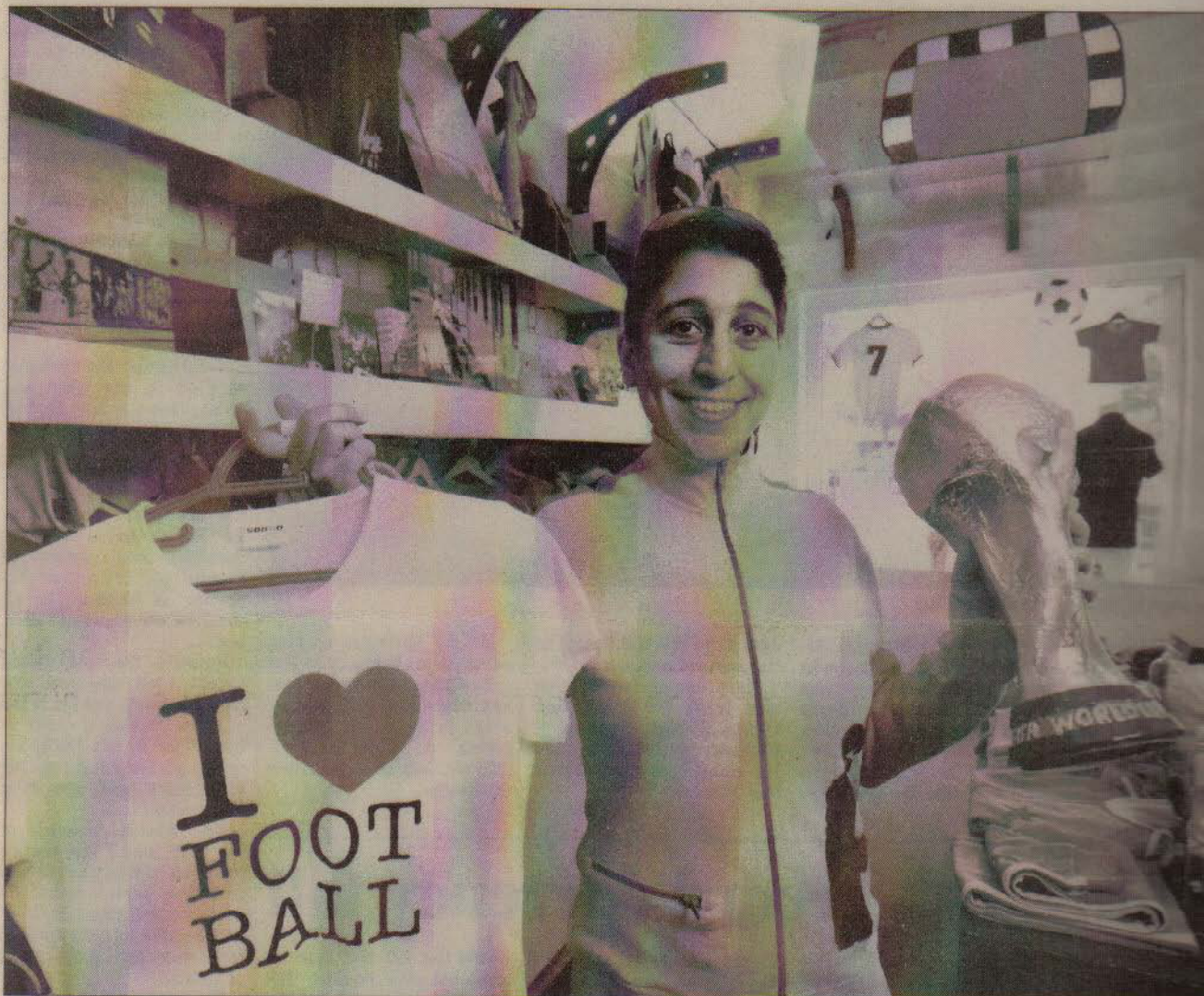
Yet perhaps oddly during Germany's current World Cup frenzy, the outlet, called "Goal – a world for football" bears no trace of Fifa, the global soccer superpower behind the month-long tournament.

For Ms Duman the omission is not odd, but deliberate. "This is a Fifa-free zone," she says with a broad smile. "Fifa's tight grip on everything to do with the World Cup is extreme, so it's good to offer fans an alternative," says Ms Duman, who turned her love of football into a business idea when she opened the shop last year.

And the shop – already popular with fans from Berlin via Barcelona to Brazil – is not the only project to try to escape the clutches of the Fifa "machine", as insiders call the business nexus that links the world football body with its top sponsors, including Coca-Cola and McDonald's.

Fifa remains the tournament's dominant force, yet more than at previous World Cups, initiatives this year run by small companies, fans and city authorities are providing a bridge between local cultures and the global world of football – and one built often without Fifa's supervision.

This trend can be traced partly to Fifa's own



Fifa-free zone: Tülin Duman shows some of her football memorabilia at her shop in Berlin, where she offers fans 'alternative stock'

difficulties. For instance, Germany's top court ruled in April against the association's efforts to ban dozens of non-sponsors from advertising with the words "World Cup".

In addition, while Germany's 12 World Cup stadiums provide exclusive advertising rights to sponsors, Fifa's own ticketing strategy – favouring big business over ordinary fans – has damped the interest of many supporters in trying to get tickets.

Instead, watching matches alongside tens of thousands of other fans on huge television screens in town squares has become the tournament's most popular pastime.

Since it began 10 days ago these "public viewing" initiatives, run by city

authorities and fan projects across Germany, have become good-spirited melting pots of local and foreign fans, many wearing their team colours.

Fifa is organising some of these in the 12 match venue

'Fifa's tight grip on everything to do with the World Cup is extreme'

cities, but is barely present at the hundreds of others. One such public viewing location near Ms Duman's shop combines live matches with cabaret performances, while others among the 20 such Berlin venues feature

live music and literature readings.

The million fans visiting Germany this month are catered for in other ways too. Small businesses are renting rooms in private houses to those without a hotel, and fan groups have erected city centre information booths for disorientated visitors.

Taking a break from helping some Sweden supporters, Marco Meyer, a volunteer at one of Berlin's booths explains that being seen as separate from Fifa is important.

A student when he is not watching football, Mr Meyer says that dealing with fans' problems – ranging from lost wallets to lost friends – is on a no-cost basis. "The whole idea of the project is to be totally non-commercial".

Visiting fans appreciate this. Eating an open-air breakfast at a temporary World Cup campsite near Berlin's main station, Natalia Guerrero, a 21-year-old Ecuador fan, is exuberant about the "very welcoming Germans" she has met.

At the neighbouring table Kgeil Erlandsson, 55, from Sweden is equally positive about Berlin (the campsite is a city-run project) but less so about Fifa. He is travelling with five teenagers, and says "our contact with Fifa has been rather negative; we've tried hard to get match tickets but with no success".

Such complaints aside, Fifa officially welcomes the blossoming of initiatives beyond its reach, arguing they reflect the "unifying power of this global sport".

Yet apparently the need to backing a German association initiative to reduce the tournament's environmental impact.

Back at the campsite, 32-year-old German Marko Michaelis says "it's only as a globalised football needs to attract sponsors to run mega-tournaments".

"Yet for us fans things are more important," he says, recalling an evening last week in Leipzig, swapping songs with supporters of several other teams or without Fifa, sentiment shopkeeper Tülin Duman and many football fans worldwide.

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