

The Political Economy of Soccer: The Importation of Foreign Soccer Players to the Israeli League

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This article describes and explains the process of the importation of foreign players to the Israeli football league. From 1989 to 1999, more than 500 foreign footballers were employed in the first, second and even in the third divisions of the league. Until 1989, the Israeli Football Federation had objected to foreign players. The change in the FA policy towards foreign footballers is explained by two related developments: the transformation of football from a political to a commercial model and the change in the socio-economic context, in particular, the accelerated process of a 'becoming capitalist society'. The latter was related to the process of globalization that influenced the Israeli economy. It is concluded that although the Israeli footballing community was eager and ready, the import of foreign players was imposed upon it: a combination of a growing domination of liberal economics and political weakness opened Israeli football to the world market.

The stranger ... is not ... the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow ... he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the Group itself.¹

In the European leagues in the late twentieth century, foreign players became a natural feature of the football landscape; a brief scanning of the internet proves the point. The English league in particular has witnessed an explosion in the numbers of foreign players plying their trade in the last five-ten years. Large numbers of foreigner players have also entered the Spanish, Italian, Belgian and French leagues whilst an increasing number also play in the ex-communist states. It appears that no modern football league could survive without foreign players. Football has indeed become a 'game without frontiers'² and thus, movement of players is anticipated, not just between the most developed capitalist states of Europe, but also between them and smaller still 'becoming capitalist' states, Israel included.

Historical and Social Roots

The migration of footballers has long historical roots. Before the Second World War, a small number of foreign players were to be found in certain countries, such as the Britons who played and coached in Europe and South America. British merchants, soldiers, engineers and others established football clubs outside Britain and took part in 'native' football, either as players or coaches or both.

Spreading football – and other sports – was a basic ingredient of the British hegemonic policy in her colonies.³ But the movement of football players from Britain to clubs abroad was rare. This situation changed dramatically after the Second World War, all over Europe and elsewhere.

The reasons for the increased participation of foreigners in football leagues throughout the world are far from romantic. Elite sports migration was, and still is, motivated by the eagerness to improve one's bank account. The available opportunities offered by the clubs refer to the demand or the pull side; the football clubs look for foreign players in order to improve their record on the field and consequently on the stock market.

In 1950, 'Seven British players ... broke the contracts they had with British clubs, and ... went to Bogota in Colombia to ply their trade'.⁴ The reason behind this move is bluntly stated by the author as a passion for more money; 'These were boom years for many commercial leisure activities, including sport and particularly football'.⁵ However, football players felt deprived: the pay of a player was very low – the maximum wage at that time was £12 a week in the season and £10 a week in the off-season. Furthermore, the restrictions of the transfer system made it practically impossible for a player to change clubs and, hence, to improve his economic position. It appears that those players who moved to Bogota were paid well by their new clubs.⁶

This trend of players seeking new clubs and leagues that offered better remuneration was also reflected by the influx of foreign players into French football. As a consequence: 'From the 1930s to the 1980s, over 1000 players came to France to play football as professionals or semi-professionals'.⁷ However, some authors argue that money was not the only reason for the mobility of footballers.⁸ Stead and Maguire, commenting on Scandinavian footballers in England, claim that 'The principal motivation for migration appears to center on the opportunities of experiencing a full time professional careers and the level of mental and physical commitment that this involves'.⁹ These factors seem to provide appropriate motives, but for players who, after some years in abroad, return to their home country almost at the end of their career, money was and still is, the ultimate reason for mobility.

In both formal and practical terms, foreign players are usually temporary residents (sojourners) rather than immigrants; this favoured choice of status re-emphasizes the pecuniary motive which, above all else, explains the player's move – often with his family – to a foreign culture and to the status of an outsider. Yet there is another element that contributes to the explanation of this phenomenon: the demand side that is fulfilled by the football clubs – the purchasers.

It appears that the motives of the football clubs are largely the same as that of the foreign footballers, although from a different angle and with other interests. These motives may be covered by one word – profit. Profit was also the (hidden) motive behind certain changes in the organization of the game, such as changing the political atmosphere and certain legal rules that would facilitate the freer

movement of players across national borders. With regard to current European football, the political and legal grounds to allow for such movements were established outside the framework of football by the European Community's legal institutions, which in certain cases (such as the 'Bosman rule' of 1995) imposed its authority over football. Other states outside the European Community (such as Israel) had to either adopt the EC rules or set up their own rules for dealing with foreign footballers.

After the Second World War, football underwent a substantial change underpinned by a process of commodification.¹⁰ However, commodification of the game was still missing an important component, that of becoming a business corporation. Football in capitalist states began to be transformed from being either a public organization (run by the state, by trade unions, by cities, etc.) or a privately owned family-type organization, into 'capitalist corporations'.¹¹ The game is now almost totally transformed. The prime orientation of corporate football is toward the market – within the borders of the particular country and of the world – this is the reality of 'football without frontiers'.

Britain and Europe were the leaders of this organizational revolution. Football leagues were restructured in order to adjust the game to the demands of 'modernity',¹² such as meeting and accommodating the needs of television. The European Champions League was established¹³ and the income of the participant clubs increased. The UEFA Champions League Final became the most popular football event after the World Cup. These and other adjustments were initiated in order to make football instrumental for economic profit.

These developments – some of which are connected, some of which are not – have led the industry to a financial situation where, according to Deloitte & Touche's 1998 review of England's top clubs, the 20 in the FA Carling Premier League posted a combined operation profit of £100.5 million for the 1997–98 season ...¹⁴

The consolidation of the correlation between football and capital is not unique to Britain, it is evident in other countries as well. In principle, the commodification of the game and the pursuit of profit reign almost everywhere.

The rapid increase of players' trans-border movement – which is a basic characteristic of the game's commodification – is initiated by push and pull factors; the particular motives of the players (push) and the particular interests of clubs (pull). However, in order to comprehend the dramatic increase of this movement and also its specific directions, we need a concept that animates the push and pull factors to produce certain effects. The concept of the 'realm of opportunities', that is, the specific socio-economic and political context that leads events to occur, will therefore be employed here.

Globalization and Realm of Opportunities

Look at the country of origin of everything in your own life, from shoes and suits to dishwashers, lawnmowers and cars. How many are manufactured in your own country? How many are 'cheaper foreign imports?' The same is true for footballers, the very essence of the sport, they are mostly cheap foreign imports and that – like it or not – is now the name of the game.¹⁵

This is not the place to review the extensive literature on globalization.¹⁶ It is sufficient to acknowledge that globalization is not a new phenomenon; it gained momentum at the end of the nineteenth century and achieved great influence over national policies in the second half of the twentieth century. It is also apparent that the basic practice underlying globalization is that of capitalism and capitalism is also the factor that determines the commercialization of football.

Thus, on this basis, it is proposed that globalization can be specified by the movement across national borders of three basic ingredients of every state system: people, capital and symbols.¹⁷ The concrete extent and intensity of these movements, their course and certain priorities among them is ultimately formulated by the particular realm of opportunities, that is, by the encounter between the specific historical and social conditions of a certain society and globalization as a world practice.

It would then appear that the association between sport and globalization was almost inevitable. As Maguire and Stead have commented, 'Global sport developments are clearly interwoven with the general globalization process'.¹⁸ Football was among the first sport to tune in to globalization, the relationship being affected by foreign capital investments in clubs in different places in and outside Europe¹⁹ and by the increasing global mobility of and the development of a world market for footballers.

At present, the movement of footballers is common and well supported by economic and, no less importantly, legal factors.²⁰ The 'Bosman ruling', which has had a critical impact on football, is a consequence of the long process of globalization of Europe. Thus, both commodification and globalization have imposed certain changes on the game's management and organization.

The central issue of this article is the incorporation of foreign footballers into Israeli soccer. This is quite a recent phenomenon – the first foreign players were allowed into Israel only in 1989. The article describes and elucidates the process that made the importation of these foreign players possible.

On this Research: Methodology

The following section of this article is based on a number of resources: the sports sections of major Israeli newspapers and sports magazines and information from the Israeli Football Association (FA), which has maintained a file on every foreign player in Israel (over 500 foreign players entered Israel between 1989 and 2000).

The information included in these files was used a) to follow the stream of players into the leagues, b) to follow the distribution of these players by countries of exportation and c) knowing the country of exportation, to estimate – with help of other sources – the probable cost of foreign players. Other information (including players' payments) was gathered from the sport sections of the daily newspapers and documents that are held in the archives of the Wingate Institute for Physical Education. These were used to follow the public's opinion and that of the FA for and against the importation of foreign footballers.

Football in Israel: Political and Commercial

As with almost everything else in Israel, football in the first decades of the state was political. Three major sports federations, each related to certain political parties and organizations, controlled the football clubs (by ownership or supervision). The first of these federations was Hapoel – a sports federation associated with the Trade Unions Federation, the Histadrut and, via the Histadrut, with the left-wing parties. One of these parties, the Party of the Workers in Eretz Israel (MAPAI), was at that time the dominant party in Israeli politics, that is, the dominant force in the Knesset (parliament) and government. Second, there was Macabbi, a federation associated with a party of the bourgeoisie (The General Zionists), which in the early 1950s was a partner in the government coalition. Third, Beitar, a federation associated with a right-wing party (Herut), which was the major force in the parliamentary opposition. All three federations had been established before the establishment of the state in 1948. The management of the Football Association in Israel (established in 1928) was exclusively based on the above federations. The general assembly of the FA, the executive, the president and practically every major position in the FA were filled by political figures who were nominated by one or other of the federations. Hapoel was then the largest in terms of numbers of football clubs – the sum of the clubs run by Hapoel exceeded those of Macabbi and Beitar together. Thus, Hapoel was the dominant force in the FA and MAPAI was able to exert considerable influence over the FA via Hapoel.

The political make up of the FA was not exceptional. Politics dominated every major element of Israeli society in the first decades of Israeli independence. Accordingly, football was organized and run politically. Directly and/or indirectly, the political parties in the Knesset had a concrete effect on football in Israel. For example, on more than a few occasions, politicians intervened when 'their' team was at risk of relegation, or needed 'some help' to win the league championship. The impact of politics was built into the entire system. In addition to a transfer clause that imposed restrictions on the movement of players between clubs, a player who belonged to the club of a particular federation rarely crossed political borders. When players were transferred, they usually did so between clubs of the same federation. In fact, a move between clubs of different federations was highly unusual.

At that time, Israeli football was played on an amateur level, but quite often a particular federation arranged jobs (sometimes more like a sinecure) for its players. Considering the poor employment situation in those days, this was an important reward for loyalty to the club.

Israeli football was parochial – all management and players were Israeli. However, due to a certain shortage of coaches, a few were imported. The football clubs, which were increasing in numbers in the 1950s, were dependent on public funding, which was available through their particular federation. Some support was governmental, in which case, the federations acted as agents – government money was granted to the FA or the federations and the latter delivered it to their clubs. Indeed, the loyalty of the clubs was assured by political means.

This political model in football reigned for some decades after 1948. Its effects began to decline in the 1970s and collapsed toward the end of the 1980s. During and following the 1980s, Israeli football was in a process of transformation from a political to a commercial model: in essence, football was undergoing a process of commodification.²¹

The reasons for this mutation arose outside of football. The Israel socio-economy was changing and becoming more and more capitalist. Fundamentally, the ‘market’ in economic and political terms, became dominant.²² Privatization of public property was a major motif: public assets – those of the state and of the Histadrut – which amounted to almost 40 per cent of the total Israeli economy²³ – were offered to individual capitalists and/or corporations. Practically, politics, which, since statehood, had been so influential over most domains of society, was losing power in favour of the economy. This process had repercussions on certain levels and issues – and for some, the consequences were quite critical.

The impact of these changes in the context on football was direct and in some ways, critical. The political organizations were losing control over the economy. Most noteworthy, the Histadrut was drastically losing its economic power. The consequence of this situation was immediate: the sports federations lost their financial power. Although the football clubs maintained their political ties, most became economic orphans and many were approaching bankruptcy.

The only viable option was for the clubs to change their formal status, that is, to become privatized. This meant that the federations needed to sell their clubs – essentially, those in the top divisions of the league – to private owners, either individuals or corporations. This indeed happened in the early 1990s and many football clubs of the first and the second divisions changed their status. Since, according to the FA rules, a football club could not actually be sold (legally the club was a non-profit organization) they were leased to private management. In practice, they became private with the management independently buying and selling players, hiring coaches and running the everyday business of the club.

Foreign footballers became a common element in the commercial model of football from the end of the 1980s. However, the tale of the ‘foreign legion’ of

footballers started some years before the privatization of the clubs became effective.

The Foreigners Are Coming

The history of foreign footballers in Israel is fragmentary. Only a very few played in the football league in the first decade and then, for 30 years, there were none. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a growing stream of foreigners entered the professional leagues, including the Premier (first), the National (second) and the Nationwide (third) divisions.

In February 1952, the first foreign player was imported from Apoel in Cyprus, by the coach of Hapoel Haifa. In 1961, two other non-Israeli players were imported from South America by Beitar Tel-Aviv. The FA was hesitant as this was an exceptional case and, although their rules actually said nothing specific about the participation of foreign players in the Israeli league, this set what was perceived to be a dangerous precedent. The Hapoel and Macabbi federations raised serious objections, but the two players were eventually allowed to remain and played for some time, although the further importation of players – but not coaches – was prohibited by the FA. It is worth noting that already in the early 1960s, Israeli footballers had moved to play in South Africa and in the USA. In the 1970s, Israeli players went to play in Europe (i.e., Belgium, France). This was one-way traffic that was also resented by the FA, which tried to block it but could not, and had to acquiesce.

In February 1986, two foreign players joined the Israeli football league, one was the Scotsman, Peter Lorimer, who joined Hapoel Haifa as player/coach, the other was the Argentinean, Daniel Brailowski who joined Macabbi Haifa. Both players were foreigners, but their legal positions in Israel were totally different *a priori*. Lorimer was non-Jewish and upon his arrival he was considered a non-citizen requiring a work permit (this was handled by his host-employer, Hapoel Haifa). Brailowski was Jewish and under the Law of Return (which relates only to Jews) he was granted citizenship immediately on arrival and became an Israeli player. Lorimer had to be satisfied with his position as coach.

In 1989, the FA finally decided to open the gates to non-Israeli players. Each club in the National league (the name of the first division at that time) was allowed two foreign players. Ten such footballers played in 1989/90 season. In 1993, the FA raised the quota to three in the first division and two in the second division. In 1997/98, the quota was raised to four in the first division and in 1999, it was raised to five. Hence, it is possible that ten out of the 22 players in a Premier league match may be non-Israelis. This is already a routine occurrence throughout Europe at the beginning of the third millennium.

The FA's decision in favour of foreign footballers was approached with some scepticism. In a debate published in *Ma'ariv* in August 1987, some veteran football coaches and clubs' chairmen aired their reservations. However, while in

the past the objections had been based mainly on political and economical reasons, this time the sceptics based their objections on professional arguments, such as the real contribution of foreign players to the Israeli football. Among other things, it was argued that the importation of foreign players had a negative impact on the indigenous players' opportunities to participate in the game. It was also argued that because of the poor economic capability of the local clubs, the level of the imported players would be low. However, based on the mood reflected in the media, from the late 1980s onwards, the basic attitude was positive. Experts and laymen considered foreign players as 'part of the modern game' and some saw them as an inevitable consequence of football's commodification and the wish to play in the European events.

How and Why All This Happened

The explanation of the story of foreign footballers in the Israeli league emerges from two circles. The inner circle refers to the specific model of football in Israel – two have been offered above, the political and the commercial. The outer circle refers to the context of the Israeli society, which is divided historically into certain realms of opportunity. Principally, as suggested above, the inner circle's options are set by the specific realm of opportunity. This means that in order to comprehend 'what happens to football' we should start with the engulfing context. Nevertheless, here we choose to start with the inner circle and the process of transformation of football in Israel from a political to a commercial model.

In the mid-1960s, when the FA realized that Israelis players were transferring to other countries for financial reasons, the issue of professionalization – that is, making football a salaried occupation, was imposed on the FA agenda. Public opinion encouraged by the media was angry and accusatory, blaming the FA and the sports federations for the 'footballers drain'.

A political solution was required for what seemed to be an economic problem: the Israeli economy in the mid-1960s was suffering a depression, although, of course, some sections of society were better off than others. Footballers, in general, were not among the former. Formally, a player was not allowed to receive payment for participation in the game; his status was defined as amateur. For internal (political and economic) and external reasons (the rules of the International Olympic Congress), the FA was cautious regarding the amateur codes of behaviour, at least on the face of it. The sport sections in the daily newspapers conveyed a different situation: 'We know of many cases of football players who receive steady payment between 400 IL and 1000 IL.'²⁴ Rumours about under-the-table payments to players were revealed to be true when, in 1971, the Minister of Education ordered an investigation of football management. The directors of the FA were replaced as a result of this investigation.

Although the football players were not organized, for example, in a union, they raised their voices on this issue and demanded payment for playing. This is

unsurprising as some of the players were unemployed, while others had to give up work time in order to take part in training. They demanded that football be recognized, *de jure*, as a professional occupation, hence, the basic issue was the professionalization of the game. Regarding the situation in Israel, this was a political issue more than anything else.

The major participants in the politicization of the issue were the directors of the sport federations. Any change in the status of a player – from an amateur to professional – was liable to confront the FA with two critical issues: possible sanctions by FIFA, the international governing body of world football, which at that time insisted on amateur football, and severe problems in their (future) budget. The chairman of the Hapoel Federation concluded that the sum of money required to maintain a professional football club was much higher than the anticipated gate money, together with other possible incomes. Hence, professional or quasi-professional football needed state support and this was unacceptable: ‘The Histadrut, and the Hapoel Federation would never agree and never be a party to the development of professional sport in Israel.’²⁵ The Macabbi and Beitar Federations were less determined – their association with bourgeois parties influenced their orientation in favour of professional football. However, both were aware of the economy of the game and, in practical terms, none had enough self-generated income to maintain a professional team. In the 1960s, under the reign of political sports federations and when regular payment to all local players by the clubs was practically impossible, the importation of foreign players was not even a dream.

Nonetheless, the breach in the political model of football grew. In the early 1970s, players began to be rewarded by their clubs – some more than others – although some were still paid nothing. Formally, these were illegal payments. Some players refused to step onto the pitch if the club refused to yield to their material demands and more players went to play abroad.²⁶ The situation was close to chaos when some politicians decided to take action. In September 1972, the Vice-Minister of Education, who at that time also held the office of the FA president (he was nominated – temporarily – in order to carry out the recommendations of the 1971 committee which had investigated the management of football), published an article in *Yediot Hasport* (Sports News) in which he announced that ‘I do not rule out sportsmen who are making their living by professional sport’. However, he specified that the state could not support any sport financially and that football had to be maintained by its self-generated income. This was not the only voice of ‘revisionism’, but, because of his formal position, it was very important. It became clear to everyone involved in football at that time that the amateur regulations were no longer effective. In fact, payments to players became policy at club level. These funds were raised from groups of supporters and private individuals and were in fact illegal contributions to the clubs. The FA and the sports federations – which knew about this practice but kept silent – were searching for a solution to this bizarre situation, albeit one that still fitted the political model.

In November 1975, after a debate in the Knesset, the Minister of Education (the same man who had been the Vice-Minister in 1971) decided that the Israeli FA must set up new and real, non fictive regulations; it would be clearly stated in these regulations that the payments to players should be recorded in the club's books and tax paid according to the law.²⁷ This was the first step in acknowledging professional football *de-jure*.

The FA received a mandate to relax the restrictions of amateurism. Football was then running along two different (however related) tracks. One track was a continuation of the political model: the sports federations kept some of their nominal power at the FA and remained responsible for the macro policy of football in Israel. The other track was the beginning of professional football at the club level: the player became an employee of the club (usually on a part-time basis) and the club was responsible for the player's payments – though it could not carry this role without the support of the particular federation. Some money was raised from the clubs' supporters. As a result, the influence of the individual club became much more effective than before.

A change was also evident in the FA policy. In 1980, after an Israeli national team's match against the Swedish team in the preliminary rounds of the World Cup, the FA gave each player in the Israeli selection a bonus of 300DM.²⁸ This money was payment for participation in a football game and, considering the previous attitude of the FA, this was a clear shift in policy. This was also possible because the International Olympic Congress had relaxed the amateur rules in 1974 and FIFA had already recognized professional football as legitimate.

The 1980s were the watershed in the Israeli socio-economic and political situation. This was a period of acceleration in the 'becoming capitalist process' in Israel. This process, which had its tentative beginnings three decades earlier and had been slowly growing, reached a new stage in the 1980s.²⁹ A few major parameters are worth noting. The left-wing government fell and was replaced by a government coalition inclined to lean towards the right in politics and economic policies. The Histadrut, which for many years had been a leader among a very few powerful political and economic organizations, was practically disintegrating. Privatization of the public economy and public services was a major issue of state policy. A 'free market economy', which had been supported in the past by only a political minority, became the leading orientation of most of the political parties in the Knesset.

Most importantly, the socio-economic context of the 1980s was changing and politics, which for many years had been the dominant issue in Israel, was being demoted – it was still important, but less effective than before. The economy became the dominant instance, the market became (almost) the final arbiter: those industrial and commercial organizations, as well as certain social services that could not maintain themselves economically, had to either be privatized or perish. Private capital – Israeli or non-Israeli – was preferred over state or public support. This process of becoming a capitalist society was empowered in the 1990s and effected every sector of Israeli society, sport included.

Indeed, the changes in the context had a direct and harsh impact on football. The sports federations could no longer support their clubs financially. Hapoel, which ever since statehood had been the largest and strongest sports federation in Israel, was losing power and control, since its patron, the Histadrut, was in a crisis situation and could not provide financial support. In turn, Hapoel could not support its football clubs. The Macabbi and Beitar federations were also affected: their political patrons were equally unable to provide financial support and, consequently, their clubs were in distress.

Thus, the individual football club had to find its own solution to its financial problems. Two possible options were available: privatization, which meant transferring the club to private management, or – the least preferred option – changing the public status of the club, that is, transferring its ownership from that of a federation to that of the local municipality. In practice, these options were open only to the clubs in the top division of the league and to a few in the second division. Most of these clubs opted for privatization, while those that could not find a private owner changed their public status, hoping to become private in the future.³⁰

A players' market came into effect in the mid-1980s and negotiations between clubs and players, although unofficial, became a feature of Israeli football. The newspapers followed the deals in detailed reports. The players' market was expanded in 1987 with six Israeli footballers playing in Europe. This time the FA offered almost no objection. In fact, the new FA rules allowed any Israeli to play abroad. There were two beneficiaries of this market extension: the individual player, who improved his economic position and his value in the players' market, and the club, which enriched its coffers by selling a player to a non-Israeli club. Such a players' market constituted a clear sign of change in Israeli football. However, this change was partial and limited: a club could sell players locally or abroad, but could only buy Israeli players. The market was still closed to foreigners.

Almost everything was ready for the next step – the import of foreign players – but a bold political move was required in order to remove the barriers against this change. Despite the decrease in the domination of politics over the economy, politics remained influential. For example, in the 1980s, football in Israel was still run by the three federations and the football clubs were still officially the federations' 'property'.

In 1987, the chairman of the Knesset sports committee announced that it was no longer possible to forbid Israeli clubs to import players. The chairman was preaching to the (almost) converted; the clubs were ready, public opinion was supportive and the sports federations were inclined to accept the change with a few conditions designed to protect their position in the FA.

However, coaches and ex-players were still divided. Some believed that the import of foreign players would improve the Israeli game, while others thought the import would extend the local players' market and also increase the motivation of

the Israeli players. On the other hand, there were those who argued that the import of foreign players would not make any significant improvement in the game's attraction and that the time was not ripe. They argued that it was much more important to invest in young local players and to improve the management of the football leagues. However, as noted above, the general attitude, including that of the political organizations in charge of football, was positive.

The last barrier was Hapoel, that is, the Histadrut. This barrier was removed in 1988 when the chairman of the Histadrut, who also had a senior role in the FA, said that it was time to allow the import of foreign players. Hapoel, Macabbi and Beitar all agreed to open the gates. When this issue was brought to the decision of the FA, the result was a foregone conclusion.

Realm of Opportunity

Foreign footballers joined the Israeli league during a very specific realm of opportunity. This realm was embodied in the economic and political context that provided the critical parameters and determined the degrees of freedom for football. Hence, the 'fate' of football in Israel was dependent on certain parameters of the engulfing realm.

As already noted, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the emerging domination of the market in the economy, as well as in politics and culture. This domination was based on the developing free market ideology, which was being nourished on the ruins of the old political economy. The particular impact of this realm on football is epitomized by the commodification of the game. Players were treated as a commodity with their value in the market deciding their fate in the game. The import of foreign footballers was intended, among other things, to affect the local players' market. Sponsors became an important factor in the clubs' incomes, as clubs underwent privatization. From the start of the 1990s to the end of the second millennium, three-quarters of the clubs in the first division changed their status and became private in practical terms. Some clubs in the second division made a similar transition. A privatized club that was demoted to the second division still remained privatized, while a non-privatized club that was promoted to the first division improved its chance of privatization.

Private money and management became the most influential factor in the football league. Those clubs that remained public (under the auspices of a city or federation) were searching – sometimes desperately – for private capital and management.

Thus, the realm of opportunity was responsible for the transformation of football in Israel into a commodity. The realm provided the options: there were only a very few – either the first division clubs changed their ownership status (under private or city auspices) or the entire league was faced with bankruptcy. Foreign players had actually begun to join the league two to three years before the purchase of the first club (Maccabi Haifa) by a private owner, but the change of

the leagues had already commenced prior to this, leading to a replacement of the traditional political chairman of clubs by a non-political figure from the business sector. Thus, foreign players were an accelerator of privatization, as well as one of its major characteristics.

The realm of opportunity was also directly responsible for the participation of foreign players in the Israeli league. In contrast to commodification, which was imposed upon the game, foreign players were an option rather than a critical necessity. However, considering the economic situation and the political situation in Israel during roughly the last two decades of the twentieth century, the import of foreign players was practically inevitable. Israel was eager to join the world market, to be part to the on-going process of globalization and, hence, an open inflow and outflow of capital and manpower was a necessity. With no pre-planned intention, Israeli football was plunging into the stormy stream of globalization.

Interim Report

In September 1989, ten foreigners played in the Israeli league – all in the first division. This group was the ‘avant-garde’ and in the 1990s, every club in the Israeli first division purchased first two and, later on, when the FA increased the quota of foreign players, three, four and even five.

The first foreign footballers had been mainly imported from South America. Obviously, because of the poor budget of the clubs and the mediocre ranking of Israeli football, these were not first-class players, but they were available, attractive to the Israeli fans and, not least, they were relatively cheap. A new role was created as a consequence of this increasing flow of foreign imports: that of the players’ agent. This role became as essential in Israeli football as it has throughout the world. Nonetheless, even including the commission of the agent(s), the price of the foreign players was usually less than that of the average local player. The income tax system in Israel worked in favour of the foreign players – no tax was deducted from their wages. As for the South American players in Israel, the money (paid in American dollars) they earned in Israel was ‘more than double what they would get in their own country’.³¹

For some ten years, from 1989, the major import markets were Russia, the ex-USSR states and the former Yugoslavia. Out of more than 500 foreign footballers, over 60 per cent originated from these countries. But footballers were imported from various other countries, such as Romania, Finland, Holland, France, Mauritius and Nigeria. Only a very few of the imported players were considered among the best in their country of export. Other than a very few, the ones who had an impressive history in football (for example, had played for the Argentine national team), were past their peak when they arrived.

This article began with a citation from Simmell, regarding the positive social contribution of the stranger. This may also be true of foreign footballers. Unfortunately, few research studies deal with foreign players’ contribution to

football, beyond the economy of the game. It is possible to speculate about the impact of foreign footballers on the management of the game in Israel, but this would require another article. One aspect is obvious: the impact of the import of players on the clubs' budgets.

In the beginning, the average cost of a foreign player was about \$50,000 per season (ranging from \$20,000 to \$85,000).³² The cost of a top Israeli player was then around \$100,000 per season. At the very start, eager and inexperienced club managers purchased 'second rate' foreign players. Many played just a few games and were sent back home. Over the years, the selection process improved and with it the price of the players. In 1999, Macabbi Haifa paid \$900,000 for a player from Poland. A price tag of half a million dollars for a foreign player is no longer unusual. Some clubs in the first division were better off financially than others and, as, for example, in Britain, could afford relatively expensive and talented footballers – locals and foreigners alike. The poor clubs, mainly those under the auspices of the cities or the sports federations, had to settle for less expensive, and often less talented, players. But this is exactly what football commodification is about in the capitalist world: the best commodity is purchased by those with the most economic resources.

Conclusion

The importation of foreign footballers was not an independent issue that was decided solely by the football organizations in Israel. Rather, it was a derivation of the economical and political realm of opportunities. Hence, when football was undergoing transformation from a political into a commercial model, the importation of foreign footballers became almost inevitable.

Since its first steps as Israeli football in 1948, the different clubs and organizations were controlled by politics. The first encounter with foreign players was practically embarrassing. The FA was not expecting non-Israelis in the league and had to contend with the reality of foreign players. However, the FA was adamant and the importation of players was forbidden. This decision was backed (practically initiated) by political parties which at that time had great influence on the FA.

When the political and most importantly the economic situation changed and impacted on the positions of football clubs, the option of importing players became real. In a relatively short time many foreign players 'parked' in the Israeli league and a few even became Israeli citizens. In the last instance, the importation of foreign players was demanded by the football clubs but was decided by a more inclusive process, that of the 'becoming capitalist' of Israeli society.

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NOTES

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