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Disability Liaison Officers in European Football Clubs as incipient managerial position: English, German and Spanish Perspectives

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Background

Football clubs are confronted with the need to demonstrate that they are responsible to all their customers, including those with different types of impairments and disabilities. In Europe, it is estimated that more than 100 million people (around 10% of the population) have some form of impairment or disability (CAFÉ, 2010). Although not all of this population are necessarily football fans, a growing number of them regularly attend, either alone or accompanied, matches at European stadiums. The Deutsche Football League (DFL) estimate that ‘out of 800,000 wheelchair users living in Germany, 30,400 are interested in football’ (M Ruehmann, 2009, pers. comm., 18 December). According to the National (British) Association of Disabled Fans (NADS), there are approximately 30,000 people with disabilities attending matches regularly in the UK (NADS, 2009). These are reduced considerably when focusing on stadium attendance in Spain (Paramio et al, 2009). There are substantial differences in terms of accessibility at European stadiums being very poor or non-existent in countries like Spain, while there are good examples of accessible stadiums at the Premier and Bundesliga leagues. Still there are many challenges to be met that prevent a growing number of people with disabilities attending matches (Cook, 2009).

Attending matches at stadiums can be described as a multiphase experience as part of what we have described by the term ‘*holistic journey sequence approach*’ to the stadium (for further discussion see Paramio, Campos and Buraimo, 2010). A key figure in facilitating the interaction between fans with disabilities and fans and clubs is through having a qualified Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) at club level.

A strategy to address stadium accessibility, promotion and wider-equity issues for supporters with disabilities has been to appoint staff to the role of DLO within the clubs. From a sport management perspective this is a relatively new development that at this point not been previously examined. Hence this research attempted to address this gap by focusing on two cases from English football. This leads to the following research questions for;

- How many football clubs in the elite leagues of England, Spain and Germany have a DLO dealing with fans with disabilities?

- What are the specific competencies, responsibilities and management skills that a DLO at major club level requires?

Research design and data analysis

Primary data were collected by way of in-depth semi structured interviewed with two DLOs working at Premier League clubs. These interviews were followed by ongoing personal communications and in addition the staff responsible of accessibility issues in the Bundesliga. Additional information was gathered through 'live' observations by the authors during the stadium operations within the last year.

In conjunction, secondary sources included examining and analysing various annual reports from international and national organisations like the recently set up CAFE (Centre for Access to Football in Europe) and NADS. A content analysis of relevant websites for all Premier League, Bundesliga and Spanish Primera Division clubs was undertaken.

Results

From the analysis it is shown that those clubs that have a DLO can make a substantial impact to the overall experience of fans with all types of disabilities and is a critical issue for the management of any stadium. Furthermore, when looking to the number of DLO in the three leagues selected, we found that with some exceptions like Phil Downs at Manchester United that he was pioneer in 1989 or Alun Francis at Arsenal, this job has recently been set up at most of Premier League and all Bundesliga teams, but it is still a non-existent figure in Spanish teams. As a member of Bundesliga confirms, all Bundesliga clubs have a DLO.

As the English cases can reveal the DLO responsibility covers all aspects of the club's operations from the information given on websites to the accessibility of all executive areas. Among other qualifications, skills and experience, any DLO must possess good working knowledge of disability and understanding of any related legislation and how it relates to disabled football spectators.

Discussion and conclusions

From a management perspective, there is a need to share knowledge and experience across Europe about the role of DLO to provide good standards of accessibility on match and non match days to people with disabilities. As in other sectors where accessibility represents an emerging managerial issue, most football clubs should see the advantages of providing accessible environments to fans with disabilities in their venues, but also to a large fan base as the Manchester United case proves with over 2.000 fans with disabilities members.

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