

Indian gains impetus in bid to take over at Blackburn

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An Indian entrepreneur has stepped up his efforts to buy Blackburn Rovers by enlisting the support of one of European football's marketing pioneers.

Jean-Claude Darmon, a multi-millionaire sports rights specialist and grandee of the French business scene, has joined a bid by Ahsan Ali Syed, the president and founder of Western Gulf Advisory, an investment firm with offices in Bahrain and Switzerland.

A sports industry veteran, Darmon will initially advise Ali's negotiating team, which hopes to conclude a deal with the trustees of Jack Walker's estate by the end of the month.

If the bid is successful, he will develop a commercial strategy for the loss-making club, who have struggled since winning the Premier League in 1995. However, he would not be involved in the day-to-day operation.

Algerian-born Darmon, who was formerly chairman of Sportfive, one of the world's largest sports marketing groups, has been heavily involved in the finances of French football since the late 1960s and event management in sports such as rugby and boxing.

Darmon's eponymous company handled promotional work for 18 of the top French 20 clubs, having identified that there was little advertising activity at club level in France beyond perimeter hoarding.

Ali, a qualified lawyer whose *modus operandi* involves him investing in

already well-managed businesses, is the latest in a line of foreign suitors for Premier League clubs.

It is understood that he wants to invest in Blackburn's long-term future with a potential £300 million injection of his family wealth, which traces its origins to the East India Company. He would need first to clear the club's debt of £20 million and buy out the Walker family.

Last season Blackburn reported a loss of £6.5 million on revenues of £50.9 million and they have one of the largest wage-to-turnover ratios in the Premier League at 90 per cent. The Walker family has made clear its unwillingness to underwrite continued losses and the club have been up for sale for two years.

Ali, 36, whose company manages assets worth £8 billion, does not expect to see a return on his investment for at least five years.

Some money will be available to buy players, although any takeover would not be completed before the close of the present transfer window, but Ali is said to have a particular interest in expanding the academy at Ewood Park to develop English footballing talent.

He also wants to retain the club's existing management, including Sam Allardyce, the manager, preferring to be a financial partner rather than an active owner.

WGA has made a formal approach to Rothschild, the club's advisers. Ali's bid follows a previous expression of interest from Saurin Shah, a fellow Indian, who was keen to tap into Blackburn's large Asian community.



Darmon's influence could give impetus to Syed's ambitions