

RED STAR PARIS



**MORE THAN JUST
A FOOTBALL CLUB**

**Punks, Politics and
Power Struggles
in the Fight for the
Coolest Club
on Earth**

SIMON BINNS

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Chapter 1

Football ownership in the modern age

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Who does a football club really belong to? The age-old question actually has a few different answers, depending on who you ask.

In the modern game, moral ownership is hardly worth the paper it's written on. It now has to compete with conglomerates, sovereign wealth funds, complicated corporate structures, shareholders and other controlling interests. Not to mention unnamed overseas backers, Hollywood actors, former quarterbacks, David Beckham, millionaires, billionaires, sponsors, TV deals, rights agreements, hedge funds; the list goes on.

The fans? In the last 20 years or so, the custodianship in perpetuity often claimed by supporters based on relentlessly turning up in the face of fluctuating fortunes has actually developed into something more sophisticated. Not through any harmonious union of boardroom and terraces, however. Necessity has been the mother of invention.

In the UK, only a handful of clubs operate within their financial means. Football is a business, we are often told – but the reality is that as an industry, it has never generated

more revenue while simultaneously racking up such eye-watering debts.

The excellent book *Soccernomics*, written by Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski, makes the point that Manchester United, for so long the feted commercial giant of world football, only generates enough profit to be considered as big as the 17th-largest company in Finland.

Local boy done good? Not so much these days. Football clubs are an expensive hobby horse and unless you've got the means to keep putting your hand in your own pocket, the novelty can wear off pretty quickly. My own club, Middlesbrough, is the last of a dying breed, where local lad and chairman Steve Gibson continues to fund the club through mixed fortunes. Despite his long-term stewardship, the relationship with the fans can still be strained. Spend less, spend more. Show ambition, be prudent. You can't please all of the people all of the time.

A lack of sustained commercial guile at board level paired with the shrewdness of fans – many of whom spend their days running far more successful enterprises than the ones they turn up to watch every weekend – led to an increase in the number of supporters' trusts across the UK.

Fans form a co-operative and buy a share, rather than chucking pennies and pounds into a bucket. The trust can then buy a share of the club, and some fans even take their place in the boardroom off the back of it. At the extreme end, trusts have started clubs as their response to an owner taking liberties with history or club culture – see AFC Wimbledon and FC United of Manchester for reference.

I know this because it's what I did for a living for two years, for an organisation called Supporters Direct, operated by the UK government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It was, in lots of ways, my dream job.

It was 2002 and I was in my early 20s. I loved football. I spent two years travelling up, down and across the country to attend urgently organised meetings with supporters who were worried that their clubs might be on the brink of collapse. And they were mostly right. Oftentimes, the clubs had collapsed already and nobody had gotten round to telling the fans.

Just around that time, a proposed TV deal between the Football League went bad when the broadcaster – ITV Digital – went bust. In classic ‘football is a business’ behaviour, the clubs had spent the money they were set to get from the deal before they’d actually received it.

Sky had outbid ITV twice for the TV rights to the Premier League, at a total cost of almost £1bn.

When the rights packages came up for tender again in 2000, Sky once more crushed its rivals for the three-year deal on top-flight coverage, paying £1.1bn. ITV Digital stumped up a whopping £315m for live Football League and League Cup games, some of which would be free to air on ITV.

Clubs in the rest of the football pyramid were set for their share of £105m a season. It was a huge payday at a time when most were looking for spare change down the back of their executive lounge sofas.

A 2022 article in British football magazine *FourFourTwo* carries quotes from two lower-league club representatives who were remarkably candid about the eagerness to get on with spending their new pocket money, having been assured it was reliable, secure income.

‘Everyone was wallowing in the money that it was bringing in,’ said Macclesfield Town’s former secretary, Colin Garlick. ‘What tends to happen in football is that if the broadcasting revenue goes up, then players’ income goes up with it.’

‘We were budgeting appropriately, and spending money we genuinely thought we would get.’

Burnley chairman Barry Kilby said the club had ‘put it in as part of our revenue stream – we had money to spend, and we did’.

The big problem was that apart from the match-going fans, nobody wanted to watch lower-league football. Nobody was buying ITV’s satellite boxes, games were being scheduled for odd times of the week and Sky was hammering them for subscriptions.

An ITV broadcast of Bradford City v Nottingham Forest in the Football League was watched by 1,000 people. It was to be a peak. At the other end of the scale, the 2022 League Cup semi-final between Blackburn Rovers and Sheffield Wednesday was, according to official media analyst figures, watched by zero people.

The following month, Granada chairman Charles Allen wrote to prime minister Tony Blair to tell him that ITV Digital was on the verge of collapse and would need a bailout to survive.

ITV Digital was instead put into administration, owing the Football League £180m and having blown a hole in almost every club’s finances for the foreseeable future.

Clubs forced into administration because of the collapsed deal included the league’s oldest, Notts County. The phones at Supporters Direct started ringing off the hook.

For the next few months, I attended meetings in town halls, pubs, snooker clubs, you name it. Anywhere from 50 to 450 fans would regularly show up, asking how to save their clubs and make sure nothing like this happened again.

By the end of those two years, my view of football had changed. It was a cynical, cruel business that valued money

above all else and viewed fans as a necessary inconvenience. A vocal rabble who should turn up and shut up.

At Oldham Athletic, I couldn't get into the supporters' club bar at Boundary Park because the gates were locked. Did I have the wrong date? I could hear noise, a buzz of people. 'Are you the supporters' trust bloke?' asked a steward, appearing from across the car park. 'You need to go in through the turnstiles, they're on the pitch waiting for you.'

So many people had turned up that they moved the meeting to the main stand, where almost 1,000 fans had gathered, fearful for their club and what losing it might mean for their community.

That feeling exists in every country, at almost every club.

In Spain, Barcelona is held up as the global standard for fan ownership and involvement. The *socis* (members) have elected the club's president since 1975 when the death of Franco opened the door to democracy at the Camp Nou. The club has upwards of 150,000 *socis*, who have their say on the big issues and the relationship is pretty well established.

Success helps, of course.

Germany's Bayern Munich also has an active and influential supporters' trust: around 378,000 members at last count and that fan involvement has helped keep the club in check financially. Recent figures for the 2023/24 season show a turnover of €1bn. Bayern CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen told members the club 'has always stood for economic solidity paired with maximum success, both on and off the pitch'.

French football hasn't really caught up though. Fan ownership through corporate structures like trusts isn't really part of the culture.

At Red Star, the question of ownership was always pretty easy to answer, at least until recently – Red Star belonged to Patrice Haddad.

A flamboyant filmmaker with a penchant for a beret and sunglasses, Haddad has been president at Red Star since 2008, when the club was only just out of the sixth tier of French football.

In May 2022, however, Haddad and his holding company PH1 sold Red Star to Miami-based 777 Partners for a reported €19m.

777 was a burgeoning investment firm and part of the growing wave of owners that subscribe to the multi-club model. The group already owned Genoa in Italy and Standard Liège in Belgium, and held a stake in Spanish club Sevilla. 777 would also go on to buy Vasco da Gama in Brazil, Australian side Melbourne Victory and Germany's Hertha Berlin. A cross-continental collection of clubs where there was room for growth, a lack of recent trophies and some decent marketing crossover. Sleeping giants waiting to be re-awoken and more importantly, revalued upwards, as part of an international football family. Talk of synergies and such. The *Audoniens* gave them a foothold in France.

But it didn't land well with the fans. Not at all.

The Tribune Rino Della Negra – the official supporters' group also known as the Bauer Collectif – launched a petition against the deal.

'During its 125 years of existence, Red Star has known glory, popular enthusiasm, but also shipwrecks and many disappointments,' it read. 'This chaotic history makes it an atypical club that reminds all football lovers that another football is still possible. However, this is threatened by the takeover of the club by the American investment fund 777 Partners.'

‘On the evening of May 11, Red Star FC was officially sold to the company 777 Partners. French football has become a new Eldorado for these financial predators. The [structure] is becoming established all over the world as the new economic model, allowing them to plunder training centres, speculate, multiply transfers and opaque transactions between franchised clubs.

‘Meanwhile, football authorities are silent and turning a blind eye. The legislature must react and take up this issue! For us, Red Star is a common good that cannot be sacrificed on the altar of profit. We call on all Red Star supporters and football lovers across the country to block the sale and mobilise to make this fight a national fight against football business and defend another vision of football.’

The petition was counter-signed by former players and influential fans and local figures in music, culture, academia and the arts, the official fan group of Grenoble Foot 38 – Red Kaos – with whom Red Star fans have a special relationship, and political players including the local MPs for Saint-Ouen and surrounding neighbourhoods. It was signed by 1,870 people. The average Red Star crowd that season was 2,384.

Petitions aside, the fans had no real say – because they had no claim to meaningful ownership. Not in the corporate world.

Speculation ran rife that the new owners would turn Red Star into a feeder club for the rest of the 777 portfolio and concerns they would rip up the Bauer.

Other far-reaching theories are almost certainly due to get me sued or worse if I print them here, but you get the gist. Football fans are a cynical bunch, but recent history has told us that distant ownership can go either way and it’s the fans who are left to pick up the pieces.

For this club in particular, its history, values and traditions are worth more than any amount of money to those most loyal fans.

Haddad hit back, telling supporters they ‘didn’t exclusively own the DNA of the club’.

‘Either they take part in the project or they don’t. Personally, I think they will, but they don’t exclusively own the club’s DNA,’ he told *L’Équipe*. ‘I myself respected and maintained it, working on the basis of a simple phrase: work on the body and awaken the spirit.’

‘The price wasn’t [an issue], because we were all on the same level. The real subject was the DNA of the club and [777] sensed the particularities of our world from the beginning. We will never be a platform for trading.’

‘However, how do you protect football if you don’t have the means? How do you keep ticket prices at €10? All of that needs financing, all of it.’

‘Similarly, 777 are coming to protect the academy. [The fans] opposed us because they said our academy will be plundered. Well, it’s been plundered for the last 15 years. We see 777 as a problem, but it’s the solution.’

These words, it turns out, were about to come back and haunt Haddad in a quite monumental way. They also set the scene for a turbulent, oppositional and often violent relationship with Haddad’s version of Red Star.

When I worked for Supporters Direct, new owners of lower-league clubs were almost exclusively motivated by one thing – the value of the land the stadium was sat on. There were some additional attractions too – the ability to move money quickly and easily without too much scrutiny, leveraging existing debt to unlock investment that largely became directors’ dividends and left the interest payments with the club, and a nice comfy box on matchdays when they bothered to show up.

In contrast, 777 came armed with a relatively conservative plan to take Red Star back to Ligue 2 within two years, redevelop the Bauer and consolidate. Yes, young talent might be nurtured, moved around the group and then sold on – but that’s football, right?

As it stood, prohibitive domestic rules around youth development and professional contracts for young players were doing Red Star no favours anyway. Clubs in the Championnat would regularly lose their best prospects at 15 because they simply weren’t allowed to keep them on professional contracts as they didn’t have an accredited academy.

Corporate structures and creative accounting have become as fundamental to football as the *gegenpress* and the half-time pie. Fans have become more expert in reading balance sheets and Companies House has replaced the weekly football pink sheet in most places. Complex financial instruments and ownership arrangements lurk beneath the surface of almost every top-flight club.

Red Star’s new owners – unbowed by the fan protests – immediately made use of their new acquisition and loaned in defender Paolo Gozzi from Genoa.

Haddad remained as club president, a visible and ebullient presence at home games.

* * *

Red Star start their 2023/24 campaign with a 2-1 away win against newly promoted SAS Épinal in front of 1,700 people. They will play home games at their Bauer stadium this season, after years of being moved around due to a host of safety concerns and rules based on the division they were playing in.

What looks for the most part like a comfortable away performance is given some extra edge when the

hosts score 15 minutes from the end, setting up a nervy finale.

I watch and listen from my back garden, on my phone, while painting my shed.

My wife and my neighbour think I'm having a breakdown. It's a pleasant August Friday evening, there's a bottle of wine on the kitchen top. We should be sitting together watching the birds flit around the pink summer sky in our garden. But that will have to wait until the final whistle, and I know for a fact I can absolutely draw out the shed painting for exactly 90 minutes (plus stoppages). The Championnat is back and the disappointment of the last game of last season is quickly forgotten. The thrill of what might be and the annual hopeless optimism shared by football fans everywhere returns.

One of the most entertaining things about the Championnat – also referred to as the National League – is the ridiculous variation in stadium sizes and capacities. Because of the compressed nature of the French pyramid, the third tier is made up of fallen giants, barely professional sports clubs and everything in between.

This season it ranges from Le Mans (capacity 25,000) to Marignane Gignac Côte Bleue FC (1,500). The highest attendance for the season will be 18,034 for Le Mans v Nancy; the lowest will be just 104 for Marignane v Villefranche on 9 February 2024. Each one of those people deserves a medal.

French commentary garbles out of my tiny device; my wife rolls her eyes but not so much that I might stop painting. For better or for worse, in football and marriage.

It's an unconvincing start for Red Star. Stage fright amid great expectations perhaps, but the season is under way, and three points are firmly on the board. Fears that the last-day disappointment of a few months

earlier might hangover into the new campaign are put to bed, just.

After last year's near miss, Habib Beye has spent the summer laying out a clear message to his squad. Success, with no excuses.

A club insider tells me that his message on the training ground is no mercy. No near misses, no slip-ups. Red Star this season will dominate everything in their path, and anything less will be a failure. Beye doesn't just want to beat other teams, he wants to crush them. He wants to win the league and then some. The dressing room is fired up and there's an air of determined optimism around the Bauer.

New signing Ivann Botella opens his account after only five minutes, pointing to a potentially shrewd bit of business by Beye and his advisors. He cost nothing, arriving on a free from RWD Molenbeek in Belgium.

Cheikh N'Doye, the 37-year-old veteran midfielder-turned-makeshift striker, picks up where he left off last season to add Red Star's second. He's a fan favourite, full of honest endeavour and a no-nonsense approach to the art of being a centre-forward.

Red Star have been forced to shuffle the pack in pre-season – but unlike PSG, there was no oil money or outrageous contract offers. Eight players departed – four on free transfers and another four allowed to leave after their contracts expired.

Beye and Marlet, the former striker now employed as chief advisor to Haddad, had to wheel and deal in the free transfer market to pick up a handful of new recruits, including Botella.

Of all the transfer deals done by Red Star in the summer, Beye is maybe the most important of all. The club's failure to clinch promotion sent a number of Ligue 2 clubs into high alert. He held talks with Sochaux and

Amiens; Haddad reportedly started drawing up a list of possible replacements.

But for now he remains as manager. His contract expires at the end of the season. Anything other than promotion will almost certainly mean the end of his time at Red Star for the promising young manager with a growing army of admirers.

Beye's assistant, Pierre Sage, did leave the club over the summer though, to return to Olympique Lyonnais as director of their youth academy while he works towards his own coaching badges.

The opening-day win is followed by defeat at GOAL FC and a win against Sochaux at the Bauer, leaving fans optimistic but none the wiser as to where Red Star might actually be going this season. But six points out of nine is an encouraging start.

And the shed looks pretty good too.