

Business Guides on the Go

Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger

Passion and Profit

The Dynamics of Soccer Fandom
and Management

 Springer

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ISSN 2731-4758

ISSN 2731-4766 (electronic)

Business Guides on the Go

ISBN 978-3-658-45826-3

ISBN 978-3-658-45827-0 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-45827-0>

Translation from the German language edition: “Fußballfans und Vereinsführung” by Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger, © Der/die Herausgeber bzw. der/die Autor(en), exklusiv lizenziert an Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, ein Teil von Springer Nature 2024. Published by Springer Gabler. All Rights Reserved.

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for Gerhard Hanappi

Preface: Motivation for This Book

Soccer is undoubtedly the most popular sport and is still growing in popularity. Soccer is omnipresent, in the media, in schools, on playgrounds and, of course, in stadiums. The enthusiasm for soccer is also reflected in the large number of fans, i.e. the many people who regularly follow the games, join clubs, and discuss the course and results of matches.

The fans are a core element of every soccer club, not only from an economic point of view, but also as a visible sign of the importance of a soccer club: the more people believe in a particular soccer club, the more attractive it becomes for members and business partners, and the more relevant its voice in important social issues, for example.

Fans and soccer clubs are therefore directly connected, belong together, are an inseparable unit, need each other.

There are significant differences between fans: while some simply go to a match every now and then, others buy season tickets and regularly come to the stadium and/or travel to away games. The so-called active fan scene is characterized by the fact that the respective fans organize themselves and plan and carry out various activities, i.e. they come together to form their own fan clubs. The active fan scene makes the headlines from time to time, mainly because of riots, violent actions, disruptions to matches or aggressive, discriminatory chants.

The public portrayal of these fan clubs in the mass media is often very one-sided with a focus on negative headlines. What is often overlooked,

or even ignored, is the fact that these fan clubs play an important social and socio-political role. Be it by getting involved in certain issues—e.g. collections for the homeless—or by providing important social integration services and thus promoting solidarity and inclusion.

As little as the fan groups are internally homogeneous groups, the relationship between the fan clubs and their soccer club is just as complex. On the one hand, fans act under the crest of their beloved soccer club and thus contribute to its “brand” (negatively or positively), while on the other hand they often distance themselves from the specific club structure and its officials and organize themselves as separate institutions. For example, not all members of certain fan clubs are also members of their soccer club. On the one hand, soccer fans are very concerned about the success of their own team, on the other hand, they often disregard what is beneficial for the soccer club as an institution and what is not.

In addition, there is an incredible level of emotion in soccer: “elated” and “saddened to death” are very close together, often it is just one goal, just a few seconds, a tiny action that decides which side the mood falls on. Anyone who has ever been carried away in a stadium for 90 min (and often a few more) knows what we are talking about.

This complexity of the topic in dealing with fans, their significance for a soccer club, their social role, their often provocative and unacceptable actions, their loyalty, and their immense economic importance for the sport of soccer have prompted me to venture a differentiated and structured look at fan cultures, particularly from the perspective of club management. This book therefore attempts to shed light on fan culture from the perspective of organizational theory, but of course does not do without socio-psychological approaches, nor without theories of diversity and inclusion.

I am interested in management issues not only from a scientific point of view, but also for personal reasons: As Vice President of SC Rapid, bearing a famous footballer’s name,¹ I have learned a lot about fan culture. Systematically integrating this into a scholarly discourse is a

¹Gerhard Hanappi, my father-in-law, was a record-holding Austrian national player for many years. He financed his architectural studies by playing soccer professionally and, among other things, built the Weststadion in Vienna, which was later named after him before it was replaced by a new stadium.

particular concern of mine, not only to contribute to a better understanding of fan clubs in the public and in the media, but also to develop constructive conflict resolution strategies with active fan clubs from a management perspective on a scientific basis.

At this point, I would like to point out that gender labels (i.e. the equalization of “soccer” with “men’s” soccer and the direct verbal labelling of “women’s soccer”) lead to a reproduction of the idea that men’s soccer represents soccer per se and hence women’s soccer is the deviation from the norm.

The analyses in this book relate to men’s soccer and its fan clubs, which have predominantly, but not exclusively, male members. This is mainly due to the long and extensive research tradition on their topics and the current discussions on the role and culture of men’s professional soccer in particular. My interest in the fascinating phenomenon of “fandom” goes hand in hand with this: how can it be that people—especially men—with different life backgrounds, different levels of education, different likes and dislikes come together at a match to follow a soccer game together, highly emotionally, with impressive stamina and enthusiasm that is almost reminiscent of ecstasy. What mystical power emanates from this sport and the teams that can mobilize such strong emotional reactions? How can it be that this enthusiasm can literally make a stadium tremble? And how can it be that adults in the stadium are reminiscent of small children who simply act affectively and give free rein to their feelings, often crossing the boundaries of what is acceptable?

This counter-concept to the otherwise very rational, coolly distanced, and correct areas of life and business has something captivating about it and arouses my inquiring curiosity. How can the good things about fan cultures be preserved and the negative effects minimized, not to say eliminated? This is the central question I address in this work.

I would like to thank everyone who has helped to make this book possible, first and foremost: my husband Hardy Hanappi, my son Zenon, Annie Flaismanova, Steffen Hofmann from SC Rapid, my SC Rapid board members Stefan Kjaer, Christian Podoschek, and Nurten Yilmaz, numerous fans, and many other interviewees whose valuable contributions have helped to sharpen my view of the subject.