

## Sport and the Citizen

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**There are many values that sport can underscore or promote. Teamwork, fair play, respect for rules and so on, but in a crucial area, there is a value sport can – and arguably must – learn from civil society: democracy.**

The paper focuses on spectator team sport for two reasons: that spectator team sports provide an opportunity for long-term affinity and affiliation that individual sports do not, and that spectator sports are dependent on a regular consumption. This ability to maintain a longstanding relationship with a team is what defines the sports club.

### Volunteer/amateur vs spectator/professional sport

In volunteer-run sport, a volunteer has the very important power: to cease to volunteer. This informal power underscores the rights that statutes governing a sport may give participants and together, these formal and informal rights ensure that the direction a particular sport takes is guided by and in the interests of its participants. This is not the case with professional or semi-professional sports which depend on incomes from paying consumers to operate the sport at that level, paying for participants, administrators, facilities costs and so on, which of course have been augmented in the last 30 years by broadcasting revenues. While the roots of the spectator sport's culture have been called the "democratic phase" (1.) where spectators were the actual members of the clubs they supported and /or participated in, professional and semi-professional spectator sport's culture and traditions as we know it today in most parts is a development of the commercialisation and professionalisation of sport. With the increasing number of football clubs being incorporated into limited companies the number of fans participating or voluntarily engaged in the governance structure of their clubs is declining. The "democratic phase" is over, at least in most places.

The current phase of football governance could be called "dictatorial" or "authoritarian", since single owners or small groups of shareholders (the identities of whom can remain shrouded) run many clubs. Clubs

are run as if an ordinary private enterprise. Even so, at the level of governance of sport, the democratic structure is maintained. Clubs join federations on a regional or national level, and they elect the officers governing that sport in that particular area. This voluntary governance model has survived – albeit uncomfortably – the transition to professionalised mass-spectator sports. However, the missing dimension is that unlike



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in participation or volunteer sports, a crucial stakeholder is excluded from a formal role – the supporter. Not only does this render the resulting governance structures somewhat illegitimate, it makes the club and sporting structure less open to accountability and therefore more likely to suffer from poor performance, inefficiency and corruption. In short, there is no-one to act as a check and balance on club owners and executives, and this close pool of recruitment also effects the quality of accountability at the level of the sports governing bodies. It also affects the recruitment pool for senior officials, leading to noted trend for sports governing bodies – as opposed to their participants – to not reflect the diversity found in their societies.

### Team sports and identity

A crucial dimension of the relationship stems from the identification of the supporter with their team. Whilst some sports – Formula 1, cycling – have a dual function with individuals competing under a team banner, this paper argues that for the most part, teams are peripheral rather than central. Ferrari's tifosi aside, examples of teams having loyal followers who support the individuals who happen to perform under that banner are few and far between. As support is based on the individual competitor, the lifespan of support for that individual is related to the length of that sportsperson's career and ceases when they retire.

1. See Dietrich Schulze-Marmeling: Wir holen uns das Spiel zurueck. Fans und Fussball, Goettingen 1995.

2. See Albert O. Hirschman. 1970. Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

A crucial factor driving the relationship in team sports is the ability to identify with a concept – the club – which pre-exists identification with the individual sportspeople who perform for it, and as

a result, support of the club as concept, as opposed to club as collection of players – can be a lifelong relationship which can form a plank of one's identity. In contrast to normal life, where we change our consumer habits if

we're not happy with a service or a product, fans are known for their loyalty regardless of the quality.

But, because fans do not exercise their consumer choices, clubs have little incentive to listen to their fans in the way in which other businesses would listen to its customers if its sales started declining. The normal way in which companies and consumers give and receive feedback in a market does not operate in spectator sports because normal consumer behaviour is precluded by fans' loyalty to the team.

### Exit, Voice and Loyalty

The choices for individuals in response to 'organizational decline' was mapped by Albert Hirschmann in 'Exit Voice and Loyalty'. He argued that consumers exit a relationship with a company and either the company understand this message and reformed, or the company fails. In politics, exit from the polity is not possible for most people, and so instead citizens have a voice to compensate the ability to exit. Spectator sport suffer from having neither the consumer response that leads to exit, nor the civil structures that give a voice in compensation (2) .

To identify the value of fans we need to understand what the value of a club is. A football club is more than the team on the pitch or its stadium. As much as the financial capital fans and others bring, any football club has an enormous reserve of social capital, which is invested by generations of supporters in the community the club plays in. In other words, the players and the fans .

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write the history of the club – they make the club.

Indeed, whilst in most countries the club takes the form of a private enterprise, their public character makes them far more redolent of governments and public authorities.

### The value of fans

In Germany sports governing bodies understand and preserve the social capital fans bring to the enterprise. Sports clubs are run by their members. The German Football Association (DFB) (3) and the German League Association (DFL) for example respect and even promote actively the deeply-rooted culture of members associations, participation and volunteering in football to help strengthening

the governance of football clubs especially the grass roots. Both the DFL and DFB list among their main responsibilities to preserve and promote volunteer sports structures to promote good governance in

football. This is maintained even at the professional level, since the DFL has a regulation that ensures that at least 51% of the voting control in professional club must reside with a *verein*, a volunteer association of supporters.

In contrast, most football clubs in Spain are run as limited companies without any form of supporter involvement (4). A growing number of fans have become increasingly critical with the way clubs are run and actively promote the return to the days where all clubs were members associations and they could be actively involved in running them (5).

These two very brief examples show that in professional football in Germany members/volunteers are part of the governance of the clubs they support, involved in decision making processes, while fans of clubs run like any other business, like most Spanish clubs, are mistakenly treated as consumers,

disregarding the particular relationship of affinity and identity and their value for the governance of clubs.

### Supporters Direct

The 'democratic deficit' in football in the UK was addressed in 2000 when, at the instigation of the UK Government, Supporters Direct was founded. They assist supporters who want to actively participate in the governance structures of their clubs. They have helped form over 150 participative volunteer supporters groups across the UK in these sports, which have been joined by over 120,000 responsible sports fans in the UK alone.

The success of this initiative informed elements of the European Sports Review (6) and European Parliament's Report (7) on the

future of professional football in Europe, where the importance of the initiative was cited. Following this, UEFA funded a research project which identified that there were organised groups of fans in many European countries who wished to

become involved (voluntarily as well as professionally) in the governance structures of their clubs and who needed advice and support to assist them with these goals. Following from this report Supporters Direct (as experts in ownership and governance)

have extended their services across Europe, liaise with UEFA who have funded our work so far, the European Commission and other pan-European bodies, Leagues and National Football Associations. Supporters groups in 14 countries including Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Israel promote voluntary democratic sports structures with a focus on active participation. As outlined above, supporters are the major long-term 'cultural investors' in spectator sports, a huge force of (potential) volunteers and active citizens who should not be sidelined but should be represented and actively involved in the governance of the clubs they support.

In order to close the growing gap between the clubs and the spectators, we have to understand that fans are citizens, whose responsible and democratic involvement is not just beneficial to the governance of the clubs they support but also to the communities they live and play in and society as a whole. We also believe that through addressing the democratic deficit in football, we will also provide an arena to reinforce democratic values. Effective democracy requires citizens to recognise their collective identity as citizens and to work together to find solutions that are based not on personal satisfaction, but accommodation and common interest. These 'democratic skills' are threatened by the individualisation promoted by consumer society and so we believe that democratising football will help citizens learn these skills which will in turn help cement democracy within Europe.



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[www.supporters-direct.org](http://www.supporters-direct.org)

3. See Aktion Ehrenamt;

([http://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/Assets/pdf/ae\\_image.pdf](http://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/Assets/pdf/ae_image.pdf))

4. Except FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, Bilbao and Osasuna, which take the legal form of members associations

5. See Federación de Accionistas y Socios del Fútbol Español – FASFE (<http://www.fasfe.org>).

6. See José Luis Arnaut: Independent European Sports review, (Council of Europe) 2006, ([http://www.independentfootballreview.com/doc/Full\\_Report\\_EN.pdf](http://www.independentfootballreview.com/doc/Full_Report_EN.pdf)).

7. See Ivo Belet: The future of professional football in Europe, European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education, 2006, ([http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/pr/631/631110/631110en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/pr/631/631110/631110en.pdf)).