



The effect of the UEFA Champions League on commercialization and nationalization in building football club identity in 1990s Europe, and its effects on the future of competition.

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### **Abstract**

By the 1990s, changes in the structure of football clubs enabled rapid commercial growth in the industry, and added a new priority for many clubs to become economically profitable. Leading up to the same time, many clubs began marketing themselves as representations of the best that their nations had to offer, centralizing their identities around their home nations. The intersection between these two growing interests represented a problem for clubs for whom these two objectives were incompatible. This paper aims to offer an explanation of how the UEFA Champions League may have offered a solution for clubs to reconcile these two desires. This paper further aims to use this framework in order to add to existing literature regarding the current wedge between both club and fanbase due to the hegemony of top clubs existing at the top by arguing that the creation has more to do with the trickle-down effect of the repetitive style of football being played at the national league level rather than solely on competitive balance. Furthermore, this paper aims to apply this theory to understand the future the sport is heading towards through considering the recent protests against the European Super League.

### **Keywords**

Sports law, Football clubs, Nationalism, UEFA Champions League, Bundesliga, Premier League, La Liga, Bayern Munich, FC Barcelona, Real Madrid

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## Introduction

This paper aims to study the intersection between the growing commercial interests starting to emerge, with the creation of national and regional identities during the later half of the 20th century in Europe, through the lens of football, one of the most popular sports in Europe during this time. Using football as a lens to study this topic allows for a close study of what popular culture and sentiments were, as football often took an important place in many people's lives. It is important not to overstate the effects of the sport on the political and cultural stage at the time, but instead this paper aims to use football as a representation of the workings of this growing junction and how football clubs attempted to deal with the contradictions emerging from it. During the 1980s and 90s, the football world experienced a growth of commercialization and in tandem a growth of regiocentric marketing by clubs, creating a paradox for many clubs where their commercial interests did not necessarily lie with the regional identity they had tried to build, exemplified by the Bosman Ruling. The creation of the UEFA Champions League demonstrates a way that clubs attempted to reconcile this growing nexus between the two trends, as the competition allowed clubs to continue with their commercial interests by increasing their revenue and markets but also further themselves as a starring example of the strength of their particular region by showcasing their talents on the European stage. However, the growing gap between the Top 5 leagues and other European Leagues, exacerbated by the growing popularity, yet limited access of the Champions League, created a monopoly of the football market and European stage. The resulting homogenization of the Champions League, both in terms of participating club and style of football being

played, resulted in a growth of discontent with the top tier of football clubs and their fanbase, due to the often-competing interests of an attractive style of play yet a lack of risk-taking desire by the management of a club. The new European Super League proposal gathered scrutiny over its format's security advantages towards top clubs, yet this paper argues that the lesser risk of a loss of a key piece of revenue for many clubs may increase the variety in playing style and tactics during matches for the top tier of clubs due to that very lack of risk. However, the clubs who would be placed outside the top division would instead continue trending towards the same, indistinguishable style, due to the increased requirements to access the prizes and exposure of the top tier of clubs.

## The effects of increased commercialization

### *Television and stadiums*

In the 1980s and 90s, the expansion in the marketing of football increased both match attendance and television coverage of European football. At the same time, many clubs started being taken over and listing on the public stock market. Football clubs rose to prominence in the 1850s, as a group of members who typically paid a membership and were thus able to make decisions about the club, including electing its officials such as the president, and deciding when and where to make investments. Towards the latter half of the 20th century, however, as football grew, more and more clubs changed from amateur to professional. This switch, alongside the growing number of matches and attendance, led to the creation of limited liability companies for many clubs, to allow for raising capital quicker and at the same time reduce the risk involved in these still-growing organizations (1). It is important

to note at this point that some European leagues did have restrictions on the structure of their clubs, with the most famous example being Germany, whose clubs, until 1998, were still required to be made up of member associations as a non-profit, with any revenue generated being retained solely by the club (2). This trending switch in club structure quickly allowed investors and clubs to seize upon the growing business opportunity in football and take advantage of the new television rights, and the growing potential market it brought.

In the 1990s, the expansion of public television meant an increase in profits for clubs due to not only an increase in TV rights but also an increase in sponsor revenue, match-day viewership, and thus potential customers of merchandise and stadium tickets. Football broadcasting looked very different in the 70s and 80s. The idea of widespread broadcasting allowing fans to simply sit at home, seemed contradictory to the working-class roots of football. This thinking paired with clubs' worries that TV broadcasting would cut into match-day ticket sales, meant that typically only highlights were broadcast until 1983. In England, ITV and BBC reached a deal for the right to broadcast ten live games a season for 2 years for 5.2 million pounds. Negotiations regarding the contract renewal were tumultuous for the next few years, credited to the many factors not limited to the different interests of the top and bottom tier clubs, as well as competing broadcasters offering different terms. In 1992, Sky Sports saw an opportunity to beat out rivals ITV in the growing football market and made a 304 million pound bid for the right to broadcast 60 of the new Premier League's games a year. Sky took the opportunity to market the games as a full-hour activity, adding segments in between matches

for the host to not only keep talking about the matches and tactics but also to add humor and hold the audience's attention (3). In Germany, Leo Kirch bought the broadcasting rights of Bundesliga matches to air on his channel Sat.1 for ~ 260 million euros (4). In 1993, the rights for Serie A matches (and Coppa Italia) went for 67.5 million dollars a year on a three-year contract (5). In addition, Tele+, a subscription company, bought the rights to 28 games, or around one game a week, for 22.4 million euros (6). The realization by media companies of the enormous opportunities available in football broadcasting paired with clubs' realization that TV broadcasting was not significantly costly to their match-day revenue, caused a huge increase in money spent and made in this industry.

The increase in television revenue and the boost of popularity that it brought with it, allowed investors and clubs to feel more confident investing more money into their clubs, such as investments in stadium expansion. The Deloitte Football Money League, which compiles economic analysis of the top 20 football clubs each year, credits much of the growth of football to stadium developments: "The stadium development boom, started in the early 1990s in the UK, and most recently seen in Germany, has provided the perfect opportunity for clubs to enhance their revenues..." (7). For example, Manchester United's owner in the 1990s, Martin Edwards, invested ~ 60 million euros to bring United's stadium, Old Trafford, capacity up to ~ 67,000 seats from 44,000. While a chunk of the invested money was due to new regulations that required all English Stadiums to be all-seaters, much of the investment was also due to the knowledge that there was a very good chance of making money off the

investment. Even when the stadium was at a 55,000 capacity, it managed to bring in around 1.2 million euros each matchday, from ticket sales, and hospitality facilities (8). Even clubs that did not have the financial backing of private investors were able to invest more money into stadium expansion with the knowledge that the club could recoup the investment with the income the expansion would generate. One such example was Real Madrid, which at the time and continuing today, was not a traded company, meaning that it did not have the luxury of an owner who could invest their own money. Despite this, the club expanded its stadium, the Santiago Bernabeu, in 1992, raising its total capacity by ~ 22,00 seats, at a cost of ~5 million pesetas. The increase in stadium investment, while just one facet of the increased money ploughed into football, does represent a good example of how football was becoming an increasingly commercialized business (9), with sporting success becoming just one of the key issues for clubs to balance. There is little doubt on this topic throughout the literature, with the Deloitte Football Money League reporting that by 1996/7, the top 20 clubs were worth ~ 1.2 billion euros. The change in the structure of football clubs in the 1980s and 90s, allowed investors to take advantage of the increased popularity that new TV contracts brought. Investing millions of dollars into clubs was no longer seen as a risk but rather as a profitable investment.

#### *National and regional identity*

As commercialization grew, it paralleled a rise in clubs establishing and marketing themselves over their national identity. Five case studies of some of the biggest clubs at the time provide insight into the growing nexus between the economic and the regiocentric approach of the

football industry: Bayern Munich, Barcelona, Real Madrid, Manchester United, and AC Milan.

Bayern Munich, Germany's rekordmeister (record champions), prides itself in not only being the most successful German club but also staunchly Bavarian, the state of Germany that the club is based in and takes its name from. Bavaria has its own culture and traditions, for example, Oktoberfest, and it even has its own dialect, Bavarian (or Austro-Bavarian) (10). It is also important to note that Bavaria had a majority Catholic population, which caused resentment to build when it became part of the German Empire in the 19th century, due to the powerful Northern Protestants of Prussia. Although Bavaria had largely accepted being part of Germany in the 1990s, it did not lose its distinct regional characteristics. One of Bavaria's most traditional clothing, Lederhosen, was not commonly worn during the 1970s. In the 1980s and 90s, Lederhosen became a much more widespread outfit not only in Bavaria but in the Bayern team as well. While most of Bayern's players during the time were not from Bavaria, as Lederhosen became more popular within popular culture, Bayern began a tradition of photographing players regardless of whether they were from Bavaria, or from other nations (which would become much more important after the Bosman Ruling of 1995), in Lederhosen. Even in a move to portray Bayern as an increasingly worldwide club, Bayern started to tie the club's identity with German and Bavarian culture, by portraying one of the unifying features of all players as being involved and immersed in Bavarian culture (11). Furthermore, one of Bayern's pride during the 1970s and 80s, was that its success helped boost the reputation of the Bundesliga and therefore allowed German

football to keep its stars within Germany, by the appealing nature of Bayern. In 1986, Bayern manager Fritz Scherer promised then German National team manager Franz Beckenbauer that Bayern would concentrate on this objective. Bayern in the decades leading up to the 1990s would take increasing pride in being both the pride of and most successful club in Germany while staying true to its Bavarian roots.

More case studies can be found in La Liga (the first division of Spain). The two giants of Spanish football, Real Madrid FC and FC Barcelona, exemplify both Spanish and Catalan culture respectively, with matches between the two, dubbed “El Clasico”, often being portrayed as a clash of two regional and national identities. Much of the conflict between the two clubs stemmed from the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War where Francisco Franco would establish a dictatorship, and would repress much of the distinctive cultures of regions such as Catalonia and the Basque. Catalonia itself is a region of Spain located in the east of Spain, bordering France. Catalan’s distinct quality from the rest of Spain, including its Catalan language, led to the rise of Catalan Nationalism, even before Franco’s regime. It is important to note that while many Nationalists did believe that the Catalanian people were their own distinct nation, they mainly argued for autonomy within Spain rather than outright separation (12). However, many of Franco’s repressive policies towards Catalonia would only serve to heighten hostilities toward both his regime and Madrid, which represented to many in Catalonia, a symbol of Franco’s and his nationalist’ regime. The name “Futbol Club Barcelona” reflects the Catalanian language compared to the Castilian “Real Madrid Club

de Fútbol.” During Franco’s regime and occupation of Catalonia, Franco, aware of the threat of Catalan symbols as a spark of resistance, changed the club’s name to the Castilian “Club de Futbol Barcelona” (13). Furthermore, Barcelona’s badge created in 1910, proudly contained and continues to contain the yellow and red stripes of the Senyera, the Catalan flag in its top right corner, with the cross of St. George, the patron saint of Catalan, sitting right across (14). Franco, as previously mentioned, was aware of the potential the club had as a symbol of Catalan nationalism, and changed the badge to instead contain the Spanish flag (15). FC Barcelona’s importance as a Catalan symbol did not stop after 1975, just as Catalan nationalism did not end. The exiled president of Catalonia Josep Tarradellas returned from exile in 1977, and stated to the then president of the Club, Agusti Montel, “Our club is great because it always remained loyal to Catalonia”, firmly establishing Barcelona’s connection with Catalonia for the foreseeable future (16). Furthermore, the victory in 1979’s European Cup Winners’ Final against Germany’s Fortuna Dusseldorf, was a perfect example of Catalonia’s lasting connection with the club as it provided the perfect opportunity for supporters to show their Catalan pride openly, in stark contrast to the repression of the Franco Era (17).

On the other hand, Real Madrid has become a symbol of Spanish nationalism to many. In 1920, a club named Madrid FC changed its name to the present Real Madrid CF, when King Alfonso XIII gave the club the ‘Real’ or “Royal” title. This beginning cemented Madrid’s legacy as a symbol of Spanish Nationalism and Royalty. This legacy was furthered when Franco came to power in 1936,

as the club became his favorite. Not only was the club his favorite, Franco realized, just as the power of Barcelona was a symbol of Catalan nationalism, Real Madrid could become a symbol of Spanish unity under his dictatorship. There is evidence to show that Franco favored the club in order to ensure its success and thus the portrayal of Unified Spain as being successful as well. One instance that was reported, for example, was in 1943, when an official of Franco's regime entered the FC Barcelona player dressing room in an "El Classico" match, with a weapon, pressuring the players to lose the match, which they would go on to do 11-1. Madrid's legacy as a representation of Spain's elite and government, similar to Barcelona's as a representation of Catalanian nationalism, did not disappear after Franco's regime just as tensions between Spain and Catalonia did not (18). Real Madrid's badge continues to wear the crown symbol, which was bestowed on them (and a few other Spanish clubs) by King Alfonso XIII. Madrid visited Athletic Club after Franco's death. Athletic Club was a football club located in the Basque region, where like Catalonia, the region's distinct culture and language were suppressed during Franco's regime. Despite Franco's death, Madrid was received with banners of a Basque Racialist Terrorist group, the Euskadi ta Askatasuna ("Basque Homeland and Freedom") (19). It is important to note here, that as a radical group, the ETA and its terrorist actions did not represent the vast majority of Basque citizens. However, it does give support to the idea of Madrid's continuing conservative legacy as a representative of the old regime. When talking about these two football clubs' identities outside of the pitch, it is important to talk about their respective academies, who brought those Madrid and Catalan spirits onto the pitch as well. While

contemporary Real Madrid is known for its Galacticos policy of bringing in the brightest stars in all of Europe, the 1980s were a much different era for Madrid, centering on a core of 5 homegrown players called the Quinta del Buitre. This team would win 5 league titles and have unprecedented success in Europe, winning 2 UEFA Cups (not to be confused with the European Cup, discussed later). Barcelona similarly attributed much of its success, both back then and now, to its academy "La Masia", which was established in 1979. Similarly, to Real Madrid, one of Barcelona's most successful eras originated when academy graduates began to play a key role in the first team. During the early 1990s, Barcelona under Johan Cruyff would win 4 league titles and the European Cup, with La Masia graduates such as Pep Guardiola. The success of the homegrown contingent of these Madrid and Barcelona players lent itself to the idea that the values that each club stood for brought success, and more specifically that it could create its own success from simply recruiting local kids who followed the clubs and its ideas.

Matthew Taylor argues in his paper (20), that "...the Munich crash which has been viewed as precipitating the full transformation of Manchester United into the first 'national' club side in England..." The Munich crash referred to the tragedy that occurred when a plane carrying Manchester United's squad was traveling back home from a European match against Red Star Belgrade in 1958. The plane would tragically crash after snow fell on the runway, sabotaging the plane's take-off. 23 of the people on board the plane died, either at the scene of the crash or from their injuries. The squad that was on that plane was known as the "Busby Babes", a young, talented group of players, many of whom Taylor argued

represented the image of local working-class heroes, as most of them lived in Manchester, were trained by United since a young age, and remained closely connected with Manchester's social life, yet also represented a talented team who could defeat other top European teams (21). The establishment of the "Busby Babes" and Manchester United as a team that stayed connected to its local roots yet showed the best of what England offered on the European stage, did not end with the Munich Tragedy. One of the main reasons for this continuation was the flow of stars that would come out of Manchester United's squad. Munich Disaster survivor, Sir Bobby Charlton was a United and English hero, who not only captained England to its only World Cup victory but also represented working-class values of modesty, and loyalty. In the 1990s, Manchester United sold many key players such as Paul Ince and Mark Hughes, players who were widely popular with fans. These players were replaced with many academy graduates, who became known as the class of 92' or Fergie's Fledglings (after Alex Ferguson, the manager of United during that time). The Class included eventual United legends such as David Beckham, Paul Scholes, and Gary Neville. On most of the players' first appearances, a 3-1 defeat to Aston Villa, Alan Hansen, a commentator on the post-match show "Match of the Day", commented "You can't win anything with Kids'. Ferguson and this group would prove that statement wrong, with most of the class winning ~ 5-13 Premier League titles and a crowning jewel of the 1999 Champions League. Not only did United's dominance of English football at the time establish it as the face of English football, but the characterization of many United key players and squads as local heroes who embodied many working-class English traits boosted its reputation as an example of English

working success.

In Italy, AC Milan's owner Silvio Berlusconi exemplified how politics and football became intertwined, especially in the 80s and 90s. Berlusconi bought A.C Milan in 1986 and ran for Italian Prime Minister in 1994. Berlusconi was already a successful businessman at the time, with AC Milan being just one of his investments. Berlusconi ran for Prime Minister as the head of the Forza Italia party (whose name itself resembles more a football chant rather than a party name). The center-right party ran on the idea of bringing traditional middle-class values, such as private rights, and the importance of the family, back to Italy (22). In the time since Berlusconi had acquired Milan, the team had won 4 league titles and 3 European cups, leaving Berlusconi with a reasonable claim of his leadership potential. Berlusconi used his position at the club in order to bolster his reputation, tying together the identities of Italy and A.C Milan. In a campaign speech, he stated "I hope I will give the country a good government. Most of all a good team. For the moment I am celebrating the victory of Milan in the League. The Italians should follow the example set by my players..." (23). By using the club's name in his speech, he not only bought himself a sense of connection with many Italians, for whom football was a major part of their lives, but also tied Milan to his political success, and the success of Italy under his term. Berlusconi positioned his AC Milan as the embodiment of Italian success, through his reminder of the team's league victory, and used that position to support the idea that Italy could prosper just as AC Milan had if Italians would follow Berlusconi and his leadership, just as Milan's players did. As these brief case studies of these 5 clubs have shown, football clubs approaching the 1990s began

becoming identified with their home country and region, with that identification coming in various ways, be it politics, values, or culture.

### **The growing disconnect between club identity and Nationalism**

The growing commercialization of football offered many players and clubs a variety of opportunities to further their profit, which often conflicted with the growth of the connection between club's identities and their home nation and region. Due to the differing timelines of the professionalization of football in Europe, trends emerged of players beginning to move away from their home countries whose leagues were still amateur in order to pursue football as an economic career. For example, Matthew Taylor argues that "...Europe, for instance, one of the main migratory routes has historically been from the 'poorer' north to the 'richer' south...." He supports this argument using evidence such as Scandinavian players', whose domestic leagues were still amateur, migration to the south due to the well-paid contracts offered there (24). Clubs also started to view the transfer and player market as not just a way to ensure sporting success but also as an economic gamble in which they could win large sums of money. Many big-money purchases of players were not only due to their skills on the football pitch, but how much they could increase their market value to profit the club when they were sold as well as how much press the player would bring to the club. Roberto Baggio, the prized star of both Fiorentina and Italian football, transferred to Juventus in 1990, for a then world record fee of 10 million euros, which would cause a frenzy in Fiorentina's fanbase, who felt betrayed at their star leaving for the club who had just beaten them for the Scudetto (the Italian Championship). However, Baggio would later

claim that Fiorentina's president Flavio Pontello had pressured him to leave to receive the hefty transfer fee as Pontello's financial situation was fragile. Baggio was one of Italy's brightest stars and Fiorentina fans were no doubt proud to call him one of their own. Former Argentinian Fiorentina player Miguel Monntouri even commented that Baggio was "...more productive than Maradona. He is without a doubt the best number 10 in the league..." (25). Maradona, an Argentina player, who played for Napoli at that time was one of the brightest stars in Serie A, winning the Scudetto with Napoli in 1990. This praise of Baggio, therefore, would have written his name in Fiorentina fans' hearts, as not only a representation that they could attract the best of Serie A but also that they could do it without looking outside their very own Italy, establishing Fiorentina as a top Italian club. Baggio's transfer is just one example of the consequences of the growing commercialization of football's effects on how clubs' economic and transfer strategies were developed, and how those strategies could be in direct contention with clubs' established national and regional bases (26).

### *The transfer system and free trade*

In 1995, the football economic and player landscape radically changed due to the Bosman Ruling, making the ruling an essential component to truly understand the nexus between commercialization and nationalism in football. Before Jean-Marc Bosman's challenge to UEFA regarding the situation surrounding his contract and the transfer fees that he claimed were blocking him from leaving RFC Liège, the power of the transfer market was very much vested in the hands of clubs rather than players. In an attempt to keep leagues competitive by ensuring that clubs had

complete control over when they wanted to sell players, players were only allowed to switch clubs with the club's permission and the destination club paying a requested transfer fee regardless of whether the players' contracts had expired, by placing players on a retained list without offering a new contract. This retain-and-list policy was supported by the argument that smaller clubs, in the system, were ensured the ability to sell key players with the knowledge that they could replace them through the fees recuperated from the sale. Bosman's case wasn't the first to challenge the past transfer system: cases like *Radford v. Campbell* and *Kingaby v. Aston Villa FC*, brought challenges based on malicious intent rather than on the overall legality of the system (27). A more far-reaching decision was made in *Eastham v. Newcastle United FC*, where the Chancery Court ruled that the retained portion of the transfer system was in contention with free trade, rejecting the argument that the retaining system was the best way to ensure there was not a concentration of top players at the biggest clubs. While the court ruled that the retaining system was not justified, it believed that the rest of the transfer system was necessary to protect the interests of clubs.

Jean-Marc Bosman, a professional football player at RFC Liège, had just had his contract expire at the end of June 1990. Bosman was offered a new contract by Liège, with a significantly lower salary; Bosman rejected the offer and was instead placed on the transfer list with a transfer fee of over 11 million Bfrs. Bosman eventually reached an agreement with French club, US Dunkerque, and an agreement with the clubs followed. RFC Liège, however, did not believe that Dunkerque would follow through with the payment and therefore failed to ask the Belgian FA to send the transfer

certification to the French FA, resulting in the deal falling through and Bosman remaining at Liège, who would suspend him for the season, and leave him unable to find employment at other clubs. Bosman filed charges over both the legality of the transfer fees demanded over players whose contracts had expired as well as UEFA's 3+2 rule, which limited the number of foreign players a club could play during European competitions. The cases made their way to the European Court of Justice, who ruled, while referencing articles 48 of the Treaty of Rome, that "...It appears indeed correct that the professional footballers active in a football club are to be regarded as workers within the meaning of that provision. Therefore, on the subject of the 3 + 2 rule, The rules on foreign players are therefore incompatible with the prohibition of discrimination under Article 48(2)....": On the subject of transfer fees, it ruled that "...There is thus a clear restriction here on the right to freedom of movement, which is caught by Article 48...." (28).

The ruling of the 3 + 2 rule as well as the old transfer fee system posed a threat to clubs who at the time were actively trying to build their identity as a staple of national pride. Easing the movements of foreign players at a time of growing commercial interests meant a huge increase in foreign-born contingents in top clubs. In Germany, Bayern Munich's 1993/94 squad contained only 5 foreign players out of 24 members of the squad, with only 3 out of the 5 achieving more than 5 appearances (29). The number of foreign players did decrease in the 1996/97 season, with only 2 foreigners playing, but in 1999/00, the number drastically increased to 12. Bayern who prided themselves on a top club that would be able to keep German players within Germany now had to

deal with the exodus of many Germans to leagues such as Seria A, which offered much more lucrative contracts, and reconcile this with the previous promise of keeping German players within Germany. Furthermore, Bayern had to explain this failed promise in the context of an increasing foreign presence in its squad.

In Spain, FC Barcelona's 1993/94 squad had five foreign players while it grew to 10 in the 1996/97 season, and 14 in the 1999/00 season. Real Madrid's squad changed from containing just four foreigners in 1993/94, to 10 in 1996/96, and 15 in 1999/2000. Barcelona experienced a huge influx of Dutch talent and staff in the 1990s, with two famous Dutch Managers, Johan Cryuff and Louis Van Gall becoming managers in 1988 and 1997. Cryuff was a former Barcelona player and football icon, who was and still is viewed by many to have revolutionized the game. Cryuff's stint at Barcelona was extremely successful winning four league titles, and one Champions League: he did so by implementing his style of "Total Football" on the team, which eventually became a part of Barcelona's footballing identity. However, later in his stint, Cryuff fell out with President Nunez and was replaced with short-term manager Bobby Robson, who would make way after one year for Louis Van Gaal. Van Gal and Cryuff shared history and had differing opinions on how football should be played. Van Gaal brought in a host of Dutch stars, such as Patrick Kluyvert, as well as letting go of many Catalan players in the squad. Joaquin Roy in his study of the effects of the Bosman ruling on FC Barcelona, argued that Barcelona fans were willing to lose pieces of their Catalan identity through the addition of a sizable Dutch contingent in the squad in order to reach the same heights they had under Cryuff. Ultimately the same success did not

come and Van Gaal left the club in 2000, leaving a club that had seemed to lose a bit of its national identity from the replacement of Catalan players with Dutch talent made possible by the Bosman ruling (30).

For Real Madrid, the 1990s seemed to become more of a transition period from two very different eras, the Quinta del Buitre in the 1980s and the Galacticos in the early 2000s. As discussed before, the Quinta del Buitre was a group of homegrown players that led Madrid to one of its most successful eras. On the other hand, the Galacticos was an era where Real Madrid began focusing more on buying the biggest stars from all around the world, such as David Beckham, Zinedine Zidane, and Luis Figo. While most of this new era did not occur in the 1990s, it is still important to acknowledge this period in time as it was undoubtedly a result of the growing commercialization and Bosman Ruling in the 80s. These stars would not have been able to play on the same field prior to 1995, not only due to the foreign player requirements but also the vast sums of money needed to bring the players to Madrid in the first place. For both Barcelona and Real Madrid, the Bosman ruling resulted in a shift away from the idea that their success was based on their reliance on local players who embodied the values of the club.

In England, Manchester United's 1993/94 squad contained 5 players not from the UK, while that number increased to 9 in 1996/97 and 15 in 1999/00. One of the biggest fears that resulted from the Bosman Ruling was the devaluation of youth development. Barry Fry, manager of English team Birmingham City, explained that "...Young players are no longer assets to the club. We could have a world-beater and as soon as he's 18 he could walk out

and there would be nothing we could do about it...” (31). As pointed out previously, much of Manchester United's 1990s squad had graduated out of the academy and were established as local boys who had come up through United's academy. The idea that now youths who had been developed by United would instead leave to foreign leagues threatened the identity United had built around being able to create its own success out of its local English youth.

In the 1993/94 season, Italy's Associazione Calcio Milan's (AC Milan) squad only contained 5 non-Italian players (32). It grew to 9 players during the 1996/7 season, and 14 during the 1999/00 season. Most of Bersculoni's political rhetoric tied AC Milan's success specifically to his leadership, due to the political and self-serving nature of the rhetoric, making it distinct from the other cases studied here. However, much of the success that his football rhetoric brought, was due to Italian's connections to football and AC Milan as a team. While it would be untrue to say that the crux of AC Milan's support from Italians was solely due to the Italian demographics of the team, it cannot be said that it was not an influencing factor, which the origins of the AC Milan and Inter Milan's rivalry can show us. Inter Milan was a club born out of a group of AC Milan players who disagreed with the club's policy of not having any non-Italian players. The internationalization of AC Milan would have no doubt marginalized many of its fans, making Bersculoni's rhetoric about Milan and its success being tied to him and his view of Italy much less identifiable.

### **Changing the format of European football competitions as a response to the disconnect between club identity and Nationalism**

In *Parallel Myths, Popular Maps: The Europe of Soccer*, Dietschy, Ranc, Sonntag made the argument that the Bosman ruling “.....although it has not significantly altered traditional patterns of supporters' loyalty to their clubs, it has produced a new transnational fandom for the most well-known global brands such as Manchester United, Real Madrid, or Bayern Munich....” (33). This would seem to be in direct contradiction to these club's efforts to establish themselves as regional and national clubs. The change in the format of the European competitions, however, provided a reconciliation.

The switch in the format of European competitions was reflected in this growing nexus between commercialization and nationalism and regionalism in football. The new format not only allowed clubs to further their reverence and exposure on a global market but also allowed them to use the improved exposure to further consolidate their regional identities, albeit on a global stage. European football matches have been played ever since 1895, when the champions of England, Sunderland, defeated the champions of Scotland, Hearts. Many more pan-European competitions followed such as the Challenge Cup, open to clubs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Coupe des Nations, open to the champions of ten of Europe's domestic leagues. After a break in football due to the outbreak of World War 2, the number of matches between different top European teams grew, including a match between Wolverhampton Wolves, champions of England, and Budapest Honved, champions of Hungary, in 1954. This match came off the back of Hungary beating England 6-3 at Wembley Stadium. The Wolves ended up winning the game 3-2, leading the English Media to call them “Champions of Europe.”

L'Equipe, a French newspaper, responded: ".....Before we declare that Wolverhampton are invincible, let them go to Moscow and Budapest. And there are other internationally renowned clubs: AC Milan and Real Madrid to name but two. A club world championship, or at least a European one – larger, more meaningful, and more prestigious than the Mitropa Cup and more original than a competition for national teams – should be launched....." (34).

In addition, the creation of a pan-South American competition had already spurred European clubs and media to urge UEFA for the creation of a continental competition for its clubs. Thus, the first annual pan-European competition was created by UEFA. The competition called the European Cup had a completely different format than it does now, from the 1950s to 1992, with only the champions of 16 European nations participating in a completely knockout-formatted tournament.

In 1992 and 93, the European Cup underwent a huge rebranding and format change, with a round-robin group stage added in the 1991/2 season before the top team in each of the four groups would face each other in the traditional knockout format. In the 1992/3 season, the European Cup became the presently termed "UEFA Champions League". One of the biggest reasons for this change was the growing commercialization of football. As football clubs became more and more like businesses as discussed previously, with owners who were able to and desired to take advantage of the growing popularity and coverage of the game, those owners desired a greater share of the profit for the biggest clubs, as well as a greater guarantee of participation

in the competition and gaining access to its prize money and coverage (35). Previously, the restriction of entries to the cup to champions of Europe's top leagues, created the fear for many top clubs in Europe's more competitive leagues, such as the Premier League, La Liga, Serie A, and Bundesliga, that they would not participate in European competition for a given season. This lack of participation would leave them without both the prize money that came with participation but also the sponsor and exposure that competing at the highest level offered. The existence of a parallel cup "UEFA Cup" that allowed multiple entrants from each country who had not already qualified for the European Cup, exacerbated fears that the European Cup would become obsolete. Gerhard Aigner, the then General Secretary of UEFA, summed up the fears of many top clubs: ".The clubs, especially Real Madrid, wanted more matches, more financial security. The Champion Clubs' Cup was overshadowed by the UEFA Cup at the time because it only included one club from each association, whereas there were several from each country in the UEFA Cup. The answer was to introduce group matches..." (36). Officials from clubs like Real Madrid and AC Milan would at first agree and submit a plan to UEFA, that completely replaced the knockout stage with a round-robin league. However, after UEFA rejected the proposal, they instead submitted a proposal of an initial group stage and then knockout rounds, which UEFA would accept, together with the rebranding to the "UEFA Champions League" and the decision to not sell the market rights of the competition to different companies but rather hand the marketing right to a company called TEAM AG (The Event Agency and Marketing) (37).

TEAM AG vastly expanded the Champions

League to the grand European competition it is today. The implementation of new camera and television coverage requirements in participating stadiums, and completely new branding which included a designated ball and anthem, all helped increase viewership and sponsorship of the tournament causing it to become even more important for clubs to expand their influence and fanbase. Stadiums of clubs that participated in the Champions League now had to fulfill requirements that allowed for the expansion of television coverage. For example, to ensure that match-viewership on television was attractive, cameras were required in each goal net. Additionally, post-match interviews were conducted immediately after a match, to further connect television audiences with the game and the players (38). The branding of the Champions League played an equally important role in the expansion of its reputation. The logo consisting of eight stars representing participating clubs as the stars of Europe boosted the legitimacy of the tournament to being a true competition and fight between Europe's most elite clubs. UEFA itself stated that "...Prestige is at the heart of the UEFA Champions League brand image..." (39). Furthermore, the Champions League anthem sung before every match, consisted of lyrics in English, French, and German, emphasizing the status of participating clubs as the champions of Europe. Together with the classical music and choir, the anthem created a sense of production and grandeur for the competition. UEFA reported that the switch to centralized commercial marketing generated over 70 million Swiss Francs in 1992/3 compared to the 10 million the year prior (40).

The increased revenue that European competitions brought to clubs as well as the

opportunity to prove themselves as truly the best that Europe had to offer, made top clubs more attractive to players, both due to the sporting opportunities the clubs offered but also the monetary opportunities. This new attractiveness of top clubs due to the newly structured European competitions and their positioning as Europe's premier competition, allowed clubs to rely less on their own national players to be classified as the best of their nation and rather allowed them to use their new global attractiveness as evidence of their contribution to their nation's and region's strength. Rather than thinking about commercialization and its resulting globalization as a threat, clubs began to view it as an opportunity to share and grow their regional and national identities.

Bayern Munich would win the Champions League for the first time since the change in format during the 2000/01 season. Bayern would field 7 non-German players at the onset of the match, a drastic change from the sole non-German fielded in the 1976 European Cup, the last one Bayern had won. After the heartbreak of a last-minute loss to Manchester United two years prior, Bayern took advantage of the opportunity to prove themselves as the best European club, and with that boost the reputation of German football with Bayern as its star. German President, Johannes Rau, congratulated Bayern after the victory: "It was a fantastic final. I congratulate Bavaria for winning the Champions League." Similarly the German Chancellor, Gerhard Schroder, claimed "This success will significantly boost German football and significantly strengthen self-confidence." (41). Bayern's victory in the Champions League allowed it to present itself as a symbol of Bavarian success and a way to boost German football on the global stage,

therefore positioning Bayern as essential to German football and strengthening Bayern's regional and national reputation that it had already built itself on. This triumph is just one example of how both growing globalization and commercialization were used to the clubs' advantages, through the stage of the Champions League.

A similar case can be found for the club Real Madrid. In 1998, Real Madrid won the UEFA Champions League for the first time. Compared to the previous time they had won the European Cup in 1966, where Madrid fielded a completely Spanish team, Madrid fielded 6 foreign players in the final, with Predrag Mijatovic, a Montenegrin striker, scoring the winning goal. Mijatovic, himself talked about the victory and what it meant for him in an interview: "...Not just having scored the goal, but the importance that win had for the club. It was like passing from black and white into color. We boasted a lot about having won trophies, but there was no recent Champions League. It was a huge weight lifted, and I scored the goal. It was the best dream, the perfect script..." (42). Rather than dividing and diminishing the victory for the club because it relied upon foreign players, the fans and the club only became stronger through the success of winning Europe's biggest club trophy, which the team had not achieved for over 32 years. The multinationalization of Madrid allowed Madrid to strengthen their claim of being the strongest club in the world, therefore growing its fan base and potential revenue. Furthermore, the European stage that the Champions League offered, allowed Madrid to boost their standing as a representation of Spain and the best it had to offer, by pitting them against Juventus; the Italian Champions at that time.

A final example of how success in the Champions League allowed a club to cement its identity is Manchester United. In 1999, Manchester United would win their second UEFA Champions League. When the club won its first European Cup in 1968, it fielded only 2 players not from the United Kingdom, while in 1999, United started 6 players not from the U.K. and then substituted in another Norwegian player, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, who would eventually score a last-minute winning goal. Similarly to Bayern and Real, despite the difference in origins within the team, the most important fact was the prevalence of United, the establishment of United as the best Europe could offer, and proof of English excellence as they beat then-German Champions Bayern Munich. Furthermore, United became the first English Club to win the treasured treble, which included winning the league title, league Cup, and Champions League in one season. This immense achievement further boosted Manchester United's popularity and status as the best in England and Europe. When Alex Ferguson, the manager of that United team, reflected on the night he stated that: "...Nobody will ever win a European Cup like that again. Every time a team is 1-0 up with three minutes left, they will keep thinking of Manchester United..." (43). Even given a more of a skeptical view of the long-lasting nature of the achievement, the heightened stage of the Champions League, undoubtedly, allowed United to cement this moment as a defining moment of Manchester United and its English identity on the global stage.

While both Barcelona and AC Milan did not win a Champions League title post-Bosman ruling until the later stages of the 2000s, their participation in the tournament nonetheless allowed them to market their own local and

national brand to a global audience and gain monetary advantages over other Spanish teams and Italian teams. During the 1999/2000 season, FC Barcelona, who came 2<sup>nd</sup> in La Liga, averaged a ~ 23,947 stadium attendance (44). Celta Vigo, who came 7<sup>th</sup>, on the other hand averaged only 1,421 fans in attendance in La Liga during the same season (45). In Serie A, 3<sup>rd</sup> place AC Milan had an average attendance of 57,771 (46) while 5<sup>th</sup> place Parma had an average of just half of that with 21,000 (47). Meanwhile, the average attendance for a 1999/2000 Champions League match was 35,000, with Barcelona having an average of ~ 62,000 per match in the competition and AC Milan having an average of ~ 51,000 (48). The Champions League offered clubs extra opportunities to attract fans into stadiums and oftentimes attracted more fans than regular league games for clubs such as AC Milan and Barcelona. Clubs participating in the UEFA Champions League also gained a huge monetary bonus not just through the increased exposure that it granted but also through awarded prize money. For example, in the 1999/2000 season, clubs, such as AC Milan, who participated solely in the first group stage would receive 1.5 million CHF for participating and 500,000 CHF for each match played, with an additional 500 or 250 thousand CHF guaranteed for each win or draw respectively. For clubs like Barcelona, who reached the semifinals, 4 million CHF would be awarded for reaching the quarter finals, and 8 million CHF for reaching the semifinals (49). Even clubs who did not do exceptionally well in the Champions League, such as Milan and Barcelona, were able to benefit from their participation through the increased opportunities for stadium attendance and exposure to new fans, as well as monetary benefits simply for participating.

## Discussion

### *The pyramid of top-ranked, mid-ranked and relegation teams*

Unfortunately, at the moment due to the limited access of the top tier of European Competitions and the benefits it provides, the teams reaching this stage have gained a massive advantage to retain their place in the cup, leaving a homogenized, exclusive group playing at the very top. This particularly affects those leagues outside of the Top 5. The prize money each participating team gains for even only reaching the group stage, as well as the increased exposure the European stage brings teams, have only increased from the 1990s' levels which this paper has focused on previously, owing to the continuing trend of the exponential increase in spending in football starting from the previously discussed pattern in the 80s and 90s. Due to this fact, it is now widely accepted that teams who have participated in the tournament often have an advantage when returning to their own league and facing their fellow countries' teams who do not have the luxury of the additional revenue. Much of the literature surrounding the future of the sport and the role of European competitions, has focused on the Top 5 leagues, with the subsections focused on those leagues outside of the Top 5 mostly focused on studies of the league's inner workings rather than the effect of European competitions on the league itself. This may be contributed to the limited European qualifying spots given to leagues lower down the UEFA association ranking (the ranking each league is given, determined by their representatives' performance in Europe). The leagues just narrowly missing out on the current top 5 such as the Portuguese Liga Portugal, Austrian Bundesliga, and Dutch Eredivisie miss out the most through this

approach. This is because their club's performances in Europe reflect those coming in above them in the UEFA Association ranking much more, than those below them, yet they are often not considered as greatly in studies of European football.

In the Top 5 leagues, the competitive balance has generally remained much closer than those leagues outside of the Top 5 leagues. This difference has been generally attributed to the viewership each league gains by itself, with those such as the Premier League, Serie A, and La Liga, retaining global viewership not solely interested in the battles of clubs at the top, most of whom already regularly qualify for European Competitions, but are invested in the midrank and relegation battles. This dispersion of interests in the Top 5 leagues offers clubs not currently competing in European Competitions the opportunity to invest more money and resources to achieve a coveted European spot, as the viewership not only provides the club revenue through matchday sales but also global TV viewership revenue and perhaps most importantly private investments. England's most popular team based on average matchday attendance is Manchester United with around 73,000 fans per matchday in the 22/23 season. According to the 2018/2019 Global Broadcast Report in partnership with Nielson Sports, the Premier League broadcast around 260,000 hours of football to over 180 countries, with more than 1.03 billion households tuning in for a cumulative total of 3 billion views (50). Included in many of the broadcast deals that Premier League maintains with different providers in more than hundred countries, is the vast majority of games including those not of the traditional "Big 6", allowing both midranked and relegation battling teams to gain global viewership, potentially allowing

investors to feel more confident in the prospects of investing in these football clubs. Burnley, on their return to Premier League football, gained a flurry of international investors such as sports and media stars such as JJ and Kealia Watts, Dude Perfect, and popular football videogame producer Sports Interactive. Despite Burnley recent promotion, it was still a risky prospect considering the advantages clubs already in the top tier have compared to newly promoted teams, and Burnley's prior relegation just one season prior, yet the global exposure the Premier League offered even for teams that would not immediately be fighting at the top of the table, but rather in the relegation zone, made the club an attractive prospect for investment (51). Further evidence of the importance of global exposure due to the broad coverage of the Premier League on teams such as Burnley is the club's sponsorship deals, such as their new one-year, \$7.5 million deal they signed with W88, a betting company, as they prepared for their Premier League return, which in total has brought them over 14.6 million dollars (52). On the other hand, clubs in leagues such as the Liga Portugal face a much harder time gaining substantial global exposure due to the entire league not gaining much airtime other than those at the very top. Clubs such as Benfica, Porto, and Sporting, have constant access to global viewers through their control over Portugal's Champions League qualification spot. Compared to the complete coverage of every Premier League game internationally, leagues like Liga Portugal have instead international TV deals that air only a select number of games every match week, with the Benfica, Porto, and Sporting's games being the priority. For example, the Portuguese international TV deal for the airings in the U.S with Gol TV only streams 5 games per match week. The lack of international exposure for

midranked and relegation teams in leagues outside the Top 5 makes those clubs a less attractive investment, providing the clubs with less opportunities and resources to compete. This is particularly impactful as the club's decreased total revenue results in a disproportionately larger impact on its competitive abilities.

#### *The Upward diffusion of talent*

Furthermore, clubs outside the Top 5 leagues often face a diffusion of talent moving out of their own leagues towards the Top 5 leagues with greater number of UEFA qualification spots, leaving a homogenized pool of players in domestic leagues. Green et al (2015), has suggested that the loss of a Champions League qualification spot has a negative impact on the domestic leagues by encouraging players to leave in search for prospects in a league that has a greater amount of qualification spots. The article further states that the removal/additions of qualification spots seem to affect midranked teams the most. While the article specifically mentions the Italian Serie A as a recent example of this trend, the model can still be applied to those leagues outside of the Top 5, with players moving from leagues with lower qualification spots to those with higher spots for the opportunity to compete in the competition. In the 22/23 season, the Portuguese Liga Portugal had a total of 86 departures with 24 of those going to one of the Top 5 leagues. On the other hand, the league had 57 arrivals with only 8 coming from a Top 5 league. The diffusion of talent from leagues just below the Top 5 has created a monopoly of a handful of clubs in each of these leagues (53).

#### *Effect on the style of football*

Due to the homogenization of the teams at the top of European Competitions, and the risks

that come with losing an essential piece of revenue that come from advancing to the further stages of the competitions, as well as the diffusion of talent that particularly affect those just outside the Top 5 Leagues, fans have become disgruntled with the cautious and repetitive style of football being played, not just in the competition itself but also in countries leagues. Much of the research surrounding the reasons for fan attendance and satisfaction in football has revolved around the effect of the competitive balance of leagues, with a higher competitive balance resulting in greater matchday attendances, and *vice versa*. As discussed previously, the addition of European tournaments has generally been shown to degrade national leagues, especially those outside the Top 5, towards a lower competitive balance, due to the non-accessibility of the infusion of extra revenue that the competitions offer. Literature suggests a different approach to considering the reasons for fluctuations in fan attendances. Brandes and Frank (2007) found through studying different leagues and tiers of European national football leagues, that perhaps competitive balance did not affect fan attendance, but rather *vice versa*. They further state that on a theoretical ground, clubs may retain support despite the lack of competitive balance due to the system of promotion and relegation that almost all of Europe's league contain, creating battles within the league tables for those not directly fighting for the top spots (54). This paper proposes that under the lens of football, clubs are increasingly becoming nationalistic symbols, competing with other teams for the position of their countries' representative club, in terms of success but perhaps more importantly the means of achieving that success, with an entertaining style of play that fits with the club's and nation's identity.

In the 2012 Champions League Final between Bayern Munich and eventual winners, Chelsea, the two teams had vastly different approaches and style befitting their club's ideologies. In their run in the tournament, Bayern had beaten FC Basel 7-1, Marseille 4-0, and would knock out favorites Real Madrid in a penalty shootout. The high scorelines reflect the aggressive and never stop attacking attitude of the German club. Bayern would continue this attacking play in the final at the Allianz Arena, their home stadium. In a pre-match press conference Chelsea Captain Frank Lampard would describe the Bavarians as "not very shy" and "...they are very brave and attacking...It doesn't matter who they are playing...". Bayern would end up with 20 attempts on goal with 6 on target, compared to Chelsea's 6 attempts with 3 on target (55). The Chelsea team seemed comfortable in their own style of a more defensive football paralleling England's much more cautious style of football at the time, emphasizing stability and rigidity, at least within the football pitch. Micheal Ballack, a former Bayern and Chelsea player, claimed at a pre-match conference that his style would not put Chelsea at any significant disadvantage as long as they "play what they think is the best way to win the competition" and not listen to those who say "...they can't play the same style in the final, they need to attack, they can't stay in their own box and wait..." (56). Undoubtedly, the final between the two teams became a match between two contrasting styles of football, whose corresponding nationalistic origins added a further layer of excitement for fans, of whom a little more than 62,500 fans filled the Allianz Arena (~ 94 stadium capacity) and ~167 million watched the game on TV (57, 58).

In 2021, Chelsea would again reach the

Champions League final, facing off against Manchester City. However, rather than a match between two clear opposing ideological styles, both teams were rather evenly matched in terms of many key statistics such as attempts at goals, passing accuracy, and fouls committed (59). Ahead of the match, commentators were discussing the two contestants with Chelsea "...as a big unit, they know how to attack and how to defend. They are a solid team which move on the pitch as a unit. You watch them and think you cannot go through them..." while City was able to "...go and storm a match..." and "...control the game and keep possession ... technically it's really good to watch...". By the end of the game, it was clear to see that Manchester City had bowed to the pressure and chose to change their distinct Pep Guardiola infused style, and as Sky Sports put it shortly after the game "...It did not work. The control that had been such a feature of the team's turnaround during the winter months was absent from the outset, the dangers obvious..." (60). The disappointing nature of the action may have turned off fans from watching the finale in the future. While the final score of 1-0 may not accurately reflect the excitement and action of an entire match, the scoreline, when taken into context, of one of four consecutive 1-0 results, has had fans losing excitement for watching the competition due to the predictable nature of both the play and scoreline. The scoreline's importance may matter even less with finals like the 2019 Liverpool v Tottenham Hotspurs final being viewed as one of the most boring finals, despite the 2-0 score, with former player and manager Glenn Hoddle claiming, "...I've never seen two Premier League sides make so many unforced errors..." (61). More research will be needed to further establish and analyze fan reactions through surveys and questionnaires due to the inherent

biases of social media and punditry, where those with the more extreme opinions are more likely to be seen and heard. Due to the increasing coverage of the competition compared to the early 2010s, it would not be an accurate assessment to simply compare the viewership numbers of the two different matches. In addition, more data that Paramount +, the international streaming service who have the rights to the Champions League, has elected not to share, would be needed to determine the time stamps of viewership drop-off during the airing of the finale in order to more accurately gain a picture of viewer satisfaction as the match progressed.

Yasseri (2019) found through a machine learning model study of 11 of Europe's top leagues that predictability (in the style of play) has been increasing for the majority of studied leagues, including England, Germany, Netherlands, and Portugal, with only Belgium and Italy displaying relatively stable predictability (62). With a survey by the ECA in 2020 reporting that 33% of fans support their favorite club due to the style of football they play, clubs are under pressure to continue playing using tactics and strategy that their club have been known for, yet often those tactics are obsolete or unsuited either due to the growth of modern football or due to players being poorly indoctrinated into a club's system (63). Due to this progression of modern-day football, clubs have shifted their style of play to more standardized tactics, shown previously in European competitions but also their domestic leagues, in turn leading to fan disgruntlement. Sam Allardyce, who has managed over 14 clubs, many of which were relegation battling teams in the Premier League, commented in 2021 on the consequences of the increasing similar football tactics, in reference to the

possession-based style that Guardiola popularized, in the Premier League: "...It's detrimental to the world of football. It'll become boring. The best league in the world should have different systems, different ways of playing.." (64). Viewership numbers in leagues such as Seria A and La Liga have also notably decreased with the 2021-22 La Liga season having an average of 301,00 viewers per broadcast match compared to the 429,000 viewers during the 2018-19 season (65). However, as discussed before, more research is needed to establish proof of a causal relationship between the style of play and viewership number, considering the Premier League stable viewership numbers despite complaints among fans about the present 'boring' style of play.

The growing discontent between fans and their club can be attributed to fans' preference to a style of play that may not always guarantee results compared to the club's interest in securing a place in the growing elite of the football world. The connection between the style of a football club and the fans, has created problems for clubs particularly in leagues outside the Top 5 and lower tier clubs, with fans expecting their own team to play in a certain "appealing" style. Joleon Lescott described modern football recent adherence to the both successful and popular style of Pep Guardiola as "...What he has done for the way the game is viewed right through our league system - not just the Premier League, but teams in lower leagues trying to emulate the style that Pep has created.." (66). Teams who may not have the talent or resources in either their player pool and training staff and facilities have often been pressured by their own fans to play an "attractive" style of football, such as Guardiola's style, or at the very least play with

a style unique to the club's traditions and values, such as Bayern's all-out attack and high line, or Chelsea's defensive stability. With even top clubs suffering under pressure from fans, clubs in lower tiers and leagues suffer the most due to the lack of resources, yet the same intense pressure from fans who are equally dedicated to wanting to enjoy their team's football. Allardyce commented about the pressure of fans to play tactics unfitting to a club's resources: "...If they've got the capabilities to play out from the back all the time, great. If they haven't, they will keep giving the ball away and the opposition will keep scoring. You have to find another way sometimes and if you don't, you lose your job.." (64). The danger of continuing to play a certain style of football has resulted in the failure and downfall of many clubs, in turn losing precious prize money and viewer exposure. This risk of losing revenue results in executives at clubs making the decision or indirectly (or directly) putting pressure on managers to instead play a more conservative style of football, angering fans due to the cascade of clubs playing in the same repetitive cautious style.

### *The European Super League*

The attempt at forming the European Super League (ESL) was widely criticized due to its format leading to the complete homogenization of clubs at the pinnacle of European football. On one hand, this league system offered top-tier clubs to play a riskier style, possibly returning a part of the distinct nature of each club's identities. However, for clubs aiming to enter the exclusive group at the top, they would be forced to continue playing a more standard and safe set of tactics, further leading to discontent within their fanbase. One of the key tenets of the newly proposed European Super

League in 2023, is the security it gives top clubs, straying away from the league and season-based qualification system UEFA currently has in place to instead create 3 tiers of leagues, with the top European clubs starting in the highest tier. Due to the system of promotion and relegation instead of direct qualification, teams already in the 1st tier do not need to worry as much about their performances in their domestic league since they have almost guaranteed participation in the ESL. However, clubs who may not have the same continuous and long-lasting resources yet who would go on a miracle run and qualify for European Competitions, would find themselves short-handed: instead of directly qualifying for the Champions League, or the highest tier of the competition, they would instead find themselves in the lowest tiered league. In order to advance up the divisions, a club would have to spend at least 3 seasons, in which their resources would be heavily depleted and there would be no guarantee of promotion each season regardless.

The proposed format and its security that it affords to top clubs like Real Madrid, Barcelona, and particularly clubs like Chelsea who have not qualified for the past Champions League season, and do not look to be in a position to qualify anytime soon, may afford a solution to the repetitive football play that has been steadily increasing. The lack of threat to these clubs' positions in the European league may allow for more risk, where a loss would no longer mean elimination from the competition for that season, or in the domestic leagues, a dropping of crucial points towards qualification. Top clubs could afford games to test out new tactics and strategies and allow new players to become adjusted to the club's style of play rather than the current trend of

having little patience with new transfers. On the other hand, there has always been the group of rising clubs knocking on the doorstep of the exclusive group of top clubs, such as Aston Villa, VfB Stuttgart, and Bologna FC, many of which are playing a style of football that is free flowing, yet structured, and most importantly appealing to fans, as well as those from leagues just outside of the Top, previously discussed. These clubs would be the most disadvantaged by the shift to a European Super League, due to the lack of immediate rewards, through prize money and exposure, that automatic qualification would typically afford them. While these clubs may be able to reach coveted European qualification spots through playing an attractive and identifiable style of football, the necessity of continuing the same success throughout more than 3 seasons would increase the chance of each club losing their distinctness in an effort to secure stability, fighting at the top. While the European Super League may afford a solution to their increasingly lack of identifiable play for the very top tier of football clubs, this paper finds in this theoretical framework, that clubs outside the top echelon, who might be producing their own identity through their football play, would be instead be forced to continue this increasingly homogenizing trend. This paper only sets up a theoretical argument through the use of looking at the discontent within football fanbases from a growing lack of regionalistic sense of identity, to determine the effects of the European Super League on the future of football. The halting of proceedings for the formation of the ESL makes it difficult to determine the empirical effects of the association, yet it may be useful to study the past formations of domestic leagues systems such as the English Football League System in order to determine any patterns regarding fan

engagement and satisfaction with the shifting dynamics of their club and league. Furthermore, research on why much of the opposition to the ESL came from top clubs, who would most benefit from the shift in system and who are willing to accept the current advantages that the Champions League system offers, may be necessary. More empirical studies regarding the dramatization of the football industry outside of the pitch, such as the dramatization of the transfer market and increase in clubs' social media usage, can also be useful in order to further understand what factors impact fan satisfaction, and predict the viability of the European Super League in the future.

With football established as an informational lens to look at the culture of a place at a time, the 1990s stand out, particularly in Europe with the European Union being founded in 1993, and the development of not just nationalistic identities but also a pan-European identity. In parallel to this, there is a trend of economic growth which was further supported by the opening of more markets through the E.U. and globalization, mirroring the same effects happening in the football world. Through looking at the development of football through a nationalistic lens, we can learn more about the recent developments revolving around the lack of competitive balance, exacerbated by the addition of European Games and revenue for only the top tier of clubs. This nationalistic lens also helps understand the lack of competitive balance's effects of fan attendance and satisfaction, offering an alternative theory that fan satisfaction might have less to do with the success of a team than it's adherence to a certain style of play in line with its national identity. The growing disconnects between fans and the clubs' hierarchies due to the shifting

balance between the prioritization of style compared to a fight for European competitions, that bring with them a chance to break into the elite group of football clubs at the top, may be solved. However, this paper suggests that only the very top group of clubs would be positively affected by this shift, and have the ability to revert course of the trend: smaller clubs would instead be forced to continue to standardize their tactics due to the increased requirements of gaining access to the rewards of European competitions by the protests to the European Super League.

### Conclusion

By the 1990s, changes in the structure of football clubs enabled rapid commercial growth in the industry, and added a new priority for many clubs to become economically profitable. Leading up to the same time, many clubs began marketing themselves as representations of the best that their nations had to offer, centralizing their identities around their home nations. The intersection between these two growing interests represented a problem for clubs for whom these two objectives were incompatible. This was further compounded by the newly allowed ability of players to freely choose which teams they wanted to play for after their contract expired. The UEFA Champions League may have offered a solution for clubs to

reconcile these two desires. A combination of the round-robin and knock-out format of the Champions League, kept ostensible regional club identities alive, while capitalizing on large amounts of prize money available for merely participating in the format. This money could be then resourced toward buying - and keeping - talented players from midranked and relegated teams, and from leaving respectively; owing to the newly allowed freedom of movement of players. Within the auspices of the Champions League, not only could clubs field foreign players without renegeing on their (the clubs) national and regional identities, but also gain a pan-European and pan-Global fan base. The UEFA Champions League did however have the effect of clubs adhering to a uniform and conservative style of football especially in the top-tiered teams; and depleted the talent pool of midranked and relegated teams; thereby creating a monopoly of top tiered teams. The current wedge between club and fanbase may have more to do with the trickle-down effect of the repetitive style of football being played at the national league level rather than solely on a lack of competitive balance. The recently proposed and unsuccessful idea of the European Super League may have had the effect of reversing this homogeneous and repetitive style of play by allowing the top tier teams to take more risk without affecting rewards.

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