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Football and politics: the politics of football

Martin J. Power, Paul Widdop, Dan Parnell, James Carr and Stephen R. Millar

How often have we heard the old adage that sport and politics should not mix? Indeed, the New Year was only days old when the International Committee of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games warned that athletes engaging in political acts of protest would face disciplinary action (Guardian, 2020). The editors of this special issue of *Managing Sport and Leisure* insist that sport has always been political. Taking Association Football as its focus, this special issue is devoted to “Football and (P)politics” and was inspired by the Football, Politics and Popular Culture conference held at the University of Limerick in November 2016. While capital “P”, Politics is concerned with government, world trade agreements and global capitalism, politics with a small “p” focuses on the everyday micro-politics of life and our everyday decisions. This is not to suggest that politics has nothing to do with Politics. Indeed, as Janks (2012, p. 150) outlines:

the socio-historical and economic contexts in which we live produce different conditions of possibility and constraint that we all have to negotiate as meaningfully as we can. While the social constructs who we are, so do we construct the social. This dialectic relationship is fluid and dynamic, creating possibilities for social action and change.

Football has been inscribed with tribalism, protest, military propaganda, political symbols and modes of masculinity since its inception. Through its local connections and global appeal, football is an important platform for sociopolitical distinction and regulation. Football also offers a unique space for the public performance of identity, both for hegemonic groups attempting to demarcate normative cultural values, and alternative and diasporic groups who use football to critique the status quo and celebrate their alterity (Millar, 2016). In recent years, political actors have capitalised on football for both social mobilisation and political propaganda, which often evidence a network of relationships between football, politics and society (Dunning, Murphy, & Waddington, 2002; Spaaij, De Waele, Gibril, & Gloriovova, 2018).

Clubs, players and fans are enmeshed within politics. Clubs have been formed as a result of population upheavals and migration; have been associated with ethno-national and religious communities, and political ideologies and parties. In the contemporary context, football continues to be tied to political events and symbols. The continuing migration of people seeking refuge in Europe has seen football supporters raise their voices both in support of and opposition to such migration (Spaaij, 2015). Football has been a mobiliser for various offshoots of populism, particularly those from the far right of the political spectrum in more recent years. Racism and anti-racism practices play out on and off the pitch (Cleland, 2014; Cleland & Cashmore, 2016; Doidge, 2018). Broader contemporary international political controversies or the wearing of “political” symbols continue to spark controversy among player, fan and political communities alike (See for example Kelly,

2013, 2016). Playing, and participating in football as a fan, are also welcome forms of escapism from social isolation, with ongoing debates examining the rationale for investment in sport as a mechanism to promote social inclusion (see Coalter, 2015; Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Parnell & Richardson, 2014; Parnell, Pringle, Widdop, & Zwolinsky, 2015; Rich, Misener, & Dubeau, 2015; Schailée, Theeboom, & Van Cauwenberg, 2015; Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2014).

On a football pitch in Yugoslavia on 13 May 1990, one iconic moment, provided a symbolic example of these potent bedfellows. Against the backdrop of Croats voting for independence, and a riot between the Bad Blue Boys Ultras of Dinamo Zagreb and the Delije Ultras of Crvena Zvezda (Red Star Belgrade), the Zagreb captain and future star of European heavyweights' AC Milan, Zvonimir Boban, kicked a police officer who had allegedly been mistreating Croatian fans. Some continue to argue that this moment symbolically marked the end of Yugoslavia, with a devastating Civil War following later and many of the protagonists on that day swapping the terraces for the front lines (see Milekic, 2016 for an interesting discussion of this event).

There is a growing body of literature exploring the management, marketing, and governance of association football. A number of dedicated texts have captured the growth in this area and represent an extensive body of research undertaken by contributing scholars, including the Routledge Handbook of Football Studies (Hughson, Moore, Spaaij, & Maguire, 2016), the Routledge Handbook of Football Business and Management (Chadwick, Parnell, Widdop, & Anagnostopoulos, 2018) and the Research Handbook on Sport Governance (Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2019). Indeed, recent articles within *Managing Sport and Leisure* include a variety of football-based articles including an examination of footballs global trade network (Bond, Widdop, & Chadwick, 2018), the education pathways for football managers (Morrow & Howieson, 2018) and governance in national football federations (Finnegan, McArdle, Littlewood, & Richardson, 2018), amongst others. The Routledge book series *Critical Research in Football* which is associated with The Football Collective has received unprecedented interest and is proving a valuable outlet for scholars from many disciplines to disseminate research findings and influence the football community. The first publication in the series covered fan activism, protest and politics in post-socialist Croatia (Hodges, 2018) and the most recent one examines the development of women's soccer in Germany (Meier, 2020). The breadth of topics featured and methodologies deployed in football research and scholarship is an exciting time for the field and also prompts us to continue to reflect, understand and inform future research.

The purpose of this special issue of *Managing Sport and Leisure* is to provoke a broad, interdisciplinary, and critical discussion about (P)olitics and / of Association Football (as a form of entertainment, recreational or occupational activity). To move the scholarship in these areas forward, the SI editors encouraged submissions from scholars both inside and outside of the sport management domain. Our call for papers asked scholars

to submit papers that spoke to the management, marketing or governance of association football at elite, community and grassroots levels in the context of migration, racism, ethno-national formation, conflict (Ethno-national, Ideological, Sectarian, class etc.), identities, gender, and fan culture. Our initial focus was simple: What is the relationship between football and (P)politics? We asked authors to consider the ways in which we might explore that relationship in a given time and place, and in what ways we could productively talk about, theorise, and assess it. The eight articles presented in this Special Issue respond in various ways to these questions.

The first three articles examine football and Politics. Joel Rookwood's "The politics of ConIFA: Organising and managing international football events for unrecognised countries" (2020) offers unique insights on the politics and impact of three "international" football tournaments which were organised for "countries" not recognised by football's established governing bodies, and the role of the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (ConIFA) in wider mega-event contexts.

Jon Darts' (2020) article demonstrates how sport and national identity are manifest in Palestinian football and how football is being used as a mechanism to draw attention to the struggle for a Palestinian state. In essence the article attempts to stimulate a discussion on the role that football plays for people living under occupation.

"The Premier League-Globalization nexus: notes on current trends, pressing issues and inter-linked '-ization' processes" by Ludvigsen (2020) examines how entwined processes of globalisation, commercialisation and securitisation continue to influence the ways in which football is organized, played and consumed in the English Premier League.

The Special Issue then shifts focus to the politics *of* football. Lee Tucker's (2020) "Football Capital: What is it and why is it important?" employs a predominantly Bourdieusian analysis to consider how male players from a Sunday league football club in the north-east of England accumulate and operationalise "Football Capital" through a diverse range of behaviours, competencies and connections to gain status and influence in this community.

Choluj, Gerard, and May (2020) examine how the increasing commercialisation of football has been impacted by the "Against Modern Football" (AMF) movement in Poland. In their Case Study of Legia Warsaw, they ultimately argue that the relationship between a football club and its Ultra-fans is both co- and inter-dependent, with each side impacting on how the other exists.

Daniel Torchia's (2020) article "Creating and Managing Community in a Community Football Club" explores how community is understood, made operational and managed at Football Club United of Manchester (FC United). The article clearly highlights how the utopian political goal of creating a community through the football club is repeatedly constrained by established standards, bureaucracy and managerialism.

In “More than a Club, More than a Game: The Case of Diverse City”, Carr and Power (2020) explore the politics of participation in football when that participation may be policed by community members monitoring behaviour(s) in accordance with the groups preferred norms. The article provides rich insights on issues relating to female participation in sport, particularly in an international context where securitised practices and discourses are discouraging the socio-civic participation of young Muslims.

Finally, Ahn and Cunningham (2020) examine the politics of gender in their paper “Standing on a Glass Cliff? A Case Study of FIFA’s Gender Initiatives”. Crucially, the authors address the practical and theoretical implications and future directions for women’s leadership in the sport. Their paper is timely in light of the chants of “equal pay” after the USA beat the Netherlands in the 2019 Women’s World Cup final.

We hope that this special edition expands upon the existing knowledge in this area and offers new materials for, and new approaches to, contemplating the intersection of association football and (P)olitics. In conclusion, we believe that this special issue will bring enhanced and renewed attention to football and the relationship it has with politics and society.

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