

## **MK DONS FC AND AFC WIMBLEDON: MOVING THE GOALPOSTS AND RISING FROM THE ASHES**

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### **AIM**

The aim of this paper will be to compare a franchise and fan-ownership model within a European sports team context, and conclude what the key learning's are for sport managers. In particular, the paper will examine an unprecedented event in English football, the relocation of a major professional club to a completely different geographical area and the resulting creation of an additional fan-owned 'phoenix club'.

### **CONTEXTUAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

There is very little academic literature concerning 'fan ownership', which Dobson and Goddard (2011) identify as a radically different ownership model which has to date proved successful in some cases, at the lower end of the financial scale.

Sloane's seminal work (1971) is also relevant. Sloane's paper argued that an individual club, rather than the league it forms part of, is the relevant economic decision maker and that the importance of mutual interdependence on other teams had previously been over-emphasised – raising several questions regarding the objectives of sports clubs.

Wimbledon FC were granted permission to relocate to Milton Keynes in 2002, effectively creating two entirely new entities; MK Dons FC, which took the place of Wimbledon FC in the English Football League and based itself in Milton Keynes, 60 miles away from the original club; and AFC Wimbledon, a fan-owned 'phoenix' club located near to Wimbledon FC's original home, which were re-formed at the bottom of the football pyramid.

Despite the creation of these two new professional clubs resulting from the same event, they are notable for their contrasting ownership models and the reaction they have received from both the media and the wider football community in Great Britain.

In US sport, franchising is commonplace, but has rarely been as successful in Europe. Recent examples of franchise relocation in the US can be seen in baseball, ice hockey and basketball. Within American Major League Soccer (MLS), there has been a long history of franchising, with clubs historically disappearing from one location and then being re-introduced in another. The merits of Shropshire's (1995) extensive work on sports franchising in America are also considered in this case.

Unlike the European model of competitive league team sports, major US sports operate closed leagues where new teams appear based on market growth and profit potential, as opposed to success on the field of play. In America, these franchises are viewed as being a form of entertainment, but their primary objective, as for any successful business, is to make money. On the contrary, in England, for example, football clubs have grown out of the communities in which they are situated and franchising was practically unheard of until Wimbledon FC was granted permission to relocate.

### **METHOD**

This exploratory research employed a case study methodology concerned with the value that an in-depth understanding of a 'franchise' and 'fan-owned' English football club would add to the investigation as a whole. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders at the clubs involved.

### **FINDINGS**

AFC Wimbledon's Dons Trust has been proactive in their efforts to re-establish the brand values and in many ways create a much stronger brand than the former Wimbledon FC possessed. MK Dons embrace a strategy designed to alleviate the 'distance' that appears to have been created between supporters and several clubs at the top of English football. Combined with impressive targeting and measurement of young supporters, MK Dons are the only football club occupying such a large

catchment area without direct competition from another league club. Other large urban settlements without a league club may make for an interesting proposition.

#### IMPLICATIONS

This is first known study that examines the concept of franchising and fan-ownership in practice at English professional football clubs. Given the growing commercialisation/globalisation of the game with an increasing amount of major foreign investment, this case offers important lessons about club governance to European sports teams.

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