Towards new forms of popular football?

Peter Mindegaard
Center for Sports, Health and Civil Society, University of Southern Denmark

Published on the Internet, www.idrottsforum.org/articles/mindegaard/mindegaard070606.html
(ISSN 1652–7224), 2007–06–06

Copyright © Peter Mindegaard 2007. All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

The beautiful game, the people’s game, the most common form of sports on the planet – there is no doubt about it, football in and of itself, shed of its historically determined layers of symbols and meaning, is something very special; football captures, awakens – or is an expression of – the intrinsic need in human beings for physical play, games and competitions. Practically every living male has kicked a ball on time or another, and a growing proportion of women as well. Football in all its forms and shapes is a well-developed field of research within sports science, with particular focus on the contemporary expressions of commercially and media-driven football culture. idrottsforum.org has published a number of articles that demonstrates the primacy of elite football, in media as well as in terms of sports consumption, at the expense of popular football.

But there are alternatives that signal resistance to this colonization of the people’s game, to the fact that football to most people is something to consume rather than to produce, and, moreover, that it is mediated football that is consumed. Peter Mindegaard has surveyed the field of football in order to find expressions of this new popular football, for instance within the “sports for all”-concept, as part of a research project financed by DGI. Mindegaards point of departure is the hypothesis that football presently is in the first phase of a process of foundational change that will move the game away from the current dominating paradigm of football as synonymous with elite football, towards a diversification of the football landscape that will open up the game for greater variation in the way football is played, and thus for popular football outside the hierarchical structure of the league system.
Football holds a strong position in the mind of many Europeans, and it is not by accident that the game was characterized as “the people’s game”.\(^1\) A game for “the common man” – whoever it may be, a game both for the active participant and for the passive consumer.

Seen from the point of view of the consumer, professional soccer has met with a considerable amount of problems during recent years, among others the Bosman case, problems with fixed matches in Germany and Italy, and the ongoing debate about the “big 14”-clubs possibly breaking out of UEFA. On the participant level, soccer has seen stagnation in the number of club members, at a time when sports in general have increased their active membership. A growing part of the active members are children and youngsters – which would be good news, if not most of them stop their involvement when turning into teenagers.

In the media, most football coverage is about the results and performances of the major teams from all over the world and the above mentioned problems (in professional soccer), overlooking that there is something else is going on in the world of football. To claim that the competitive soccer of Anglo-Saxon tradition is challenged by new initiatives would be too dramatic. But new tendencies are challenging the ways in which football is practiced, and thus the established sporting paradigm of inclusion and exclusion. New forms of tournaments are being arranged, football schools with purposes beyond competition-only are established,\(^2\) and football is trying to regain, or redefine, its place in urban life. The different attempts, leading into new directions, may for the time being be seen merely as small ripples on the surface, but might soon reveal themselves as parts of a bigger movement.

The above mentioned trends allow the hypothesis that football enters – once more – into a stage of development or change, that football is moving away from the paradigm of the pyramid with its inherent distinction between elite soccer and popular football – towards more diversity, involving a multitude of different paradigms.

The present hypothesis concerning the character of development in society follows some hints from Danish futurology, which has outlined some central changes in our lives over the past 6-7 years that may have impact on our life in the future.\(^3\) Society develops in leaps, rather than in one continuous process.

The present study is based on an ongoing research project, “Ballgames in cultural and social changes”, sponsored by the Danish Gymnastic and Sports Association (DGI), which explores the new practices in the field of football. This furnished us with an empirical basis. On an analytical level, a method must be found to explain the links between sports culture and sports practice on one hand, and between sports practise and the surrounding socio-political culture on the other.\(^4\) The configurational analysis, relating back to the thoughts of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, offers a methodology to describe the interdependent connections in which movement culture and societies create each other. By the analysis of configurations, one can investigate any event as a specific pattern, thus

---


\(^2\) In the Open Fun Football Schools soccer is used to reconcile people from different ethnical groups in former Yugoslavia. Amongst others, described in:
Nielsen, Knud Åge & Rasmussen, Max (1999). *Play Ball – with your Life at Stake*. Vejle: DGI.

\(^3\) Hoppe, Maria-Therese (2002). *Fremtiden kommer i spring*. København: Aschehoug.

avoiding the over-generalization of events as parts of one all-embracing paradigm of civilization or modernization. In this way, the configurational method has already been applied to a cultural analysis of the National Gathering of Popular Sports in Denmark, the DGI Landsstævne on Bornholm 2002, where its methodological possibilities were shown by asking questions in a new way.\(^5\) The traditional and critical research question “why” is replaced by asking “how”, attempting to understand phenomena on a level of their own, by their specific configuration. This may make it possible to go one step deeper towards a study of body culture in changing society.

**Progress and tension: The time of football**

Sports participation requires time. As people do not dispose of an infinite quantity of time, it is a question of priority, first of all whether or not to participate in football, and secondly, how much time to spend on it. In a society characterized by in-depth changes, time, its division, budgeting and use is extremely diverse. The division of time is very different among people of different lifestyles\(^6\) – it differs between gender groups, between younger and elderly people, between different social life-forms. Whereas people in the early phases of the Danish industrial society, up to the 1950s,\(^7\) seemed to live rather homogeneous lives, working nine to five in large industrial and bureaucratic institutions, people today seem to live in more heterogeneous patterns: flexible instead of fixed working hours, shorter periods of employment instead of lifelong affiliation with one employer, more and longer education throughout life instead of just one standardized education intended to last a lifetime. These structural changes make an important difference between today’s society and past societies. Whereas the agrarian society was characterized by cyclical and repetitive modes of production and living, concerns about progress and linear evolution marked industrial society. In the era of post-modernity,\(^8\) things are mixed up. One could, quoting Karl Marx, say that all that once was solid now melts into air.

Football must be seen in connection with this societal change. In pre-modern times, football games were often situational and cyclically bound, being linked to religious gatherings, carnivals or popular festivity.\(^9\) In industrial society, the original cyclical elements disappeared, and instead a linear pattern dominated: The participation in soccer became dependent and ranked according to the last season’s results. A linear progress entered into the sequences of competitions and trainings. This gave rise to new expectations, which would move people emotionally and create the experience of a time-directed tension. This tension became a basis for soccer to be part of the entertainment industry – side by side with the criminal novel and the action movie.


\(^8\) This period has been given many different names, and a discussion is outside the topic of this text.

Today, however, one finds more and more exceptions from this rule. People meet for football performed as sole events, outside the progressive ranking. This is true for football played at the Danish DGI gatherings as well as for Italian UISP games. ¹⁰ Players come, they play, they go – they may never come again, or they meet again, but without any formalized hierarchical structure of time, without creating tensions going from the “bottom” through to the “top”.

The place and the field: The pace of football

In connection with the mentioned transformation of society, the environment in which we live has changed as well, from up to the 1930s¹¹, when many people in Denmark were self-supported and when production was deeply locally based, to the beginning of the 21ˢᵗ century, when production and distribution of goods are centralised. These changes, connected with urbanisation, have shaped a society with more noticeable characteristics of centre and periphery, city and countryside – a society where the spaces, in the city as well in the countryside, continuously are being more specialized.

In this spatial context, sports and soccer, demanding hegemonic-specific surroundings and the standardization of space, have better options than other forms of physical practice. Football, which was once played in the open landscape in all its diversity, as seen in some relics of British and Breton popular football, is now reduced to especially constructed areas, normally subjected to international standardization.

However, beside the institutionalized soccer a wide range of other football-like activities is going on. These activities, which are mostly practised in urban areas, are somehow connected to the changing space of the city. Football in this context is played in permanent basketball-like surroundings¹² and in parks, which were earlier forbidden. Municipalities offer temporarily established fields¹³ and mini-pitches. And most recently, pay-and-play activities have developed, as in the activity house of DGI in Aarhus.

This development shows that football in connection to space has gone through an hourglass from large diversity of places in the beginning to a narrow standard of space during the decades of sportification, and it may now be on a way to regain some of its lost diversity. Quoting John Bale on the distinction between space and place, one could argue that we are on a way to a society characterized by a diversity of places in football.¹⁴ Where there on one hand is the traditional modern mainstream football, played in the institutionalized space, there are on the other hand different kinds of semi- or self-organized football, played by local rules in local places. The latter, with its temporary modus and its lack of “tradi-
Atmosphere, stress and laughter: The energy of football

To describe the energy of football depends on a deeper understanding of the word energy. If energy is understood as an ability to act, as in the original Greek meaning of *energeia*, the concept can be applied to different configurations of human activity. In traditional folk football, as played in the open landscape, tensions could go high, and both laughter (after the game was over) and the grotesque (as people fighting to get a ball fallen into a stream) was part of a common experience. In this case, people were acting on their own, in an attempt to win the game for themselves and their village. With the institutionalisation of football as sport, the energy of the game was gradually controlled and restricted by common agreed rules. A new type of energy developed, which was directed towards the best of one’s own team. In this way one might speak, with Elias, of an energetic civilizing process. This tendency has been developed even further in modern soccer.

Energy can also be seen in connection with the degree of seriousness, which follows the focus on results. In this connection, football has gone from carnival-like configurations, i.e. the atmosphere of festivity during and after the game towards configurations of tension connected to the result. Or, to put it in another way: as an activity done mostly in holidays, football was connected with expectations of breaking every-day routine, whereas soccer nowadays, being practiced in thoroughly organized spare-time, as a leisure activity, meets people’s intention to relax and to avoid the stress of modern life. The paradox is, that not so few people now reject playing soccer, because to them, the rhythm of the game – with training and matches on the thoroughly organized schedule of the week – is a stressing element.

In this respect, those who meet on irregular basis playing football in the park or somewhere else, are in a way regaining some of the elements of early football: laughter and friendship across the teams. It is a place, where the physical and the psychological body meet – in an after-stress or counter-stress atmosphere.

Far and near: Interpersonal relations of football

Interpersonal relations are connected to the meeting of people, both when they meet in groups and as individuals. In traditional popular football the meeting was between two villages, them against us, with most of the inhabitants of the villages participating. Inside each team there was a feeling of belonging, a spirit of community in the village.

In the era of sport, the distinction between them and us has become sharper. Here plays the elite of our club or town, and the opponents are now often strangers, from another part

---

of town, from a far-away town or from another country. And the teams we play against are not chosen by us, but depends on results and geographical patterns. This development lead from inclusion towards exclusion, from near relations to distant relations.

Compared to this, the new forms of popular football are (re)shaping some of the traditional connections of nearness. They make it possible for the participants to play with and against their friends, family and colleagues from work. The traditional hierarchy is broken down. It is indeed popular.

Results: Objectives and objectivations of football

One important premise of soccer is its connection to sport, i.e. to the sportive contradictions between winning and loosing and between product and process. But a game as complex as football would be simplified, if its winner-loser code was identified with the contradiction between product and process. Soccer as sport has the purpose to produce something, a result. If one asks anyone playing football – boys in the schoolyard, teenagers participating in a tournament or seniors “playing just for fun and old time friendship” – they will normally know the current score of the game. But it is not the result as such, which is significant for the different forms of football, but the relation between the result and the process.

In traditional folk football where inhabitants of two villages met in a game, the result was only of temporary importance, and not handed over. It was the process that counted. In one respect, these games differed from other traditional games: Instead of pointing out a scapegoat, a winning team was found. In that respect, traditional folk football delivered some of the codes characterizing modern sport.

In modernity, however, things have changed, and results are nowadays, in the world of institutionalised sport, used to categorize and rank both players and teams. Results have changed from being of temporary importance to becoming permanent and fixed in tables. With the inherent paradox, that a victory both is connected to the actual result here and now – “who won today?” – and to the over-all result of the whole season. Anyway, now it is the result that counts.

In schoolyard football, in contrast, results are of temporary character only, lasting maybe from one break to the other. A special case is the senior team, which tries not to move up the ranks and therefore stays away from the season’s last matches. In this way, the senior players are on the one hand part of the tournament system and its selective paradigm, but on the other hand the team handles the rules according to its own best. In its own anarchist way, the senior team practices self-determination by self-selecting those to play with and against in future tournaments – without any ranking stress.
Competing organisations: Institutions of football

On the organisational level, football in Denmark is represented inside different frameworks, issued from bourgeois competitive sports, workers’ sports and popular sports.\(^{16}\) To understand this broad diffusion, one needs a short description of early Danish sports history.

In 1896, soccer was organized in DBU, The Danish Football Association. In the same year, DBU as the first association joined DIF, the Danish Sports Federation (which today includes the Danish Olympic Committee). Although at times a tumultuous relationship,\(^{17}\) DIF has since that time formed the basis for Danish soccer. However, football became part also of DAI, Danish Worker’s Sports Union, founded in 1929, and shortly after this, in the mid-thirties, football was taken up by DGI, too, as a “popular sport” alongside gymnastics. DAI, originally an independent association, joined DIF in 1943. From the view of an outsider, this organisational multiplicity and change may look a little confusing. But what is really remarkable about football in Denmark is that approximately ninety percent of the Danish clubs today are members of both of the major organizations, DIF and DGI. This means that they are on one hand members of an organisation connected to the Olympic sports paradigm and on the other hand of an organisation with a popular Sport-for-all paradigm. This can truly be regarded as an example of the Scandinavian spirit of consensus.

Analysed with a trialectical approach,\(^{18}\) the complex institutional place of football becomes clearer. Soccer in its earlier years developed in close connection with the upper and middle classes of the larger Danish cities. In that respect, it represented sport with its pyramid focusing on competition and the reproducibility of results. In the inter-war period, DAI representing the other part of the sports movement, the blue collar workers,\(^{19}\) tried to challenge DIF referring to a hygienic and social democratic paradigm and focusing on public health and equality. But as previously shown, DAI soon joined DIF, indicating a common consensus about sport – and thereby covering the existing differences in political ideologies. After this, DGI stood alone, representing the social, de-centralized and inclusive dimension of sports.

It should, however, not be forgotten, that a further – and minor – federation plays in this field of broad sports, too. The Danish Federation of Company Sports (DFIF) has football on its program.

Education and fun: Values and ideas of football

As bodily movement is closely connected to society, and as society is characterized by certain values shared by the majority, bodily movement is also a question of values. In the Danish context this means a distinction between bodily movement as valuable for oneself

---


\(^{19}\) In Denmark the sport movement was initialized by the upper middle class and soon spread to the working class.
on the one hand, and for society on the other. On another level, the main contradiction is between the education of the people for sport on one side, and the education by or through sport on the other side. The first one, education for sport, has been the dominating sports paradigm, focusing on efficiency, specialization, and competition. The workers’ sport of DAI, with its focus on education by sport towards discipline, health and integration – in the broadest sense of the word – has been adopted by the education-for-sport paradigm of DIF. As the organizational pattern indicated, differences in values may be significant, though they are not very explicit, ninety percent of the local clubs being organized in both organizations simultaneously. However, there is a tendency that the elite clubs are organized in DBU/DIF, while DGI organizes the teams and the clubs playing “just for fun”. And, notably, DGI organizes many of the youngsters. Thereby arises a contradiction between soccer played as performance sport and as a popular sport. But this bipolar model could – at least on the international level – be differentiated further, if clubs of the “the big 14” will break out of the established UEFA system. Thereby a new paradigm would become visible, a soccer league exclusively based upon the capitalist market and on commercial values.

Conclusions

At a time when soccer in political discussions is used to describe the essentials of European sports culture, it is important to point out that the field of football cannot just be described as soccer, or sport, in singular. The one-soccer paradigm does not recognise the diversity and the pluralism of football, as it is at present, and as it has always been. This is due to the fact, that football is connected to the surrounding society not just in relation to time and space, but also linked by dimensions of energy, interpersonal relations, objectivations, institutions and values. Football is a multiplicity of configurations, including not just the elite and the professionals, but also the games of the people, grassroot football. Thus, instead of being anxious about youngsters “voting by their feet”, i.e. dropping out of organized soccer, sports organizations have to take this fact seriously as a sort of silent critique – and to develop new possibilities for youngsters as well as for adults, giving them good reasons for joining football in the future. And to celebrate that we now – once more – are moving towards diversification of football, suitable for different kinds of people.

Literature


Nielsen, Knud Åge & Rasmussen, Max (1999). *Play Ball – with your Life at Stake.* Vejle: DGI.