

Labour Relations and Managerial Control in English Professional Football, 1890-1939

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In recent years, a considerable amount of attention has been paid by historians to the occupation of the professional sports person. Much of this work has focused on the relationship between the amateur and the professional, the socioeconomic background of professionals, and their wages and remuneration.¹ Yet the ways in which sporting clubs treated their employees dealt with labour disputes, and they tried to establish workplace compliance. The corresponding attitude and behaviour of players have been largely neglected. The perspectives provided by historians of labour and industrial relations, thus, have played little part in our understanding of the development of professional sport in Britain. This can be partly explained by a tendency to marginalize the industry. Quite simply, professional sport has been regarded as a separate, almost unique, world in which "normal" economic and administrative assumptions are inappropriate. Team sports especially have been seen as intrinsically unlike other industries: the firms (or clubs) were at the same time partners *and* competitors, they did not pursue profits above all else, and many were able to survive in the face of the sort of long-term losses and debts that would have meant bankruptcy for any other type of company.² Moreover, in the case of professional football, the retain-and-transfer system and the maximum wage rule have been regarded as somehow unique in British industrial relations by denying the player the basic freedom enjoyed by any other employee to leave his employment when he liked and sell his labour to the highest bidder.³

In common with broader historical interpretations of managerial activity, existing accounts of relations between sportsmen and their employers have tended to apply the notion of "paternalism" without sufficient

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explanation or conceptual precision.⁴ While there is little doubt that the notion of the individual capitalist “parent” looking after and caring for “his boys” has an obvious appeal in the environment of professional sport, it serves, nonetheless, to simplify the range and variety of managerial strategies that were available to employers in this as in other industries. By the turn of the century, the largely direct and personalized relationship between employers and workers that characterized nineteenth-century paternalism was increasingly being superseded in many industries by more formalized and bureaucratic labour strategies such as scientific management, collective bargaining, and the introduction of welfare schemes.⁵ Sport was certainly not immune to these developments. More than this, the emphasis on paternalism ignores the importance of central administrative bodies, such as the Football League, the Football Association, and the MCC in cricket, which assumed considerable direct and indirect control over the payment of professionals, the regulation of the labour market, and other aspects of capital-labour relations. In this context, the immutable picture of the paternal employer presiding over a deferential workforce is no more adequate as a complete explanation of labour relations in sport than in the older manufacturing or the emerging service industries.

The concept of workplace control has been a major preoccupation of labour historians, but it still remains rather vague and wide ranging. In the Marxist variant developed by Braverman, control at work was secured by employers through a gradual process of de-skilling, technological change and the sub-division of work tasks, which led to the subordination of the work-force.⁶ While this interpretation has been seriously criticized historically, particularly in the British context, other typologies of managerial control have been put forward that emphasize three distinct categories or stages of development: personal or simple control through the direct supervision of foremen and the use of basic forms of incentive payment, mechanical or technical control via machines or production methods, and administrative or bureaucratic control based on specified rules and procedures.⁷ The application of categories of this type to professional sport is problematic but not altogether inappropriate. While the physical environment of sports clubs, not to mention the nature of work undertaken and the production process, was clearly far removed from the factory or the shop floor, this does not mean to say that comparable managerial strategies were not developed. Sports employers were as concerned as other businessmen with the need to minimize costs and maximize economic efficiency, and one obvious way this could be achieved was through the control of the primary resource: labour.

This paper is intended to examine the relationship between management and workers in professional football, the most prominent and commercially-developed of English team sports. It will consider first the nature of the labour process and the type of payment systems developed by clubs both individually and collectively through the regulations of the central