Sadism & socialisation of professional soccer players in the UK & Ireland

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Professional soccer is a relatively prestigious occupation where players are idealised as members of a "sacred profession" (Simpson, 1981). However, behind the scenes a different picture emerges. Roderick (2003: 92) has argued that workplace behaviours in professional football are more robust and masculine than in any other industry where "young players adopt deliberately or unconsciously, the mannerisms, attitudes and behaviours that they witness, experience or are reinforced at football clubs". Using semi-structured interviews with twenty-five professional soccer players, the research reported in this paper develops an understanding of the socialisation process in professional soccer. More specifically, this paper identifies intimidation, abuse and in some cases physical violence as aspects of the socialisation process of young professional soccer players.

Introduction: Professional soccer players have become contemporary heroes (Parker, 1995) and some -- like Beckham, Ronaldo and Zidane -- have achieved global awareness in terms of their media profile. The contemporary soccer star offers a complexity of images revealing celebrity lifestyles, the acquisition of immense wealth and varying moral attitudes (Lines, 2001: 291). However, Davies (1972) dispels many of the myths portrayed by the media concerning professional footballers' glamorous and affluent lifestyles. Given the widespread interest in the soccer player, it is strange that so little is really understood about their working lives or indeed how they become professional soccer players. What do we know about the processes that produce professional footballers? Such "cultural icons" it seems travel an inevitable path to fame and glory. However, as this paper will show, the path to becoming a professional soccer player is rarely so uncomplicated.

The question of where athletes come from and how they are produced has fascinated sports sociologists (Stevenson, 2002). Academic studies on the process of socialisation in sport have focused on international athletes and swimmers (Stevenson, 1990; 2002), rock climbers and rugby players (Donnelly & Young, 1988), professional hockey players (Robidoux, 2001) and bodybuilders and baseball players (Klein, 1986; 1999). However, few academic studies examine the socialisation process in professional soccer. While Gearing (1997) provides an insight into aspects of the culture of professional soccer players, Monk & Russell (2000: 74) identify the youth training culture in professional soccer typified by "authoritarian attitudes and domination".

Parker (1996) provides a revealing insight into the daily routine of young soccer apprentices, and examines features of masculine construction within the lives of a specific group of soccer apprentices. Useful though these studies are, none of them focuses on a particular aspect of the socialisation process in professional soccer; a process characterized by physical violence, abuse and intimidation.

Research methods: The research reported in this paper involved semi-structured interviews, with twenty-five professional soccer players. The interviewees were players who were either currently, or who had previously been, employed as professionals within the league structure in England and/or Ireland. Twenty-five players were interviewed between 2004-06. The playing careers of those interviewed lay between the extremes of outstanding professional success and more modest success. Some of the interviewees had played at international level, while others had spent their entire careers in the lower leagues. More specifically, of the twenty-five players who were interviewed, eighteen had had experience as full professionals with clubs in the English Premier League. In addition, eleven players had played at international level, four at full international level and nine at Under-21 level. The players ranged in age from 21-31.

Socialisation into 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. These include the recruitment and retention of managers, how managers recruit and retain players, club loyalty, the use of agents in soccer, and the competitive, media and other pressures on soccer club managers.

Discussion: The importance of developing a good attitude is impressed on young players from the moment they sign with a professional soccer club. When a young player signs a contract with a professional soccer club, he is socialised into, what in professional football are considered, appropriate values and attitudes. Parker (1996:48) suggests that one of the central tasks of club officials is to promote such attitudes among young apprentices. Parker states "these values include attitudes of obedience, collective ability and an ability to conform" and adoption of such values demonstrates to club coaches signs of their progress and personal maturity (1996:200). As a result, young players learn that it is meaningful for them to display a good professional attitude. Thus, players learn appropriate modes of thought and behaviour associated with their work, which become ingrained over time.
When a young player is seen to comply with appropriate attitudes and values, this quite often will generate increased favour in terms of managerial preference (Parker, 1996). Moreover, failure to develop a healthy professional attitude or accept such values may generate unfavorable reactions from their coaches and managers, and, in addition, players may be stigmatized and labeled as troublemakers. This whole notion of professional attitude holds specific importance in terms of how well young players are seen to accept aggressive masculine attitudes and values within professional soccer. This concerns the extent to which players accept, in the context of this paper, intimidation, physical violence and verbal abuse.

Conclusion: The acceptance of abuse and intimidation is directly related to players’ demonstration of appropriate behaviours and attitudes to their managers and coaches. Failure to accept such abuse and adopt appropriate behaviours can, for young players especially, threaten their career prospects. These values are embedded in professional football culture and for players they are unavoidable. While some players may experience fear, conformity to the informal but institutionalized norms may prevent them from displaying the real emotions they experience.

It is difficult to imagine any other modern western industry in which socialization tactics would involve abuse, intimidation and violence of this kind. Indeed, outside the relatively closed social world of professional soccer, these tactics would almost universally regard not just as bad management practice, but would almost certainly result in cases being brought to industrial tribunals and may also result in criminal prosecutions.

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