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Defining, Interpreting and Comparing Small Worlds of Football

An Introduction to the Aims and Objectives of this Special Issue

According to FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), 1,12 billion people worldwide saw the 2018 World Cup final in Russia between France and Croatia, including 884.37 million on linear TV and 231.82 million at public events and on digital platforms.¹ These statistics testify to the popularity of Association football globally. But how many people actually play the game organised under FIFA's capacious umbrella? FIFA's most recent estimate, dating from 2006, indicated that some 265 million people played football worldwide.² Only a small percentage of these players were professionals; the majority comprised those for whom the game was essentially a recreational pursuit and junior footballers.

Especially since the 1980s, football as media sport has developed into an outstanding everyday phenomenon with global reach and considerable potential for social mobilisation. It has generated a wealth of academic studies dealing with functions and consequences. Professional football brings people together and stimulates communication; it serves as a trajectory of identity and promotes integration; it might reduce conflicts between rich and poor; alternatively, it might reinforce them; sometimes football takes on the characteristics of a secular religion. Moreover, for many people, watching football and talking about football is not only the most significant triviality available to them and a source of cultural enrichment, but also a central point of reference, often the most meaningful part of their lives.

Far less attention has been paid to grassroots football in academic research, however, than to the professional game. The non-elite, recreational player at local level, especially if he or she is not integrated into the formal organisational structures of clubs and associations, is a marginal phenomenon, arguably little understood, even in the

1 Cf. "FIFA World Cup Russia™ Global broadcast and audience summary" available at FIFA website (www.fifa.com, last accessed 19 March, 2019).

2 Based on surveys (FIFA's Big Count) of the national professional associations, the following criteria were included in the survey: professional footballers, registered players over 18, registered young players under 18, futsal and beach soccer players, occasional football players, referees and officials.

football world. Accordingly, this special issue sets out to deal with a hitherto largely unexplored dimension of football culture.

This special issue is the first joint publication of the international research network *Small Worlds: Football at the Grassroots in a Comparative European and Global Perspective*. ‘Small Worlds’ was established by a group of German, British and Irish scholars in 2015 to facilitate research into football as experienced at the grassroots across Europe with the intention to embrace research perspectives derived from history, sociology and other social science disciplines. The main idea is to establish a discursive framework that will encourage transnational and interdisciplinary research on non-professional football and foster innovative approaches more generally.

Our starting point is the observation that in Europe and even globally, though football increasingly attracts the attention of cultural historians and social scientists, research to date has focused largely on the elite professional game. Those who participate at lower levels—from non-elite semi-professionals and elite amateurs to those for whom the game is essentially a form of recreation and/or community engagement—have been largely neglected. The intention here is to begin redressing this imbalance by bringing together cultural historians and social scientists with a mutual interest in grassroots football and what it means to those who play it or engage with it in other ways. Our contributors explore various aspects of the grassroots game as it is experienced in particular national contexts with a view to generating the kind of productive insights that will make comparative work possible in due course. The nations of Germany, England and Ireland lend themselves ideally to an analysis of the kind which this special issue is offering. Sport has occupied a central place in society and ideology in Germany, Britain and Ireland for at least 150 years, rooted in quite distinct national contexts and often displaying quite distinctive characteristics. Therefore, the main focus of this special issue will be on the meaning and relevance of football at non-elite levels for individuals, clubs and communities in Germany, England and Ireland. It seeks to locate the grassroots game in its various manifestations within a series of analytical historical and sociological frameworks that will facilitate the development of comparative perspectives. While sensitive to the specific cultural and historical contexts in which the game has developed in different European countries and the way in which these have shaped particular experiences, it is clear that we are engaging with a phenomenon whose dimensions are national and international rather than local and isolated.

With this in mind, the individual papers that comprise this collection deal, for instance, with the sources available for and the opportunities arising from research focusing on the history of grassroots football in England (Dilwyn Porter); with the development of grassroots football in an all-Ireland context using the example of the Donegal League from 1971–1996 (Conor Curran); with core activities, events and crises in the context of small worlds of German amateur football within an ethnographic and sociological framework (Dariusz Zifonun/Kristian Naglo); with the findings of an eth-

nographic and sociological study focused on the parents of pre-adolescent, non-professional soccer players in Germany (Jochem Kotthaus, Karsten Krampe, Nina Leicht, Sina-Marie Levenig, Sebastian Weste) and with how German non-professional players and sports journalists position themselves towards gay (especially male) players and homophobia in football (Nina Degele). Finally, a review article will give an overview of the latest developments in the field of football studies focusing on protest and social movements between the local and the global (Jürgen Mittag).

Defining, Interpreting and Comparing Small Worlds of Football

How did organised football at the grassroots emerge and develop in different national settings? What aims do local non-professional clubs in England, Ireland and Germany pursue and how do they adapt in order to achieve them? How do they seek to realise their potential *on and off the field* in their specific national and regional contexts? What are the main values guiding them? What similarities and differences are evident in different national contexts? These are some of the questions the contributions in this volume seek to tackle by applying different research strategies, especially using analytical frameworks from cultural history and the social sciences.

Small worlds of football in this context can simply indicate the realm of organised and non-organised non-professional football, and thus can define the world of (small) associations and clubs, or that of players, managers, functionaries, spectators and so on. Following a sociological approach, small worlds of football can also be conceptualized as social worlds. Social worlds in this sense are divided into different spheres of action and perception, each having its own stock of knowledge and exhibiting patterns and practices of social relations. Furthermore, they overlap, differentiate themselves, and rely on legitimating discourses for maintaining their boundaries and their own structures of relevance. In social worlds and sub-worlds, which, in most cases, centre on formal organisations, action revolves around a core activity—for instance playing football (see Zifonun/Naglo in this volume). Both ideas of small worlds are relevant in this special issue.

Moreover, one could justifiably claim that small worlds of football constitute ambivalent spaces of meaning. The ‘football world’ in this sense is a particularly interesting example as the representation or embodiment of a general social tendency: the dialectic between efficiency, optimisation and pressure (‘progress’; ‘keeping pace with’; ‘imitation’) on the one hand, and having ‘fun’ (under controlled conditions) on the other. In this specific and complex world, it is nearly impossible to differentiate between successful performance, discipline, concentration, recreation and fun, as having fun can be an achievement in itself in this rather regulated setting. This relates to the classical assumption that societal standards are increasingly internalised and creatively

transformed in different areas and a variety of ways. Accordingly, the social world of non-elite football is recognisable not only by its characteristic forms of institutionalisation and bureaucratization (clubs and associations) but also via the social world of club football and the emotional community surrounding it, built up since the late 19th century in some instances. In fact, it is constantly recreated and redefined by social actors through their actions.

The grassroots soccer experience, on account of its sheer complexity and the fact that it is so often embedded in a sense of local identity, challenges the idea of globalisation as one-dimensional process characterised by standardisation. However, at the same time, specific local practices and self-perceptions persist and continue to shape the way in which club life operates below the elite professional level, including values, traditions and myths, sometimes facilitating, sometimes moderating the impulse to modernize or re-organize. This argument stresses the idea that the global is a realm of the imagination which has to be interpreted and analysed at the local level. Therefore, our assumption is that, at the level of local non-elite clubs, similar perceptions exist transnationally, and that these perceptions are often influenced by the global world of professional football. This is why we are dealing with different approaches regarding histories, players, practices and activities, politics or perceptions of legitimacies and loyalties in our encompassing approach. Following on from this, our analysis, just as our research network, rests upon the idea of international comparison, even if it is not always explicit. We do not want to simply document individual phenomena, but to broaden our foundation to enable ourselves to carry out a more systematic analysis in future research. This involves a search for similarities and differences, patterns, parallels and analogies.

In addition to the spatial tension—between the local and the global—of grassroots football, particular attention must also be paid to the historical dimension and changes across time. Considering academic studies that have been published in recent years with a historical perspective, it can be stated that football is analysed in almost all contributions with regard to its constructive potential. In contrast to the older pioneer studies inspired by social history, recent contributions, located largely within the sphere of cultural history, emphasise the production and construction of identities or loyalties. From a cultural point of view, this approach is based on the premise that football, importantly, supplies a surface on which ideas and models are projected. Football produces and conveys socially constructed realities that are especially evident at the elite professional level of the game. This development is certainly most evident in relation to fans and supporters. Fan culture, which oscillates between support for one's own club and acts of violence or resentment against opponents, has been an essential component of the grassroots dimension of football for several decades. Recently, it has increasingly been directed against the exuberant commercialisation of football. While this topic has already been studied in detail, other matters of change, such as the increased emergence of unauthorised competitions, sport-related protests or

even the emergence of social movements within the game, are still scarcely examined. They are at least partially taken into account in this special issue. It becomes clear that an analysis of this dimension is not only about public institutions and associations, but that the social dimension of football is increasingly coming to the fore.

Analysing Small Worlds of Football: Contents of this Special Issue

As stated above, this volume seeks to contribute to the research on football at the grassroots in Europe by raising essential questions regarding the historical context and by offering case studies which combine theoretical/conceptual and empirical findings in an interdisciplinary context. Overall, the issue will help to create a basis for future research in the field of non-professional and recreational football.

In the first of two historical contributions, Dilwyn Porter indicates that there has been an abundance of research on the history of Association football in England since 1980, most of which has focused on the elite professional game and its followers. According to Porter, recreational football has been relatively neglected, though participant numbers suggest that it constituted—as it still does—a highly significant social and cultural phenomenon. While considering the scant historiography on English football at the grassroots, he suggests that this is a question that sports historians have yet to address systematically. In his overview of the research that has so far been carried out on English grassroots football, he critically assesses the sources already available to historians while giving due consideration to the possibilities of previously overlooked autobiographical and literary texts.

Conor Curran, a historian with a focus on association football in Ireland, analyses the development of Association football at grassroots level in County Donegal, a county lying in the north-west of the Republic of Ireland and bordering on Northern Ireland. He elaborates on soccer's rivalry with Gaelic football there and the impact of the nationalist Gaelic Athletic Association's 'ban' on its members taking part in what is regarded as 'foreign' games. In particular, he explores the extent to which the removal of the 'ban' in 1971 helped to ease co-operation between organisers of Gaelic and Association football. He shows that despite the impact of the Donegal League on soccer in the county, clubs in some areas still had a precarious existence while a number of villages failed to form any teams and for some, both player registration and regular participation were frequent problems.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, Dariusz Zifonun and Kristian Naglo argue in their joint paper that the management of paradoxes, contradiction and ambivalences, which are distinctive of amateur football, is the driving force re/constructing the field of amateur football and re/writing the boundaries to professional football. Using a glocalisation theory framework, they develop a micro-sociological approach

and distinguish between three different types of activities—core activities, crises, events—that are being performed in the small worlds of grassroots football. To illustrate this, they use three different case studies in the context of German amateur football: first of all, the idea of a specific footballing style developed by a local Turkish ethnic club; secondly, the endeavour of a local club to install a new artificial grass pitch; and finally, an international under-17 youth tournament. The case studies show that it is precisely the connection with professionalism that shapes the identity of the amateur world and that the unique ways of dealing with global forces allow for constructing locality.

Jochem Kotthaus and his team examine the ways in which adult spectators of youth sports teams perceive, understand, and react to their children's actions and interactions in the context of a soccer match. They assume that the spectators consist primarily of parents and that they will be emotionally attached to their children as well as being obliged to respect the rules and codes of conduct of amateur youth soccer. In their analysis, they present a phenomenological framework in which these contradictory commitments constitute 'enclaves', small cognitive clusters within the province of meaning of everyday life. Within this sociological framework, the group of researchers discuss the results of an ethnographic study on the parents of the players participating in youth soccer matches.

Nina Degele elaborates on how non-professional football participants talk about the power of connection (or separation) that takes place within football in terms of gender and sexuality. The main analysis of her paper focuses on how people position themselves towards gay (especially male) players and homophobia in football. In her sociological approach, she considers fundamental similarities between journalists' interviews and non-professional participants' group discussions. While the mainly non-professional players, in their interviews, cover a broad spectrum from showing appreciation towards gay football players to hidden and overt homophobia, German sport (football) journalists in broadcast, radio, print and online media acknowledged the acceptance of gay football players in society. As the paper shows, ambivalence between openness and exclusion can also be found in the way journalists position themselves. Degele states that, as a result, their attitude is shifting from tolerance towards acceptance—which articulates a similar yet different pattern of uncertainty and/or homophobia compared to non-professional participants.

In his review essay, Jürgen Mittag presents 10 publications, which he divides into three problem areas or genres. First of all, he considers text books and handbooks on the relationship between sport and politics that refer to the significance of protest and social movements in a larger context. Secondly, he defines specialised studies on football and sports-related protest, dealing with individual forms of protest as well as with specific stakeholders. Football supporters are given special attention in this context by the author. Thirdly, he examines illustrative problem areas, including employment relations in sport and the role of elites or sport officials. Interestingly, the questions

raised by the links between the local and global levels of sports form a central point of reference for all studies explored here.

This publication is based on an academic conference hosted by the German Sport University in September 2015 in Cologne. We would particularly like to thank all the speakers and authors for their willingness not only to present their own research to a critical audience for discussion at the conference, but also to subsequently update the manuscripts, some of them comprehensively. Special thanks are also due to those academics who took part in the conference as moderators or commentators and who made a considerable contribution to the in-depth discussion. Finally, our thanks also go to Vivian Strotmann (ISB, Bochum), who contributed to the publishing process of this special issue and supported the final editorial process considerably.

This volume presents both empirical contributions to our understanding of grassroots football and more provocative theoretical approaches. It is hoped that by making the findings of originally isolated studies fundamentally accessible, we may also provide a starting point for more interdisciplinary research on grassroots football.

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