

## Unethical Practices and Illegal Payments: The Role of Agents in Professional Soccer in the UK and Ireland

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### Session 3: Research Presentation (25-minute)

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Using semi-structured tape-recorded interviews, the research reported here examines aspects of the relationship between professional soccer managers, players and players' agents. Central to an understanding of this relationship is an exploration of the recent shifting of power from clubs to players', and their agents. This paper will explore the central role that agents play in the contract negotiation process and the unethical side of agents behaviour. The central question at the heart of this paper looks at the network of interdependent relationships, and the shifting balances of power between managers, players and player's agents.

This paper will focus on the central role which agents play in professional soccer transfers and contract negotiations. More specifically it will examine the relationships between managers, agents and players. The role agents play in professional football is currently attracting considerable media debate, and numerous concerns have been identified. These concerns revolve around the informal methods of player recruitment employed by agents, the ease with which agent licenses are granted, and allegations concerning agents unethical and illegal business practices.

While the role of agents in professional football has attracted widespread media attention, there have been few systematic academic studies of agents. However, Roderick (2003) has documented the emergence of agents in professional football and explores the roles and duties agents play in the process of transferring from one club to another. Magee (1998, 2002) has identified the different types of agents operating in professional football and the role agents play in the recruitment of foreign players. Other, non-academic studies have identified the unethical and illegal business practices of agents (see for example; Bower, 2003). However, none of these studies explores fully the relationship between managers, players and agents. It is hoped that this paper will help fill this gap by contributing to our knowledge of the role agents play in professional football and the unethical and illegal practices employed by agents.

The role of agents in professional soccer is one aspect of a broader ongoing study into management in soccer. This broader study also investigates several other aspects of soccer management, including the recruitment and retention of managers, the ways in which managers recruit and retain players, loyalty, establishment and maintenance of discipline, and the competitive, media and other pressures on professional soccer club managers.

The research reported here was based on semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were players and managers who were either currently, or who had previously been, employed as professionals within the league structure in England and/or Ireland. Twenty-two players, eighteen managers and five agents were interviewed during the 2004-05 season. All five agents had represented both players and managers in England and Ireland. Of the twenty-two players who were interviewed, sixteen had had experience as full-time professionals with clubs in the English Premier League. Nine players had played at International level, two at full International and seven at U-21 level. Of the eighteen managers who were interviewed, eight had managed clubs in England and three of these were managing English clubs at the time of the interviews. Several interviewees had managed a national side.

The process for becoming a licensed players agent is relatively straightforward and surprisingly, there are no pre-requisite qualifications or experience required to obtain a players agent licence. It is estimated that '80 per cent of footballers employ agents to represent them in contract negotiations' (Roderick, 2003). Magee (2002) has observed that 'professional football was unprepared for the increased involvement of agents, their business approach, and their rapid centralisation in the transfer and contract negotiating processes'.

Roderick (2003) has explored the nature of the relationship between a player and his agent and suggests, 'agents close association with their clients, in terms of negotiating on their behalf and often in their absence, leaves open the possibility for shady maneuvering in relation to the way in which the players agents conduct their business'. While numerous concerns have been expressed relating to agents alleged unethical and illegal practices, our data confirms illegal payments were, and still are, common practice in professional football.

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More worrying are the difficulties of working with agents and the increased power which they now have in relation to clubs. Therefore, and despite doubts over their motives and their actions, it has become impossible for managers not to deal with certain agents, as failure to do so would result in the manager not securing the services of a particular player. The power of the agents forces managers into dealing with them if they wish to have the services of particular players. It is evident that agents have exploited this shift in players' bargaining power. Magee (2002) has argued that 'even though the player has gained significant control from the clubs in recent times, it is the agent who ultimately controls and potentially exploits the player'.

Agents have grasped a strong position in professional football which has resulted in a gradual weakening of not only the power of the clubs but also of the football authorities themselves. The lack of quality control over the granting of an agent's licence has attracted every type of individual where the quality of representation, leaves something to be desired. The accepted involvement of unlicensed agents points toward an unregulated system, as well as raising questions about the commitment of the football authorities to control transfer dealings. The power which agents have assumed leaves them in a position where, in some cases they can hold clubs to ransom, and also engage in unethical and illegal business practices.

### Bibliography

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