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Cardiff City Football Club as a Vehicle to Promote Welsh National Identity

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Abstract

The issue of identity in contemporary Britain is a complex phenomenon, with a number of cultural reference points employed in its construction. The significance of football, particularly since it was professionalized in the late nineteenth century, has for many served as a key definer of identity (Bale, 1994). More specifically, football clubs have provided opportunities for the affirmation and expression of identifications on various levels (Bromberger, 1993). Cardiff City FC for example, is often noted for creating, managing and promoting Welsh national identity (Johnes, 2000). This article explores the details of and reasons for this process. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with experienced match-going Cardiff supporters, as well as with journalists connected with the club. It is argued here that although Cardiff has often been associated with rugby union (Jones and Richards, 2001), there is a growing sense that this football club is more significant in many parts of South Wales than the Welsh rugby team. This is explained because Cardiff City is considered by many to be primarily 'about being Welsh'. In addition, the ethos of the club also focuses on a conscious social differentiation from English identity. The role of the Cardiff City's former chairman, Sam Hammam, was explored in this respect. It is claimed here that he achieved considerable success in focusing and expressing Welsh national identity through Cardiff City in a number of ways. Conversely however, Hammam was found to have misinterpreted elements of this identity, underestimating the intensity of regional Welsh rivalries. Also, although Cardiff's identity is heavily impacted by the fact they play in the English league, it is argued here that the only way for the club to realise its potential would involve qualifying for European competition. However, UEFA regulations prevent a league being represented in Europe by a technically 'foreign' club. Opportunities to express this identity therefore are limited by the club's refusal to depart from the English league system, a decision based partly on the fact that it is the context of the English league which has given voice to and helped shape this identity.

Introduction

The concept of identity in modern Britain is a multifaceted phenomenon. In for-

mulating and expressing this identity, individuals draw from a number of cultural reference points. Football clubs are a key example in this regard (Archetti, 1994). Bradley (1995) argues that football supporters obtain considerable psychological satisfaction from seeing their team achieve success. This can relate to media coverage, social events, wearing the colours of the team and identifying with its emblems and symbols, which represent years of history as well as everyday realities. Also, Coelho states that: "It is fascinating, even though sometimes frightening, how a football team gains vast and complex social signification and symbolism which overtake the simple outcome of a sporting competition" (1998: 159). Furthermore, MacClancy states that "sports…are vehicles of identity, providing people with a sense of difference and a way of classifying themselves and others, whether latitudinally or hierarchically" (1996: 2). More specifically, Bromberger argues that football "offers an expressive support for the affirmation of collective identity and local, regional and national antagonisms" (1993: 91). In the vast majority of countries in which football is a culturally dominant sport, the national team makes a considerable contribution to the construction and maintenance of respective national identity. For example, in Asia, football adopted a key role in the unification of North and South Yemen into the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1990 (Stevenson and Alaug, 1999). From a European perspective, Marks (1999) notes that the multi-ethnic composition of France's 1998 World Cup winning team served to promote racial tolerance and integration in a nation that has been subjected to considerable right-wing influence.

The significance of football in the context of identity construction is notable in the UK. Britain has the oldest and most developed professional, semi professional and amateur club network in the world (Rookwood and Buckley, 2007), and many of these establishments play a key role in promoting national and regional identities. Cardiff City FC is one of the most prominent clubs in this regard. It is historically and currently the most successful club in Welsh football, and is the only team based in the Welsh capital (Crooks, 1992; Allt, 2004). Identity among supporters, players and officials of the club however, is a complex issue as the club has spent almost its entire existence competing in the English system, with non-Welsh involvement at player, owner, managerial and corporate levels. In the past century, the club's supporters have developed a strong sense of Welsh identity in the context of continuous English opposition, manifested through proclamations of pro-Welsh and anti-English sentiment. The club has had to cope with severe threats to its identity from the rival sport of rugby union and the mass support for English-based football teams, such as Liverpool, Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal, Leeds United and Nottingham Forest, all of whom have well-established supporters clubs in the region (Jones and Rivers, 2002). A succession of Cardiff City's owners have tried to capitalise on the club's strong cross-cultural catchment area, which includes much of South Wales, including the capital city and the mass urban sprawl of the Gwent and Glamorgan mining valleys.

This paper focuses on the characteristics of the profound Welsh identity associated with Cardiff City. This investigation also explores the reasons for its development, including the various socio-political and nationalistic influences. Following the guidance of Bloor *et al.* (2001), semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with supporters and journalists connected with the club. In terms of the criteria for selection for the former component, participants were only included in the work if they had attended at least fifty per cent of Cardiff City's home and away matches during each of the last ten seasons. Structurally, this exploration is centred on issues including the significance of the sport relative to the national sport of rugby union and the socio-political status and structure of Welsh football and Cardiff City. In addition, the investigation explores the role of former Cardiff owner Sam Hammam in this context. The Cardiff case is also considered relative to FC Barcelona and Glasgow Celtic, both of which express identities outside of the league in which they compete (Jones and Rivers, 2002). Barcelona identifies with a sense of Catalan 'national' identity, and yet the club are the second most successful team in the Spanish league. Similarly Celtic are the second most successful team in the Scottish league, and yet their identity is based largely on the concept of Irish nationalism.

Cardiff City and Welsh national identity

Brookes (2002) states that national identity is constructed through representations of difference from other national identities, and that through negative stereotyping of other nations, a positive sense of national self-identity is implied. He also contends that national identity is usually constructed through establishing the difference between 'us' and 'them'. The national sport in Wales is rugby union and it is widely believed that its mass popularity has grown out of a historical opportunity to beat their English neighbours, who are perceived both historically and currently to be superior to the Welsh in population, political prowess and financial acumen. However, the chairman of Cardiff City's Supporters Club stated: "I already think we are bigger than the Welsh rugby team. I don't think Welsh rugby can compete with what we have got now. And Cardiff City are going to get bigger, whereas Welsh rugby crowds seem to be dwindling all the time." Conversely, the sports editor of the *Western Mail* argued that, "Cardiff City in the Premiership would be very big, but I think it will be a while before they can match the power of Welsh rugby." However he also added that, "there is nothing more fanatical than Welsh club football." This was explained by a fan who participated in a focus group, who argued that: "People who follow Cardiff City also follow their Welshness."

During Cardiff City's most successful period in the 1920s, they appeared in two Wembley FA Cup finals. The club lost to Sheffield United in 1925, but in 1927, Cardiff became the only club to take the FA Cup out of England. Cardiff beat Arsenal 1-0,

an event which strongly bolstered the club's identity (Jones and Rivers, 2002). Johnes claims that these finals: "represented Wales proudly and publicly taking her place in a British national institution and reminding people on the other side of the border that Britain did not just mean England" (2002: 53). In reflecting on this achievement, one fan argues that: "Winning the FA Cup puts you on the map. It doesn't matter when it is; it's there in black and white. It gives us the credentials in football terms." Mills states that the process of constructing 'meaning' or an identity' for something is based on two principles: semantics (establishing what something is in itself), and syntax (establishing what it is not" (1959: 42-3). In an inadvertent application of this notion to football fandom, Bairner and Shirlow state that: "Supporting particular soccer teams allows these fans to express their opposition to rival identities whilst celebrating their own" (1999: 162). In the context of this investigation therefore, as one fan stated: "Being Welsh is about being Welsh but it's as much about not being English or British." Another supporter claimed that "Welsh identity is hating England on the sporting field." In relation to rugby, another respondent stated: "Rugby fans only get to show they hate the English once a year at the Six Nations tournament, but Cardiff play an English team every week. So twice a month we can go invade the English."

Cardiff City have been in the secondary division of English football since 2003, and many supporters consider the club to: "Have the potential to go right to the top. There is no major Welsh club within forty miles and it's a capital city. With a little investment we could be challenging for the Premiership in five years." However, if Cardiff did achieve this objective, they would not be granted entry into European competition, as an English team would if they experienced the same level of success. This is because UEFA regulations forbid a team based outside of a given nation to represent that country in continental competition (Holt, 2007). As Jones and Rivers explain: "Europe is the place to be and until recently Cardiff got into the Cup Winners' Cup quite often thanks to qualification via the Welsh Cup. Now UEFA, in their wisdom, have changed the rules so that you must be in the Welsh league to play in the Welsh Cup" (2002: 114). In response to the issue, one Cardiff fan argued that: "We would never be able to put Wales on the map. The sides in the Welsh league at the moment are practically non-league. They never get past the qualifying rounds of in Europe. To promote our identity and our football, the top clubs would have to move to the Welsh league to develop it." This issue was also discussed in an interview with an executive member of the Football Association of Wales (FAW), who labelled the situation a "political minefield." In addition, he added: "It would be best in the long term if the country's five major clubs Cardiff City, Swansea City, Wrexham, Newport County and Merthyr Tydfil could play within their own league system, with the inducement of possible European football qualification for any team which made the switch."

However, whilst some consider the prospect of developing the domestic structure

of the game to be important for the future of the game, others argued that if Welsh teams played exclusively in a Welsh league, this could reduce the intensity of Welsh identity in the context of the inter-nation rivalry with the English: "If we didn't play the English every week it would affect our identity massively. We'd have to focus on being pro-Welsh and we'd lose something by not being able to express being anti-English." Also, Johnes argues that from the very inception of professional football in Wales: "The icons of a later popular national identity were gradually being in-corporated into any significant match between Welsh and English clubs" (2002: 56). The importance of the 'Wales versus England context' therefore is significant to the identity of the club. This notion extends to the violent element of Cardiff's follow-ing, as one fan explains: "Fighting for Cardiff is about fighting for Wales. Along with Millwall and Man United, Cardiff hooligans have got the worst reputation in Britain, and it's because lads see following City as a chance to fight the English." In 2000 Car-diff City were languishing in the lower half of English football's bottom tier. Former Wimbledon FC owner, Lebanese businessman Sam Hammam, then bought the club under a wave of nationalist rhetoric and fervour. On arrival at the club, the since de-parted Hammam circulated a document called "Follow the Dream", which contained rhetoric such as: "Wales and Welsh people are not an appendage and it is through football, and specifically through Cardiff City FC, that we are going to establish the Welsh identity and pride." Also, "there should be a feeling that every second week the 'Welsh Army' is crossing the border carrying the flag high and proud" (2000: 14). This sentiment saw attendances rise from an average crowd of 4,000 to in excess of 12,000 over a three-year period. As a consequence, a frenzy of Welsh media started to follow the club as Hammam sought to canvass maximum support from the people of South Wales. The team were promoted twice in three years to take them to the second tier of English football.

Soon after taking control of the club, Hammam took some unusual steps by welcom-ing fans of other Welsh clubs, notably arch rivals Swansea City to the club's home at Ninian Park and even paid to bus thousands of Swansea fans to the ground for an FAW Cup final match in 2002. Hammam explained this decision, stating: "As far as I am concerned this is a Welsh thing, a Cymru (Wales) thing, a Celtic thing – not a Cardiff thing…Swansea and Cardiff should join together in giving Welsh people the chance of being something" (2002: 17). However, in the opinion of the majority of respondents, this act represented Hammam's lack of appreciation for the nature of Welsh footballing and social identity. Some argued that displaying empathy with rival supporters would have questioned their own identity: "What Hammam doesn't understand is that we hate the Jacks [Swansea] more than anyone. North Wales clubs like Wrexham don't really bother us, but we hate the Jacks. We hate them much more than we hate the English." Another supporter commented that this act: "Angered us, so we sung more anti-Swansea songs after that. He put more of a divide between us

and Swansea when he was trying to do the opposite." In addition, in an act that effectively confirms the reciprocation of such ill-feeling, Swansea City, based forty miles west and therefore further away from England than Cardiff, display England banners when the two sides meet, as one fan explains: "Swansea hate the English, so it proves how much they hate us, that they are prepared to wind us up by waving England flags. It questions the whole issue of national identity when the second city are like that. But maybe it puts even more onus on us to reflect that identity." Furthermore, another stated: "Cardiff are pro-Wales but they aren't pro-Swansea. It's like a conditional love for a nation. It can't ignore city-to-city rivalry." Similarly, the sports editor of the *Western Mail* argued that: "If you asked any Cardiff City fan, they would much rather beat Swansea City than they would any English club."

After his arrival, Hammam also introduced some popular symbols into the club to increase its sense of Welshness. The use of the St David's Cross flag, an old Celtic flag, synonymous with Welsh nationalism, was added to club merchandise. It was also painted on top of the stand opposite to where the away fans sit to remind them of this identity. He also proposed a new stadium which is currently under construction, and suggested it should have a Welsh name. However, the Welsh language is not widely spoken in the South, compared to the North of the country, where, according to one fan: "It is the national language. In parts of North Wales, they won't speak English, especially at Wrexham and clubs like that. So to start talking about putting things in Welsh at Cardiff is forcing the identity of the fan-base really. So I think Hammam was off the mark a little with that one. But other than that, the changes he put in place were fairly popular." He also changed both away kits to red and green, and proposed altering the traditional blue home kit to the red of Wales. He also suggested a change of the club's nickname from 'the Bluebirds' to 'the Dragons.' Another introduction by Hammam was the pre-match rendition of the traditional Welsh song 'Men of Harlech' - sung by the Welsh soldiers at Rourke's Drift, during the Boer War and an unofficial Welsh anthem. This tradition has been accepted and currently remains in place. Another part of Sam Hammam's nationalistic dream was to field a Cardiff City team composed entirely of Welsh players. To facilitate this objective, he invested heavily in a youth academy from which Welsh internationals like Robert Earnshaw, James Collins, Joe Ledley and Chris Gunter emerged. He also hired the former Wales manager Bobby Gould and signed a number of Welsh internationals like Leyton Maxwell, from Liverpool, Rhys Weston, from Arsenal, and Daniel Gabbiddon, from West Bromwich Albion, all of whom served to raise the national profile of the club.

Reflecting on a Wales international match in Norway in May 2004, Abbandonato states: "Sam Hammam has always said his Bluebirds revolution is about two things – Cardiff City and Wales. So it's a fair guess to say that probably the only person matching [Wales manager] Mark Hughes in terms of sheer pride at this incredibly gutsy

performance in Oslo would have been the Bluebirds owner himself, watching from afar on TV" (2004: 75). He continued, highlighting the fact that: "Four of the Welsh youngsters brought through the Ninian Park ranks as part of Hammam's insistence on home grown players were among the stars on show in the Ulleval Stadium" (Abbandonato: 2004: 75). Another issue that one supporter labelled "Hamman's obsession" was to see the club compete in Europe. Bloom quotes Hammam as saying that: "The Welsh Cup and Europe is not a Cardiff City thing - it's a Welsh issue, because our clubs have the right to play in Europe. When teams like Aberystwyth are playing in Europe it affects the FIFA ranking of the Welsh national team" (2004: 60). However, when he left the club in 2006, Hammam failed to achieve this objective, as the FAW refused to relax their policy of refusing a European place to a club competing in a technically 'foreign' league.

Sam Hammam's quest for superiority was based around a courtship and accessibility to the club's fans, who essentially were his customers, and the Welsh media, who he saw as a vital marketing tool in promoting his product and his ethos. One supporter claimed that: "The media ate it all up. They loved him really, and he was so good with the fans. He used to walk around the side of pitch before games to get the fans going. It wasn't long before every game was billed as a battle between the Welsh and the English." In May 2003, Cardiff City played in a two-legged Division Two play-off semi-final against their closest English rivals, Bristol City. With just thirty miles of land, the River Severn, and crucially the border between England and Wales separating the two cities, the media attention in both countries was considerable. The clubs had met twice in the regular season and many sections of the Welsh media described the game as a 'revenge' mission for the Cardiff players. Both games were broadcast live on Sky TV, where the commentary featured numerous examples of 'Wales versus England' rhetoric: "It's a battle between two cities, Cardiff and Bristol. It's a tale of two countries, England and Wales. Two countries, two cities, one winner" (Tyler, 2003). The media therefore, have played a key role in providing a vehicle for Cardiff to promote their national identity. In addition, the sports editor for the *Western Mail,* billed as the national newspaper for Wales and central to the creation of a Welsh national and sporting identity, states: "We've increased our Cardiff coverage since they got to Division One [now 'The Championship']. This has a great impact in the club reaching out to the whole nation and is vital in their quest to increase a sense of furthering Welsh identity within the club" (Abbandonato, 2004: 75).

Finally, Welsh clubs such as Cardiff do not serve as the only example of teams competing in what is technically a foreign league. Several other cases exist in Europe, including FC Monaco in France, Berwick Rangers in Scotland and Derry City Ireland. However, as one supporter argued: "It is not the technical issue of where you play that is the issue, it's the identity you embody. Cardiff is like Barcelona, or Celtic,

or even Liverpool. They are based in a league in a country which they don't identify with themselves." FC Barcelona play in La Liga, Spain's premier football division. However, the city is the capital of the Catalonia region in Spain, and as Burns argues: "Barca is much more than a club. For historical reasons the club has developed into the most revered symbol of Catalan nationalism" (1998: 103). Similarly, Kuper states that, "Barca are a hundred times more famous than Catalonia itself, and are the main source of Catalan pride" (1996: 203). There are similarities and differences between this club and Cardiff City therefore. Both are a 'source of pride' and a 'symbol of nationalism', although as one supporter claimed: "For Barca it's about separatism. As a capital city, we're obviously the opposite. We're proud Welshmen. But then we're similar because we use our clubs to say, 'this is who we are', and 'this is what we aint'. Without that voice, the outside world wouldn't know much about us." Another respondent argued: "I think it's being the 'little brother' that makes you fight for that identity. I guess that's why the English don't care as much about us, unless they play us. But we sing about them every chance we get. I guess Barca are so used to representing the Catalan identity, it's a bigger deal for them than it is for the Spanish sides they play against regularly."

The other club considered significant in this context are Glasgow Celtic FC, who play in the Scottish Premier League. Kuper claims that: "Celtic is a big family; it's essentially an Irish club. An Irish club playing in a foreign league" (1996: 43). Also, Murray notes that: "The Irish origins of the club are even more obvious than the religious. Celtic play in the colours of the Emerald Isle, their crest is the shamrock and the flag of Ireland is hung over the ground" (2000: 71). In addition, "Celtic FC are an important badge of identity. In the case of the Celtic supporter, identification with the club is inexorably bound up with issues of identity and community" (Murray, 2000: 72). Furthermore, Guilianotti (1996) discusses the significance of the Celtic fan-base singing the song 'The Fields of Athenry'. Boyle (1994) argues that this song serves to assert their sense of Irishness. A fan who participated in this research commented on this, stating: "Celtic sing their Irish songs, just as we sing 'Men of Harlech'. That's all about our identity as being Welsh. Plus with the flags and colours and the social and football culture in general. We're similar in lots of ways." However, another supporter pointed out the limits of these similarities, arguing: "Just because we don't like the country we play in doesn't mean we've got the same identity. For a start, we express it very differently. We can be quite violent, whereas they wear colours and take thousands everywhere. We get small gates really and aren't as friendly. Plus, a lot of Cardiff lads like Rangers so obviously the Celtic-Cardiff connection is doomed from there."

Conclusion

This study explores the role that Cardiff City Football Club adopts in the creation

of a Welsh sporting identity. It is argued here that the use of Welsh national identity is central to the culture of Cardiff City Football Club, and has increased the club's potential as a sporting institution. Cardiff City is clearly a vehicle of Welsh national identity therefore, as one fan illustrates: "When we watch City play we sing 'Wales'. We have the flag on our backs, and we are the only team from the capital. We play English opposition every week, and we love being Welsh. City gives that love a voice. It allows us to express our Welshness."

Relative to other investigations of British football fan culture, this topic has been subject to a limited number of investigations, and further work is undoubtedly required. For example, there is a requirement for a more in-depth focus of Welsh Premier League clubs in this respect, together with Wrexham and Swansea, at supporter, owner, management and media levels. Also, the English perspective should be gauged in this context, notably with border cities such as Chester, Shrewsbury and Bristol, all of whom have developed international rivalries with Welsh teams. In addition, subsequent work should also examine the intra-club focus, facilitating a discussion of any negative connotations this identity is perceived to have, and whether a proportion of the fan-base don't want to be considered to represent what one support termed "an obsessive English-hating nationalistic institution that condones or at least overlooks violent conduct from its fans simply because it is committed against 'the old enemy'." Finally, the Cardiff City case could be compared to other countries with a strong regional identity, which is often manifested in the context of inter-club and inter-city rivalry. In Italy for example, such regional identification vastly reduces the effectiveness of national teams as vehicles for the expression of national sentiments (De Biasi and Lanfranchi, 1997; Duke and Crolley, 1996). Similar examples can be found with a number of other minority states. The Jordan-based team al Wihdat are viewed as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism according to Tuastad (1997), and numerous Australian clubs promote the nationalist sentiments of European migrants, as (Hughson (1997) and Vamplew (1994) note. An examination of these issues would further the understanding of the extent to which football clubs construct national identity.

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