2014

# The Impact of Soccer Regulations on European Soccer Organizations' Marketing Tactics

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### ABSTRACT

This paper highlights important changes in soccer regulations that have shaped the sport into what it is today, and marketing approaches that are used within soccer organizations and how they are impacted by these regulations. Important regulations, such as the seminal Bosman Ruling and the Financial Fair Play regulation, are examined, the growth and importance of sponsorships within European soccer organizations is discussed. The growth of Internet marketing and the impact of future advances in technological regulations on the game of soccer are outlined.


### INTRODUCTION

European football, or soccer, is the world's most popular sport, and in recent years has become subject to very strict regulations put into action by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the governing body of football in Europe. These regulations have a strong impact on every aspect of this sport, including the players, owners, fans, and all other organizations that are involved through activities such as sponsorships and partnerships with the teams, clubs and leagues. The purpose of this research is to highlight important changes in soccer regulations that have shaped the sport into what it is today, and also to focus on marketing approaches that are used within soccer organizations and how they are impacted by these regulations. Important regulations, such as the seminal Bosman Ruling and the Financial Fair Play regulation, will first be outlined, followed by a discussion of the growth and importance of sponsorships within European soccer organizations. Marketing tactics used at the 2012 London Olympic Games will also be examined, as well as the growth of Internet marketing and how future advances in technological regulations may impact the game of soccer.

### BOSMAN RULING

"Bosman is the one legal case that every football player and fan knows" (Foster, 2000). The Bosman ruling of 1995, which caused a revolution in European football, is the result of Jean-Marc Bosman's desire to move from *Club de Liege* to *Dunkerque*. Before the Bosman ruling a player could not leave his club unless they agreed to let him go, and clubs were also limited in the number of foreign players that they could sign. UEFA regulations originally allowed for clubs to only field three foreign players and two players who had come through their youth set-up programs. The Bosman ruling stated “players should be free to move when their contracts had expired and that EU clubs could hire any number of European Union players” (Fordyce, 2005). This ruling gave players more power and the ability to demand high sign-on fees and salaries because transfer fees were now eliminated after players were out of contract.[1] This also meant that clubs had no way of stopping their best players from leaving at the end of their existing contract unless they agreed to give them better deals for future seasons in order to keep them from joining another team. The freedom for EU clubs to hire any number of EU players also meant that entire teams could be established without a single player from that country, which both Chelsea and Arsenal have both famously done (Fordyce, 2005).

Because clubs were forced to pay higher wages for players after the Bosman ruling, they passed these costs onto the fans in order to help boost revenues. Ticket prices have seen a significant increase since 1995, as well as television packages that included the networks airing the soccer matches. UK ticket prices in 2012 were reported to have increased more than five times the rate of inflation over a 12-month period. The average cost of the cheapest adult ticket rose 11.7% from £19.01 to £21.24, which has been related directly to the increased wages for big-named players (a comparison of Premier League ticket prices can be found in Table 1) (Sabey, 2012). “The popularity of football on television has also made the right to broadcast a game a valuable commodity. Television rights are a major source of income for football today and the whole financial structure of European football is now dependent on their sale and exploitation” (Foster, 2000).

The biggest downside to the Bosman ruling from a financial standpoint is that the rich clubs are the only ones who are able to become richer, and the poor clubs are becoming poorer because small clubs are not able to afford big named players and they can no longer rely on transfer fees to boost their revenues (Fordyce, 2005). Rich clubs are the only ones who can afford the biggest stars, which has created a huge gap between the top performing teams and the bottom.

Overall, the Bosman ruling of 1995 changed the latent regulatory environment of European football into one of active regulation (Parrish, 2002). The Bosman ruling changed the future of European football, and “for legal purposes at least, football would now be a business” (Foster, 2000).

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[1] Before the Bosman ruling there was still a transfer fee that had to be exchanged between the previous team and the new team, even if the player was completely out of contract. The Bosman rule made this illegal so that players could move freely through the system to a new team after they were out of contract. As a result, teams now typically sign players for longer contracts to avoid free transfers, however if a player is still within the means of their contract a transfer fee is required and those fees are often extremely high. For a recent example, Real Madrid signed Gareth Bale who was under contract with the Tottenham Hotspurs for a record transfer fee of £85.3 million on September 1, 2013.

# Table 1

PRICES FOR PREMIER LEAGUE FANS

| | CHEAPEST SEASON TICKET | MOST EXPENSIVE SEASON TICKET | CHEAPEST MATCH-DAY TICKET | MOST EXPENSIVE MATCH-DAY TICKET | PROGRAMME | PIE | TEA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arsenal | £ 985 | £1,955 | £26 | £126 | £3.00 | £3.30 | £2.00 |
| Tottenham | £730 | £1,845 | £32 | £81 | £3.50 | £3.70 | £2.00 |
| Chelsea | £595 | £1,250 | £41 | £87 | £3.00 | £3.60 | £2.00 |
| Fulham | £399 | £959 | £20 | £75 | £3.50 | £3.90 | £1.90 |
| Man Utd | £532 | £950 | £30 | £52 | £3.00 | £3.10 | £2.50 |
| QPR | £499 | £949 | £25 | £55 | £3.00 | £3.00 | £2.00 |
| Newcastle | £322 | £909 | £15 | £70 | £3.00 | £2.80 | £2.20 |
| West Ham | £480 | £850 | £36 | £67 | £3.50 | £3.00 | £2.00 |
| Sunderland | £400 | £845 | £25 | £40 | £3.00 | £2.90 | £2.10 |
| Liverpool | £725 | £802 | £39 | £48 | £3.00 | £3.10 | £2.20 |
| Norwich | £471 | £790 | £30 | £50 | £3.50 | £2.50 | £2.00 |
| Southampton | £495 | £780 | £28 | £48 | £3.00 | £3.20 | £2.00 |
| Man City | £275 | £695 | £26 | £58 | £3.00 | £3.50 | £2.50 |
| Everton | £399 | £672 | £31 | £43 | £3.00 | £2.80 | £2.10 |
| Stoke | £344 | £609 | £25 | £50 | £3.50 | £2.60 | £2.00 |
| Aston Villa | £325 | £595 | £20 | £45 | £3.00 | £3.20 | £2.10 |
| Reading | £350 | £595 | £37 | £50 | £3.00 | £3.20 | £1.80 |
| Swansea | £429 | £499 | £35 | £45 | £3.00 | £3.00 | £1.80 |
| West Brom | £349 | £449 | £25 | £39 | £3.00 | £2.90 | £2.20 |
| Wigan | £255 | £310 | £20 | £ - | £3.00 | £ 2.30 | £1.80 |

**Source:** Sabey, R. (2012).

## FINANCIAL FAIR PLAY

Financial fair play regulations have recently been introduced by the UEFA in order to create more discipline and rationality in club football finances. Objectives that the UEFA aims to accomplish include encouraging clubs to compete within their revenues, stop clubs from outspending rivals on player transfer fees and salaries to achieve success and prize money, protect the long-term viability of European club football and ensure that clubs settle their liabilities on a timely basis. The reason for these rules to be put into place is due to the fact that many clubs in recent seasons have reported repeated, and worsening, financial losses. “The wider economic situation has created difficult market conditions for clubs in Europe, and this can have a negative impact on revenue generation and creates additional challenges for clubs in respect of the availability of financing and day-to-day operations” (UEFA, 2013).

In order for the UEFA to regulate and measure these goals for the football clubs, they require them to balance their books or “break even.” According to the UEFA, clubs are not permitted to spend more than their generated revenues and are required to meet all payment commitments at all times. Higher-risk clubs are also required to provide budgets that have a detailed outline of their strategic plan to meet their financial goals (UEFA, 2013). Under the breakeven rule, clubs with a loss of more than 5 million euros this season or last risk exclusion from next season’s top club competitions, which are the *Champions League* and *Europa League*. Clubs are, however, able to have a loss of up to 45 million euros a season as long as shareholders can cover the loss (Duff, 2013).

The same lawyer who fought and won the Bosman case in 1995, Jean-Louis Dupont, is currently challenging the financial fair play regulation. He claims that the rule breaks competition law and that it infringes the right to free movement of capital, workers and services. He also stated that this regulation decreases the income of agents by reducing the number of players that clubs can hire and reducing player salaries (Duff, 2013). Although this regulation is currently being challenged, UEFA believe that these rules are fully in accordance with EU law.

Both the Bosman Ruling and the Financial Fair Play regulations not only impact revenues and finances, but they also have an impact on marketing tactics used within European football organizations, which will be discussed in the next sections.

## GROWTH AND IMPORTANCE OF SPONSORSHIPS

Sponsorship used to only occur when company board members would decide to sponsor sports that they enjoyed watching or playing, whereas now major companies are spending millions on sports marketing programs. Two key factors have worked in sports sponsorship’s favor. Firstly, traditional forms of communication like spot ads are not as effective as they used to be, and secondly, marketers have realized that sponsorship is a great way to hold a conversation with their brands’ target audiences (Fry, 2013). It is believed that the shift towards sports sponsorship is being accelerated by the global downturn. Due to the recession overall marketing spending has gone down and companies are looking for more cost effective forms of communication. Sports sponsorship spending has increased due to the fact that companies are realizing that it is a great investment that provides a focal point for consumer dialogue, rather than force-feeding a message through typical advertising methods (Fry, 2013).

The biggest deals in European football used to be the multimillion-dollar transfers to gain the biggest soccer stars. However, the most important signings for Europe’s top clubs are now the corporate sponsors on the front of their uniforms (Gillis, 2010). Unlike here in the US for most other sports, the focal point on the front of players’ jerseys is not their team name or logo, but it is, in fact, the name of their sponsor. Jersey sponsorships are arguably the most valuable marketing real estate per square inch. A recent article in *Forbes* discusses the most expensive jersey sponsorships in European soccer, where Manchester United's recent seven-year, $559 million deal with Chevrolet tops the charts (Colao, 2013). Samsung Electronics Company recently renewed their jersey sponsorship with Chelsea for $23.9 million through 2015 after Chelsea pulled out their first Champions League win in May 2013. Samsung's first contract with Chelsea started five years ago with paying 11 million pounds per season as the company replaced Emirates airlines on the front of Chelsea's jerseys (Panja, 2012). Regulations related to sponsorships within the Champions League are available in Table 2.

"Only the big clubs in Europe act as price-setters for jersey sponsorship because of the amount of fans they have around the world. The other clubs are price-takers because they have a much smaller fan base" (Gillis, 2010). Essentially, European soccer sponsorships are making the players out to be walking billboards and provide the perfect medium for companies to build their brand awareness. With fans all throughout the world buying and wearing these jerseys, companies can reach what might have otherwise been an untapped market through these jersey sponsorships.

## IMPACTS OF SPONSORSHIPS ON THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY

The airline industry is interesting to take a closer look at because it has been greatly impacted by European soccer. In recent years, many clubs across Europe have been taken over by wealthy companies from the Middle East that are aiming to build their corporate brands, which is especially evident within the airline industry. Emirates, the airline based in Dubai, recently signed a $171 million sponsorship deal with Paris Saint-Germain that will allow them to be featured on the team's jersey through the 2018/2019 season in order to further enhance their brand's imprint across European soccer. Emirates has already been a sponsor for Arsenal, one of Europe's most popular clubs in London, since 2004, where their first deal included jersey sponsorship and stadium naming rights. Arsenal is Nike's third-highest seller, selling an average of 800,000 jerseys per season over the last five seasons, proving to be an extremely beneficial partnership for Emirates. Now that Emirates has sponsorships within the two major European airline hubs, they have been able to add 15 new destinations since 2011 (see Table 3 for European Airport Traffic Report for 2011-2012) and reached a record high income of $17 billion in 2012 (Melville, 2013). Etihad Airways, based in Abu-Dhabi, has implemented a similar strategy by trying to build their brand through soccer. Etihad signed a 10-year, $626 million agreement with Manchester City to sponsor their jersey and receive naming rights to their stadium. This deal has also paid off for Etihad because their airline reported a revenue growth of 17% from $4.1 billion in 2011 to $4.8 billion in 2012, and they also exceeded 10 million passengers for the first time. These deals also positively impacted the club, since Manchester City was able to spend $1.45 billion on players since 2008. A negative aspect to these types of sponsorships is that many teams feel that they are violating the Financial Fair Play regulations because both Middle Eastern airlines are state-owned, meaning they have the ability to benefit from public subsidies, cheap labor and fuel prices not available to US and European carriers

(Melville, 2013). In time many feel that regulations on sponsorships will increase in order to control these types of brand-building investments.

## Table 2

**Choice of shirt sponsor**

19.09 - The club may only use a sponsor approved beforehand by its association and also used in one of the domestic competitions as shirt sponsor. From the play- offs onwards, this provision also applies to the official training session and any UEFA Champions League media activities the day before a match.

**Change of shirt sponsor**

19.10 - According to Article 34 of the *UEFA Kit Regulations,* clubs may change their shirt sponsor during the season as follows:

a) clubs playing qualifying-phase and play-off matches may change the shirt sponsor no more than twice during the same UEFA season but only once from the beginning of the group stage;

b) clubs directly qualified for the group stage may change the shirt sponsor only once during the same UEFA season.

Starting the competition without a sponsor but subsequently using one is not considered as a change of sponsor.

A change regarding the content of the sponsor advertising is considered to be a change of sponsor, even if the sponsor remains the same.

**Deadline for changes of shirt sponsor**

19.11 - Clubs which want to change their shirt sponsor in accordance with paragraph 19.10, must follow the requirements detailed in paragraph 34.04 of the *UEFA Kit Regulations* and submit their request to the UEFA administration at least ten working days prior to the first match in which they wish to use the new sponsor.

19.12 - For clubs that have qualified for the knockout rounds, any sponsor changes must be announced to the UEFA administration by 1 February 2013 (12.00 CET) at the latest.

**Non-use of shirt sponsor due to national legislation**

19.13 - If the national legislation applicable at the match venue prevents a visiting club from using its approved shirt sponsor (see paragraph 32.02 of the *UEFA Kit Regulations),* the club may ask UEFA to replace its sponsor with a UEFA- endorsed programme (e.g. Respect campaign) or with a charity in compliance with the UEFA requirements. Furthermore, a club may wear advertising for a product of its sponsor as long as it complies with the applicable national legislation and is approved by UEFA. Such requests must be submitted to the UEFA administration at least seven days before the match in question.

**Source:** UEFA (2013)

## Table 3

| European Airport Traffic 2011-2012 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rank | Airport | City | 2011 Passengers | 2012 Passengers | % Change |
| 1 | Heathrow | London | 69,433,230 | 69,983,142 | 0.8% |
| 2 | Charles de Gaulle | Paris | 60,970,551 | 61,611,934 | 1.1% |
| 3 | Frankfurt | Frankfurt | 56,436,255 | 57,257,251 | 1.9% |
| 4 | Amsterdam Schiphol | Amsterdam | 49,755,252 | 51,035,590 | 2.6% |
| 5 | Barajas | Madrid | 49,670,270 | 45,195,014 | -9.0% |

**Source:** Melville, A. (2013)

### THE 2012 LONDON OLYMPIC GAMES

Corporations have not only engaged in sponsorship deals with soccer clubs in order to build their brand name, they have also ventured into other sporting events, such as the Olympic Games. The 2012 London Games acquired $957 million in official Olympic sponsorships from brands, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) went to great lengths to protect those sponsors by keeping unofficial sponsors out (Beer, 2012). The Olympics have very strict regulations and grant special protection to the Games and its sponsors to help eliminate ambush marketing. "Ambush marketing is an attempt by a brand owner to associate itself either directly or indirectly with an event, celebrity or team without their sanction, without paying the usual licensing fees or sponsorship money and thereby also potentially depriving the official sponsors of commercial value derived for their official sponsor designation" (Palomba, 2011). Only official sponsors can advertise within the Olympic venues and they created "brand exclusion zones" up to one kilometer in diameter around each venue. Logos on any of the products within the stadiums, such as hand dryers in the washrooms, were also covered up in order to help protect paying sponsors. Non-sponsors outside of those zones were forbidden from using any word related to the Olympic Games within any of their advertising. Even official sponsors have limited rights to advertising during the Olympic Games, where they can only advertise on television during commercial breaks. This means that official sponsors expect strict regulations to prevent ambush marketing in order to make their investments worthwhile (Palomba, 2011).

Although there are regulations put into place in order to protect the official sponsors, ambush marketers have found loopholes in order to unofficially get their name out during the Olympic Games. One thing they can do is to cut their campaign very close to being associated with the Olympics. According to the article "How to Brand Crash the Olympics", Lululemon brand did this for the 2010 Vancouver Games with its line, "Cool Sporting Event That Takes Place in British Columbia Between 2009 & 2011" in order to sneakily bypass the regulations (Beer, 2012). Another way to get around official Olympic sponsorship is to directly sponsor an athlete. Puma is the perfect example for using this strategy because they have been the longtime sponsor of Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt who is always decked out in Puma gear, which takes away from the official sponsor of Adidas and helps promote Puma. Lastly, unofficial sponsors are able to utilize the Internet in order to reach out to a large audience due to the fact that it is hardest to regulate the activity of unofficial sponsors online. Examples of brands that were able to successfully execute viral campaigns were Nike and Pepsi during the 2010 World Cup (Beer, 2012).

Aside from the ambush marketers, there were some successful official sponsors during the 2012 London Games that did a great job of connecting their business with sports. British Airways' big creative idea was to encourage people not to fly during the time of the Olympics. The company chose to run with this campaign because its main service is to fly people, but the "Don't Fly" message was intended to encourage their main customers to stay at home and support the UK team. This campaign was very successful for British Airways and helped boost their brand. At the end of the campaign they launched a "Thank You" message and offered a major sale on their ticket prices, which in turn increased their customer base by 30% and resulted in a 20% increase in positive sentiment towards their brand. "Sports sponsorship can not just be about glitz and glamour any more. Brands that want to be taken seriously need to ask what they are doing for their communities" (Fry, 2013).

## POTENTIAL DOWNSIDES OF SPORTS SPONSORSHIPS

Although sports sponsorships are an apt way to gain a lot of reach and help increase brand awareness, there are some possible downsides to these deals, especially within European football where the rivalries are no laughing matter. A recent study in the Journal of Advertising Research raises the question "Do you still buy the beer when the brewer underwrites a rival team?" and suggests that many researchers may have overlooked the fact that sponsorships may actually have negative effects on some brands. "For the sponsor of one team, the negative associations held by fans of a rival team may transfer to the brand, resulting in a possible negative brand effect of sponsoring" (Bergkvist, 2012). This study looked specifically at two rival football teams in Sweden and their beer sponsors. Beer brand Åbro sponsored team AIK, and beer brand Falcon sponsored team Hammarby. The results of this study showed that fans of AIK transferred their dislike of rival team Hammarby to the Falcon beer brand, and vice-versa.

Table 4 displays English Premier League beer brand sponsorships. Although the negative impacts on sports sponsorship occur less frequently, it is important for companies to realize that instances like this may occur and they should develop a plan in order to reduce the possible negative effects of brand association.

## Table 4

| Club | Beer Sponsor |
|---|---|
| Arsenal | - |
| Aston Villa | Heineken |
| Birmingham City | – |
| Blackburn Rovers | – |
| Blackpool | – |
| Bolton Wanderers | Carling |
| Chelsea | Singha |
| Everton | Chang |
| Fulham | Carling |
| Liverpool | Carlsberg |
| Manchester City | Heineken |
| Manchester United | Singha |
| Newcastle | Carling |
| Stoke City | Carlsberg |
| Sunderland AFC | Heineken |
| Tottenham Hotspur | Carlsberg |
| West Bromwich Albion | Carlsberg |
| West Ham United | Carlsberg |
| Wigan Athletic | Carling/Molson Coors |
| Wolverhampton Wanderers | Carling |

**Source:** Bergkvist, L. (2012)

## GROWTH OF INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

In addition to sponsorships, the sports industry is also seeing an increase in their online presence. Internet marketing and social media marketing are becoming major components of the industry's marketing mix. The rapid growth of the Internet allows any and all organizations to expand their global presence at a very low cost, and also helps eliminate constraints such as physical location, scale and the difference in time zones (Hill, 2009). What this means for European football clubs is that they can effectively communicate and create relationships with their fans and supporters all throughout the world, regardless of their geographic location. Soccer clubs can enhance their image through the use of Internet marketing by keeping an updated website that informs fans about relevant news, players' profiles and statistics (Kriemadis, Terzoudis & Kartakoullis 2010). They can also provide ticket information and allow users to make quick online purchases directly from their website which could result in an increase in ticket sales.

Because the Internet acts as a free market, organizations are provided with more opportunities to sell their products globally. Football clubs can take advantage of this by making their merchandise available through the Internet to their fans across the world. Many of the major club teams have been actively engaged in Internet marketing because they have realized that it may be used as a pervasive communication, relationship-building, and promotional tool (Kriemadis et al., 2010).

Another way that the Internet impacts football clubs is that it acts as a medium for market segmentation and target marketing. "Football clubs can use the Internet to compile a large database of users with rich and detailed marketing information, which then creates a better understanding of web customers' needs and the customization of products" (Kriemadis et al., 2010). One example of this is to have fans who visit the website enter their information, such as their email, address and their favorite player, etc., thus enabling the football club to send them specialized information about things such as upcoming games in their area or deals on merchandise for their favorite player. Many companies already engage in these types of activities and have been able to successfully target many different groups of consumers based on the information they have gathered through their online database.

Social media marketing is another tool that is having a significant impact on sports sponsorship. "It makes it much easier for brands and rights holders to engage with fans. You can personalize your brand's relationship with them but also respond to the things they're saying online" (Fry, 2013). Mediums such as Facebook and Twitter have redefined social media marketing and have made it possible for customers and fans of brands to communicate directly with the company. One specific example of a football sponsor that engaged in online marketing was Heineken's use of its mobile application "Heineken Star Player" to accompany the brand's Champions League sponsorship (Fry, 2013). This application allowed users to play a game while still watching the Champions

League soccer match which successfully engaged fans and provided additional entertainment to them, which in turn helped build their brand image.

## IMPACT OF FUTURE TECHNOLOGIES

As the Internet expands and allows organizations to conduct business in ways never thought possible, other advancements in technology are also being made that will impact European football as a whole. The newest, most relevant technology worth focusing on is the adoption of soccer's goal-line technology. The first system is the Hawk-Eye system, developed in England, which has already been used in sports like cricket and tennis. In soccer, this system will include six cameras at each goal to track the ball and a software system that will send a signal of the location of the ball to the referee (Bell, 2012). This system will greatly improve the accuracy of the call on the field and only takes one second to process.

The second technology is the GoalRef technology, developed in Germany and the Netherlands, which involves placing a microchip within the soccer ball. This chip is coordinated with sensors placed on the goal posts and emits signals when the ball crosses those sensors. This system is thought to be less expensive than the Hawkeye technology, however, both systems average a cost of about $200,000 per stadium to implement (Bell, 2012).

Goal-line controversies happen frequently within many different soccer tournaments and leagues throughout the world, which is why the question comes into play of whether or not to implement a technology to more accurately determine the legitimacy of goals. Major League Soccer in the United States has already offered to be the first league to take on these new goal-line technologies, and is predicted to be the first league that will embrace these new systems (Bell, 2012). The significance of these technologies is that they will impact future regulations of soccer and will also require marketing amongst European countries in order to inform the fans of the new changes and get them on board. Without informing and marketing these technologies to the fans, the UEFA risks backlash and outrage from fans that believe that there should be no change in the way that soccer is officiated.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, it is clear to see that changes in regulations in European football have a great impact on many other aspects of the sport, including the marketing tactics used within the sport. Ever since the Bosman ruling in 1995, soccer has not been the same. The ruling impacted the entire business structure of soccer. With players now being able to move freely across teams and demand higher salaries, clubs are now raising their ticket prices in order to make up for the high costs they are spending on players.

One of the biggest business changes in soccer is that now players essentially act as a walking billboard for corporations, and sponsorships are soaring. The airline industry and the Olympics are two big areas where the impacts of sponsorships can clearly be seen.  Many airlines are using soccer sponsorships to get their name out there and build their brand and it has proven to be extremely effective, but it does not end there.  "The future for sports sponsorship looks good for a few reasons...one being that the marketing paradigm continues to shift from interruptive ads towards always-on engagement" (Fry, 2013).

The growth of sponsorships, along with the emergence of social media marketing and the increase in new technologies, influences the way business is done within the soccer industry, and is creating a whole new era and meaning for European football.  Soccer is not just a sport for leisure enjoyment anymore; it is a business and acts as an open playing field for marketers worldwide.

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