

# INSTITUTIONAL MAINTENANCE AND COACH DISMISSALS IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

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## Aim

Most European professional football clubs (PFCs) operate with the overall objective of winning on the pitch (Kuper & Szymanski, 2011). As long as this objective is fulfilled, and the yearly deficit is limited to an acceptable level, the club management is usually satisfied. However, whenever a club finds itself in the opposite situation with a lot of defeats, the management normally feels obliged to act. Here, an often applied solution is to dismiss the coach (Paola & Scoppa, 2011). This view is supported by the fact that a total of 20 coaches have been dismissed in the best Danish league (Superligaen) over the last seven seasons, i.e. in average roughly three dismissals per season. Superligaen consists of 12 clubs, which means that approximately 25 percent of the clubs (in average) decide to change the coach each season. This seems like a relatively high number if coaches are compared to mid-level managers in other businesses. The popularity of changing the coach is perhaps not that surprising, since the coach is responsible for a number of strategic and operative decisions which affect team performance. On the other hand, changing the coach contains a paradox given that the effectuation of this action has proved itself ineffective as a means of creating the desired turnaround (Paola & Scoppa, 2011). The purpose of this study is to examine how this winning-logic is being maintained in (Danish) professional football, and to argue how deviation from this logic is a key factor when club managements decide to change the coach. To answer these questions, focus is put on how institutions can be seen as socially constructed and partly discursively enacted (Phillips et al, 2004). Here, two field actors (the Danish newspaper BT and the Danish football club Brøndby) are selected as empirical sources, as both organizations produce texts (newspaper articles and management accounts respectively) which can be used in the analyses on institutional maintenance.

## Theoretical background

Based on sociological new institutional theory, winning is argued to be the central rationality (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in the football field comprising a set of practices that provides logic of action for the clubs. According to Phillips et al (2004), institutional maintenance is often taken-for-granted in institutional analyses. For that reasons, focus is put on how the process of institutionalization can be empirically captured by applying discourse analysis (Phillips et al, 2004). Inspired by the work of Fairclough (1992), this study takes a dialectical view on discourse, and argues how the interplay between discursive practice and social practice is an important part of maintaining the winning-logic.

## Research methods

Two types of texts have been collected and analyzed representing discursive practice. First, 776 newspaper articles deriving from BT have been collected in order to examine how Brøndby has been articulated over a six season period. Secondly, management accounts written by the Brøndby management have been analyzed in order to examine how the club has articulated itself during the same period. This self-description is seen as an attempt to create an identity that tries to neutralize the external perception of the club. Finally, and in accordance with Fairclough's perspective, the analyzed discursive practice is connected to a social practice level, represented by actual actions conducted by the Brøndby management during the examined period.

## Results, discussion and implications

The analysis of discursive practice indicate that winning is central. There is a clear focus on results in BT's description, especially when Brøndby isn't winning. The importance of winning is also evident in Brøndby's self-description, even though they try to link poor results to bad luck and a readjustment phase. The fact that Brøndby defends the poor results reinforces the impression that winning is crucial. Simultaneously, on the social practice level, Brøndby conducts several actions which can be interpreted as responses to the negative image that is drawn by external actors like BT. The results thus indicate that the social space that make up the entire football field is structured through one dominating linguistic practice holding in place the sport-institution that constrain and enable club action, and make coach dismissals the preferred action in times of sporting failure.

The results of this study are believed, despite the Danish context, to be transferrable to other European contexts, as winning is a feature of professional football that transcends borders. However, similar studies in other European leagues are recommended. The results can be included in the preparation (e.g. educational programs) of coaches on how to tackle situations of sporting failure and external pressure.

## References

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