

(SP) DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH? ABUSE, INTIMIDATION AND VIOLENCE AS ASPECTS OF MANAGERIAL CONTROL IN PROFESSIONAL SOCCER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

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Introduction

Perry has recently noted that, given the widespread interest in the soccer manager, 'it is strange that so little is really understood about him and his contemporary role' (Perry, 2000b: 62). It is certainly the case that the literature on the professional soccer club manager, though growing, remains rather limited. Carter (2006) has outlined the historical origins of soccer management and has provided a broad historical overview of the development of the role of the modern manager. Perry (2000a, 2000b) has examined the contemporary role of soccer managers, focussing in particular on their job roles and shared beliefs. Bolchever and Brady (2004) have sought to identify the characteristics of successful soccer managers in Britain, while other studies of soccer management have focused on coaching efficiency (Dawson et al., 2000; Dawson and Dobson, 2002) and team performance and managerial turnover (Audas et al., 1997, 1999, 2002). Useful though these studies are, none of them focuses directly on what is arguably the key relationship in soccer clubs: the relationship between managers and players. Roderick, (2003,2006) in his study of the careers of professional footballers, refers to relationships between managers and players in the context of such things as contracts and transfers, while Waddington et al., (1999) and Roderick et al., (2000) have examined aspects of the relationships between managers and players in the context of the management of injuries. But little is known about how relationships between club managers and players are managed on a day-to-day basis. It is hoped that this paper will help to fill this gap by contributing to our knowledge of the ways in which managers impose discipline on players.

The maintenance of club discipline in 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, including the recruitment and retention of managers, the ways in which managers recruit and retain players, club loyalty, the use of agents in soccer, and the competitive, media and other pressures on soccer club managers.

Methods

The research reported here was based on semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were players and managers who were either currently, or who had previously been, employed as professionals within the league structure in England and/or Ireland. Twenty-two players and eighteen managers were interviewed during the 2004-05 season. Of the twenty-two players who were interviewed, sixteen had had experience as full-time professionals with clubs in the English Premier League. Nine players had played at International level, two at full international level and seven at Under-21 level. Of the eighteen managers who were interviewed, eight had managed clubs in England and three of these were managing English clubs at the time of the interviews. Several interviewees had managed clubs in both England and Ireland and two interviewees had managed a national side.

Discussion

Club rules are normally drawn up and imposed on players by the manager without any discussion with the players or their trade union representative. Thus, both the rules and the

ways in which they are enforced, are left almost entirely to the discretion – or the whim – of the manager and therefore reflect, to some extent, each manager’s preferences, experiences and ‘pet hates’. It is argued that these techniques of managerial control reflect the origins of professional soccer in late Victorian England. This pattern of management has persisted in professional soccer long after it has been superseded in industrial relations more generally because, while the management of soccer clubs has involved increasing professionalization and bureaucratization, the role of the manager has proved remarkably resistant to these processes and, as a consequence, the authority of the team manager continues to be based on traditional forms of authoritarianism. This has allowed managers an unusually high degree of autonomy in defining their own role, while placing relatively few constraints on their authority in relation to players. Roderick has suggested that ‘workplace behaviours in professional football are more robust and masculine than in any other industry’. In not dissimilar fashion, Magee (cited in Roderick, 2003) suggests that players ‘need to be able to look after themselves’. None of our data lead us to disagree with these comments. Verbal abuse and intimidation, and sometimes the use, or threats, of physical violence, are all aspects of this ‘robust and masculine’ culture, and not just with respect to young players.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the ways in which disciplinary codes are established by managers and the sanctions, which are imposed on players for breaches of club discipline. The paper also highlights the arbitrary character of these codes and the central part played by intimidation and abuse, both verbal and physical, in maintaining discipline within clubs. It is difficult to imagine any other industry in which abuse, intimidation and violence of this kind would be regarded as legitimate instruments of managerial control; indeed, outside the relatively closed social world of professional football, these techniques would almost universally be regarded not just as bad management practice, but they would almost certainly result in cases being brought to industrial tribunals and would probably also result in criminal prosecutions. There is in professional football, no attempt to identify and disseminate the elements of a good practice model. As a consequence, both the rules themselves, and perhaps more importantly, the ways in which they are enforced, vary from club to club; indeed, within a club both the rules, and the methods of enforcement, may change when there is a change of manager.

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