

Host nations should be made to qualify

London

Appropriately for the nation where Sigmund Freud spent much of his working life, Austria is displaying a complex psychological response to the task of co-hosting Euro 2008 with Switzerland.

For all those fans seemingly delighted to be staging the event there are plenty more naysayers anguishing about the right of Austria, 92nd in the Fifa rankings, to stage the tournament.

An online petition has even urged Austria's national side to withdraw from the tournament, arguing that "it cannot be denied: the performance of the Austrian team is an insult to your sense of aesthetics as well as to what you expect from this sport".

Austrian graphic designer Stefanie Schoeffmann has also produced a range of clothing bearing the slogan "hosted by losers", a less than upbeat take on the official "hosted by friends" tournament theme.

Gary Lineker and Fernando Torres

But isn't it time that, in the 21st century, the hosts of major tournaments should be made to qualify like everyone else? And I say that in the knowledge that England are bidding to stage the World Cup in 2018.

France were the last host nation to win a European Championship in 1984, though Euro 2004 hosts Portugal reached the final before losing to Greece.

Gary Lineker thinks the Darwinian view of hosts having to qualify is nothing short of heresy and put me right in no uncertain terms when I interviewed him, telling me that big competitions need the guaranteed participation of host countries, arguing that their involvement gives these tournaments an extra special ingredient.

Far from me to disagree with an England legend, but I remain unconvinced that interest in Euro 2008 would have been diluted should Switzerland and Austria not have been taking part.

More to the point, I don't think Swiss and Austrian fans would have been deterred from buying tickets to watch some of the world's best players just because their own teams had missed out.

It is estimated some six million fans will descend on Switzerland and Austria over the next few weeks, a further indication of the huge demand for these tournaments and why the Swiss and Austrian economies will enjoy a welcome filip through tourism.

Given Austria's lowly Fifa ranking, below those football powerhouses of Guatemala and Mozambique, their enforced two-year competitive sabbatical could be viewed as nothing short of disastrous as far as their hopes go. In 2007, they endured a nine-game winless streak. Would that have been the case had they been playing competitive football rather than friendly matches?

I spoke to Dr Simon Chadwick, professor of Sport Business Strategy and Marketing at Coventry University, about the idea of mandatory qualification.



While agreeing with Lineker's view that hosts should be allowed to qualify automatically, he suggested an even more radical solution to the idea of democratising international football.

He would like to see nations like England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain excluded from hosting future tournaments, with these competitions awarded to smaller countries or co-hosted by nations like Latvia and Lithuania.

And if countries are unable financially to host European Championships, Uefa and the bigger nations should subsidise them.

That's not all, Professor Chadwick also feels the bigger nations should play each other more in the qualification process, thereby allowing allowing smaller ones to progress to the finals.

It's an interesting idea, but what do you think?

John Sinnott is a senior broadcast journalist at BBC Sport Interactive. Please check our FAQs if you have any questions.