Managing organizations in sports labor markets
Course syllabus

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11th – 15th February 2019

Why is this course important?
Football seems to have gone mad. Neymar for 222 million to PSG, 140 million for Philippe Coutinho, and ‘only’ 135 million Euro for Kylian Mbappé. Clubs spend insane amounts of money to hire a contingent of foreign players. Players make so much money that being a footballer nowadays seems to be synonymous with being a millionaire who spends a small fortune on new haircuts, tattoos, and colorful football boots. Fans can no longer identify with players, and the gulf between fans and teams have widened. And with all that big spending on the market, the outcome of competitions and cups becomes more and more predictable. These casual observations often find their way into the popular discourse and suggest that the transfer market is a, if not the, leading cause of the problems of ‘modern football’.

But how does the labor market for modern football players and other athletes really work? This question lays at the heart of this course and has been examined from an economic and a sociological perspective. For economists, sports labor markets are a prime example of an efficient market, where talent is observable and teams have all the information they need to make rational decisions. For sociologists, sports labor markets are a place of exploitation where mala fide player agents and club directors buy and sell players from around the world with the goal of reaping high profits.

In this course, we will briefly discuss how economists see the labor market in professional football, but pay most attention to understand how sociologists conceptualize sports labor markets. We will see that sociologists have focused on either contouring the macro-level structural features of the labor market or describing the micro-level experiences and decisions of individual athletes as they traverse the market. However, the meso-level of how organizations act on the market and what goes on within organizations has been largely overlooked. This gap opens up opportunities for organizational scholars to contribute to our understanding of sports labor markets. We will explore these opportunities and investigate how sports labor markets might be conceptualized as fruitful areas to explore more general questions and puzzles in management theory. Overall, this course will give you an academically informed understanding of how sports labor markets work and how sports labor markets can be researched to inform management theory.

What should you be able to do by the end of this course?
At the end of this course, you are able to:
1. Understand the main social-scientific theories about the labor market in professional football
2. Compare key differences between sociological and economic theories on sports labor markets
3. Identify new directions and research opportunities for organizational scholars to sports labor markets
4. Assess how research to sports labor markets can contribute to management theory
What do you need to do for this course? Assignments and evaluations
Each student needs to hand in a research proposal that includes 1) a clear research question related to the management of sport organizations, 2) a motivation why this question is theoretically important, 3) a literature review embedding the research question in the literature and which cites at least one of the papers we discussed in this course, and 4) a data and methodology section outlining the data and methodological strategy to answer your research question.

Research proposals cannot exceed 8 pages (font size 11, double spaced, standard office margins) including all text, tables, figures, and references.

For a good source on how to structure your research proposal see “Dr. Karen’s Foolproof Grant Template” on https://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/

Hand in your research proposals within two weeks after the final day of this course.

Course schedule
Students are expected to read the two key readings prior to each session. Suggested readings are provided for your reference if you would like to read more about the topic of the session.

Session 1  How do economists conceptualize sports labor markets?
Key readings:


Suggested readings:


Session 2  How are sports labor markets structured?
Key readings:

Giulianotti & Robertson (2012) Mapping the global field: A sociological model of transnational forces within the world game

Suggested readings:

Session 3

How do athletes maintain their agency when they move across country borders?

Key readings:

Elliott (2016) Football’s Irish exodus: Examining the factors influencing Irish player migration to the English professional leagues. International Review for the Sociology of Sport vol. 51(2), pp. 147-161

Suggested readings:


Session 4

How important is agency for domestic mobility in sports labor markets?

Key readings:


Session 5

What is it like to be a professional football player?

Key readings:


Suggested readings:

Session 6  
**What about organizations in sports labor markets?**

**Key readings:**

Velema et al. (2018) Global value added chains and the recruitment activities of European professional football teams. Accepted at International Review for the Sociology of Sport

**Suggested readings:**


Session 7  
**How do market observers judge quality?**

**Key readings:**


**Suggested readings:**


Session 8  
**How can research to sports labor markets inform management theory?**

There is no reading for this session, but we will use this time to jointly explore how our own research in sports labor markets can inform more general questions and puzzles in management theory.