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## MANIFESTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS IN AN UNFAMILIAR TERRAIN? INSIGHTS FROM CRICKET & RUGBY IN THE UAE

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Synopsis:

As the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 kicks off, the main purpose of this study is to explore the changing landscape of sports business/ marketing and/ or management in an environment unrenowned for the sports in question. While football has become one of the leading professional sports in the world, others such as Rugby and Cricket are not very far behind. While acknowledging that there are various other professional sports being targeted at a global audience – such as Formula One racing, Tennis, Golf, Basket Ball and Boxing amongst others, this study’s conceptual focus is on “Rugby” and “Cricket” (unfamiliar sports in the research context) and their implications for football – taken from the context of the Bosman Ruling. As hitherto silent players from the most unlikely places become more vociferous - a notable manifestation being the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this may be a time for reflection on the benefits and costs of the Bosman ruling in the sports marketing/management discourse.

Abstract:

### ABSTRACT & RESEARCH QUESTION

As the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 kicks off, the main purpose of this study is to explore the changing landscape of sports business/ marketing and/ or management in an environment unrenowned for the sports in question. While football has become one of the leading professional sports in the world, others such as Rugby and Cricket are not very far behind. While acknowledging that there are various other professional sports being targeted at a global audience – such as Formula One racing, Tennis, Golf, Basket Ball and Boxing amongst others, this study’s conceptual focus is on “Rugby” and “Cricket” (unfamiliar sports in the research context) and their implications for football – taken from the context of the Bosman Ruling. As hitherto silent players from the most unlikely places become more vociferous - a notable manifestation being the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this may be a time for reflection on the benefits and costs of the Bosman ruling in the sports marketing/management discourse.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND/ LITERATURE REVIEW

As already documented elsewhere (Madichie, 2009), professional sports has evolved from mere 'entertainment for spectators' to a service offering to four distinct groups' – (i) the fan-base marked by attendance levels, viewership, and purchase of team merchandise; (ii) television and other media conglomerates acquiring exclusive broadcasting rights; (iii) government and other private investments in construction of sports facilities; and (iv) sponsorships or outright team purchases by corporations and even governments' sovereign wealth funds. While the focus of previous studies in the target research context has been in the domain of football Middle East investments in team purchases (e.g. Manchester City), stadium naming rights (Etihad Stadium and Emirates Stadium), sponsorships (FC Barcelona-Qatar Airways) as well as hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Qatar) – other sports are surfacing in the region. Notable amongst these are developments in Cricket and Rugby where countries in the region do not have established national teams. What seems to be raising research questions are also the team composition of these yet-to-be popular sports in the region especially where immigrants and/ or foreign nationals have become key fodder for the grassroots initiative with a potential pipeline into national team. In the case of Cricket, the Pakistani diaspora are very well established in the UAE with Sharjah playing a central role in hosting the sport on a major scale. When it comes to Rugby, British Athletes are doing pretty much the same and the Dubai Rugby 7evens ground is the popular home of the sport at its height. Evidently, there are bound to be debates, and key research questions over team-cum-player eligibility to compete and especially when the grassroots initiative moves into the national team composition – (i) should this matter? (ii) Does this raise issues over the Bosman rule that applies in football? (iii) What can Cricket and Rugby teach or learn from football governance?

## METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

The conceptual study is based on observational research protocol including personal, participant observations, ethnography and non-participant observation based on key readings of media clips on sports in the UAE and wider Arabian Gulf region.

## RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The study observes and reports some of the trends, attitudes and behaviours, and changing configuration of sports participation, their management and/ or marketing and their potential implications. For example, it has been observed that key playmakers in the UAE national football team have been linked to transfers to European top sides following the recent third place at the AFC Asia Cup in Australia (e.g. Omar Abdulrahman, the UAE talisman, and Mabkhout who scored the opening goal against Japan on Friday 22 January 2015 under 10 minutes). Furthermore, there have been recent developments in the sport of Rugby where foreigners (i.e. UAE residents) have now become eligible to adorn the country's shirt and compete in the Hong Kong Asian Under-20s Sevens Rugby tournament in December 2014 (see Sport360, 19 December 2014). This raises questions over the eligibility criteria of team compositions under the Bosman rule that regulates football with implications as to what lessons might be learned from the sport of Rugby for application to football and

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vice versa.

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