Football teams going international — The strategic leverage of branding

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ABSTRACT

Sports, which not so long ago were merely a very local affair, have become a major global activity. Through media, exhibition games and tours abroad, star players, fan communities on the web and licensed merchandising, among other things, sports teams have increased their global appeal and thus their international reach. Beyond the Real Madrid, Manchester United, New York Yankees and the likes that usually come to mind, sports clubs have realised the power that branding encapsulates in marketing their team beyond their local market. This paper looks at sports teams as brands in their own right and how they can achieve their internationalisation as such. In this regard, a graph of the internationalisation of a sports team brand is introduced. The authors then present four strategies sports team brands could use in order to grow internationally and, when their potential allows, to become global brands. In this regard, cases of European football teams are used. The discussion is concluded with a reflection on the internationalisation of a sports team brand that takes into account the nature of the sport involved, the club’s country of origin and the way the league is managed.

Keywords: internationalisation, sports teams, brand, football, sponsorship, Europe

BACKGROUND

Companies in the consumer goods industry have long understood the opportunities that foreign countries represent. Hence, it should be no surprise to find Adidas in Indonesia, Dunkin...
Donuts in Germany, McDonald’s in India, Nestlé in Belarus, P&G in Romania and so on. It is only recently that sports teams have started capitalising on markets outside their immediate reach, however. This is partly due to the nature of professional sports, which, for a long period of time, represented a local affair, limited, at best, to a national or continental event. Owing to the progress of technology and the increasing exchange across countries and cultures, professional sports have taken on a global dimension — all the more so since some teams (FC Barcelona, Dallas Cowboys, Manchester United etc) and players (David Beckham, Roger Federer, Tiger Woods etc) have achieved the status of global brands and are managed as such. Some sports team managers interviewed by the present authors underlined that ‘there might be room for only a few global sport team brands’. As such, the increasing financial disparities between established clubs in major leagues (English, Spanish, Italian, German and French football leagues) and the rest of the pack might cause a fracture between the haves and the have-nots and, consequently, affect the ability of teams to expand beyond their original market.

But how does one go from a local product to a national and global brand in sports? What are the determinants of success required to start building a global sports team brand? What process should a sports team follow? What strategies are available to a sports team to establish itself as a global brand? Some answers to these questions will be found by focusing on the case of European football teams. First, the paper will have a look at the concept of sports teams as brands. Secondly, the issues and research objectives will be highlighted. The methods will follow, before presentation of the main results. A discussion and conclusion will end the paper.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF SPORTS TEAMS AS BRANDS

The value of a brand

As in many industries today, the brand represents the most important asset of a sports club. This brand is composed of intangible benefits, such as the emotions fans experience at the stadium and the sense of belonging to the team, and tangible benefits, such as the result of the game and team’s merchandising. Accordingly, in professional sports, along with entertainment, religion and politics, the emotional response from fans is stronger than in any other industry. A professional sports team has the potential to build its brand equity by capitalising on the emotional relationship it shares with its fans. This is all the more important considering that teams often sacrifice customer loyalty and long-term association for short-term revenue growth.

By defining a strong team identity, which constitutes the first of three steps of the general model for developing brand equity in sports (Figure 1), a team could be able to overcome a losing record. This is followed by positioning the sports team in the market and then performing marketing actions that are not only coherent with the identity and positioning of the team but also reinforce them. The team’s brand identity or personality is important because it provides the club with direction and meaning. This personality should increase consumer preference and usage, arouse emotions and increase the level of trust and loyalty.

As far as a global brand is concerned, it needs to find a way to provide relevant meaning and experience to people in various markets. A global brand creates perceptions of brand superiority, quality and preference among consumers. As symbols of cultural ideals, global brands are generally sought after by consumers.
brief, a strong brand is built on a clear identity and positioning, and nurtured with coherent marketing actions.

The internationalisation of a brand generally and in sport specifically

Inspired by the literature on the internationalisation of the firm, some authors have reflected on the internationalisation of brands, both as a process and as a set of strategies. Their contribution helps to better understand how a brand could move along the ‘brand equity pipeline’ and identifies the catalyst factors in the internationalisation process of a brand.

From a process perspective, Anderson et al. identified five stages of internationalisation for a brand:

- **Aspirational**: The desire to internationalise the brand is born and communicated within the organisation.
- **Procedural**: The decision to internationalise the brand is implemented.
- **Behavioural**: The company adjusts its brand according to cross-cultural requirements.
- **Interactional**: The company creates, builds and maintains effective and meaningful relationships with new and existing stakeholders.
- **Conceptual**: The company constantly re-evaluates its way of thinking and operating with its brand in foreign markets.

Cheng et al. have also contributed to the reflection on the internationalisation process of a brand. According to them, companies can follow four progressive stages to build an international brand:

- **Pre-international**: The company focuses on ensuring its survival, before developing itself as a top-tier brand in its home country.
- **Global lead market carrying capacity**: The company develops a presence and a brand awareness in foreign markets, especially in lead markets (North America, Western Europe and Japan), mainly as a supplier to major brands.
- **International branding and market succession**: The company works on developing an international brand of its own in lead countries.
• Local climax: The company focuses on developing its brand in other markets, among other lead emerging markets.

In terms of the strategies that a brand could follow when going international, Kapferer\textsuperscript{22} underlined three main avenues:

• Think local, act global. This strategy is especially relevant for standardised products and consists of a gradual implementation abroad based on the success in the local market. This enables the brand to increase its chances of acceptance abroad and to reduce the financial risk.

• Think global, act global as much as possible. This provides the brand with better chances of acceptance abroad and a lower financial risk. Firms that follow this option generally have a global mindset.

• Unifying local brands. This occurs when one firm buys another one and the two different organisational and country cultures need to be integrated.\textsuperscript{23}

Moreover, Van Gelder\textsuperscript{24} elaborated four strategies:

• The brand domain specialist. This strategy influences the development in a specific domain, such as in technology, and consumers’ preferences (e.g. Apple with the iPod).

• The brand reputation specialist. This strategy emphasises authenticity, credibility and reliability (e.g. Volvo with safety).

• The brand affinity specialist. This strategy aims at outperforming the competition by building relationships with consumers and by offering a memorable experience (e.g. Walt Disney).

• The brand recognition specialist. This strategy increases the brand’s spontaneous notoriety, which can make it top-of-mind (e.g. Nescafé).

Based on this set of literature, this paper introduces Figure 2, which is a synthesis of the authors’ reflection on the internationalisation process of a sports team brand. Even though it appears highly influenced by the sequential approach in international business,\textsuperscript{25} teams have the possibility to bypass some steps and accelerate their internationalisation. Whether local, regional, national or

Figure 2 The nationalisation process of a sports team brand

international, a sports team brand should look to leverage its brand, which could happen in several ways, depending on its actual status (Table 1).

In order to internationalise its brand, a sports team could choose from among four strategies, which appear to be the most relevant in the sports arena. The reader should note that these strategies are not mutually exclusive and, as such, teams are able to combine them (Table 2). These strategies will take a very concrete form when analysing the teams studied for this research.

### ISSUES AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As for any other brand, fan loyalty is essential to the survival and growth of a sports team. Moreover, the strong emotional bond that exists between a sports club and its fans, as well as the myths and symbols associated with a team, emphasise the importance of considering a sports team as a brand in its own right. Thus, how can a sports team become an international global brand? More specifically:

- What are the determinants of success required to start building a global sports team brand?
- What process should a sports team follow?
- What strategies are available to a sports team in order to establish itself as a global brand?

### METHODS

As football is the most popular sport around the world, it is fitting to apply this work to football. The authors applied their conceptual framework (Figure 2) to three European football teams: Football Club...
Barcelona (FCB) in Spain, and Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Olympique de Marseille (OM) in France. Inspired by the recommendations of established researchers who suggest some diversity in the sample, the selected sports teams were not all at the same level of development in their brand equity.

This research is exploratory and the methodology is qualitative. The authors proceeded with in-depth case analyses of the teams. The primary data came from in-depth interviews with vice presidents, marketing directors and general managers of the three clubs, based on semi-structured questionnaires with open-ended questions. One-to-one interviews were conducted at the offices of each team and lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. Between one and three managers were interviewed for each team, depending on the level of expertise and availability of the managers.

The authors consulted sports publications, team documents, team websites and media articles (print and electronic) in order to increase the validity of the data. These sources also provided specific information regarding the teams and their brand strategies. Content analysis was used for the data analysis. The essence of the data was extracted by analysing the brand strategy and marketing actions. Validity was ensured through the use of several sources of information and the comparisons made between the cases.

**MAIN RESULTS**

Based on the preliminary analysis, the authors elaborated the graph on the internationalisation process of a sports team's brand as a global phenomenon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand reputation (think local, act global — the brand reputation specialist)</td>
<td>The team capitalises on its reputation to go abroad. It gradually enters foreign countries thanks to the results and the history of the team. It often transcends the sport it represents (eg New Zealand All Blacks, NY Yankees and Real Madrid).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand affinity (think local, act global — the brand affinity specialist)</td>
<td>The team builds a strong fan base through a unique emotional experience it offers to its fans. Fans identify strongly with the team and the players, and often unite within brand communities online (Manchester United).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand challenger (think local, act global — the brand recognition specialist)</td>
<td>The team favours promotion and high investments in players as the first step towards (re-)establishing the sports team brand. But results, history and fans are needed (eg Chelsea and Manchester City).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand conquistador (unifying local brands — the brand recognition specialist)</td>
<td>The team pairs with another team across continents. Thus, the local team benefits from an image transfer, and the foreign team benefits from a springboard to enter one or many promising markets (eg Ajax Amsterdam/Ajax Cape Town, Bayern Munich/Urawa Reds, Real Madrid/Beijing Guoang and San Jose Sharks/Shanghai Sharks).</td>
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team brand (Figure 2) using the four strategies from Table 2. The next step was to identify the determinants of success required to start building a global sports team brand (Table 3). These determinants or catalyst factors are linked with the four strategies presented in Table 2, according to their degree of relevance for a successful internationalisation. Indeed, when looking closely at the situation of PSG, OM and FCB, the authors were able to highlight a set of ‘winning conditions’, both internally and externally, that could also serve as a guideline for other sports team brands.

Internally, the following could be mentioned:

- **An impressive record on the field.** For PSG, seven French Cups, two French Championships, three League Cups and one Cup Winners’ Cup. For OM, ten French Championships, ten French Cups and one European Champions’ Cup. For FCB, 19 Spanish Leagues, 25 Spanish Cups, seven Spanish Super Cups, three European Champions’ Cup, two European Super Cups and four European Cup Winners’ Cups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal determinants</th>
<th>Brand reputation</th>
<th>Brand affinity</th>
<th>Brand challenger</th>
<th>Brand conquistador</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• An impressive record on the field</td>
<td>****</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A well-developed system of communications (team website, team TV, team publications etc)</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>****</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A strong community involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A series of tours in promising markets (ie Asia and North America for football)</td>
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<td>****</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A good range of team merchandise</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The hiring of some star and/or local players</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External determinants</th>
<th>Brand reputation</th>
<th>Brand affinity</th>
<th>Brand challenger</th>
<th>Brand conquistador</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The support of a major equipment maker (Adidas, Nike, Reebok etc)</td>
<td>**</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A strong rivalry between teams (eg Real Madrid vs FC Barcelona)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The association with a renowned country in the sport the team represents (eg Italy or Spain for football and Canada for hockey)</td>
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* low relevance; ** some relevance; *** strong relevance; **** very strong relevance of the determinant or catalyst factor with the respective strategy.
expanding and crystallising the brand in foreign markets.

- **A strong community involvement.** In 2007, PSG won the ‘Licra d’Or’, a distinction given by the League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA), while OM launched the ‘OM attitude’ programme. But the best example is probably provided by FCB, as the club decided to forgo a lucrative shirt sponsorship deal (worth an estimated €15m a year) and instead pay €1.5m a year to support Unicef.

- **A series of tours in promising markets.** This is especially true for FCB, which visits markets where the club wants to showcase and expand the brand (eg China and the USA).

- **A good range of team merchandise.** From traditional team kits to baby products, notwithstanding women’s merchandise which is gaining in popularity in all sports and leagues (in European football, but also in the National Hockey League, for example).

- **The hiring of some star and/or local players.** These players act as emotional anchors for teams that can then strengthen fans’ allegiance to the club through these players. In this area, even though PSG and OM have a tradition of recruiting local and international stars (eg Giuly, Pauleta, Rocheteau and Susic for PSG; and Boli, Deschamps, Papin and Völler for OM), it is definitely an advantage for FCB, which, throughout its rich history, has seen some of the world’s greatest players wear the blaugrana jersey (Bergkamp, Cruyff, Eto’o, Laudrup, Maradona, Messi, Ronaldinho etc).

Externally, the key determinants of success are:

- **The support of a major equipment maker.** PSG, OM and FCB can each capitalise on the distribution channel of their equipment maker (Nike for PSG and FCB, and Adidas for OM) to develop their brand internationally. Nike and Adidas stores worldwide showcase these brands, in addition to team stores, when those exist abroad (eg FCB in China).

- **A strong rivalry between teams.** What are referred to as ‘classicos’ are the games between local rivals, such as FCB and Real Madrid or OM and PSG, generating increased media coverage compared with a regular league game. They also contribute to the construction of iconic brands in the home country but also in foreign markets, because these rivalries crystallise team allegiance via ‘us against them’ confrontations.

- **The association with a renowned country in the sport the team represents.** In this case, PSG, OM and FCB can all benefit from their national status because both France and Spain are known as ‘football countries’. Furthermore, like many other sports teams, the denominations of the three clubs include the name of their city. According to Kapferer, this is a way of reinforcing the identity of the club throughout the world and making the internationalisation of the brand easier.

Looking at the position of each team on the ‘brand equity pipeline’ (Figure 2), PSG and OM are national brands and, as such, seek to become international brands; however, the reputation of OM is stronger than that of PSG. OM was established in 1899 and has a richer record and a longer history than PSG, which looks relatively young (established in 1970). A good record and a strong heritage represent two of the success factors in the internationalisation process of a team. It should be emphasised that the longer a club has been present in its community, the stronger the sense of belonging for its fans should be.
FCB positions itself as an international continental brand that tends towards the global status on the ‘brand equity pipeline’ (Figure 2). As such, this kind of sports team brand is looking to remain competitive globally and to develop its presence within several international markets, especially those it considers strategic. For FCB, these would be Asia (China) and the USA. Thus, FCB has key advantages over PSG or OM in building a good image and a strong identity for the club, which are essential elements for the success of the internationalisation of the team brand.35

DISCUSSION

In reference to the brand equity pipeline introduced in Figure 2, this paper can now look at the three football teams and suggest some strategies for their internationalisation. First, PSG is a national brand. In order to evolve through its internationalisation, the club could follow the brand challenger strategy (think local, act global — the brand recognition specialist). This strategy focuses on brand recognition through strong advertising investments (Table 2). PSG does not have as impressive a winning record as OM or FCB; it had to fight for its survival in the last two seasons and, even in 2009 when the club finally seemed to have reached some stability on the field, the newly appointed president, Charles Villeneuve, had to resign in January after a public confrontation with the board. It should be added that PSG does not trigger as strong a reaction among non-PSG fans as OM and FCB, which makes an international strategy based on affinity more vulnerable. That being said, PSG could capitalise on its reputation through the hiring of foreign players or on the international status of Paris, as the image of Paris and its symbols are admired worldwide. Thus, PSG could use co-branding through an association with the city of Paris and foreign star players, and expand its brand internationally accordingly. By doing so, PSG could capitalise on its newly gained international recognition in order to strengthen its national position. The question some might ask, though, is whether PSG has the legitimacy to associate itself with the image of Paris without being seen as an imposter, trying to buy its way to become an international brand. But the authors believe that PSG does have this legitimacy.

Secondly, as a national brand, the next step for OM is to reach the international level on the ‘brand equity pipeline’ (Figure 2). With this goal in mind, OM could follow the brand affinity strategy (think local, act global — the brand affinity specialist), which is focused on emotions and the development of a unique bond with consumers (Table 2). As the team can count on its strong identity and an important fan base, well known for its passion, OM could capitalise on legitimate product and brand extensions (merchandising) to help crystallise the emotions of its fans. At this point in time, the performance of the club does not yet allow the OM brand to play on its reputation. Its record is mostly based on the past, with its last major win being a Champions Cup in 1993. Furthermore, a big issue with OM is the fact that the emotions and drama surrounding the club could jeopardise a brand strategy that could only take roots in the stability of a long-term commitment to this strategy.

Thirdly, FCB sits between the ‘international continental’ and the ‘international global’ status (Figure 2). FCB could adopt the brand conquistador strategy (unifying local brands — the brand recognition specialist), which is based on partnerships with foreign clubs (Table 2). This should help FCB truly
become global. Thanks to its strong identity and its communication system (i.e. over 1,300 penyes worldwide), FCB is already following some strategies based on reputation and affinity with its fans. One avenue the club could consider is to unify its brand with foreign clubs. This could allow FCB to enter new markets on a long-term basis, by capitalising on the credibility it gained in Asia and in the USA, with its recent partnerships and tours. The main challenge FCB might face in its internationalisation is how it will manage to build an international image, while remaining true to its strong Catalan identity. The balance might not be easy to find and communicate in the positioning of the club without creating some kind of confusion in the minds of its fans.

CONCLUSION
As previously stated, the main objective of this study was to explain how a sports team could become an international global brand. More specifically:

- What are the determinants of success required to start building a global sports team brand? (Table 3)
- What process should a sports team brand follow? (Figure 2)
- What strategies are available to a sports team in order to establish itself as a global brand? (Table 2)

With this objective and these questions in mind, the authors looked at three European football teams in order to illustrate the conceptualisation of the internationalisation of a sports team brand. This process includes the following stages: local, regional, national, international continental and international global, as presented in Figure 2. As it tries to expand its brand across markets, a sports team can carry out four strategies, which are not mutually exclusive: brand reputation, brand affinity, brand challenger and brand conquistador.

In a period of huge economic transformation, professional sports teams have realised the power that branding encapsulates in marketing their club beyond their local market. What the authors term ‘globalisation’ offers both opportunities and threats to sports teams. They can no longer hide behind what used to be a very local activity. In this regard, its brand is recognised as the most important asset of a sports club. Furthermore, the commercial success of the brand can nurture the sporting success of the team by attracting great players and more fans, for instance.

As an example, looking at what happens in Asia, the popularity of football continues unabated after the success of the 2002 World Cup. Trying to capitalise on this popularity in order to expand internationally, teams such as Manchester United and Real Madrid regularly tour Asia; while other clubs, like Sheffield United, have actually purchased an equity stake in a Chinese club. At the same time, Chinese fans appear to have a strong affinity with European football. Manchester United’s Commercial Director, Andy Anson, mentioned: ‘According to United statistics, United has some 94,000,000 fans worldwide, with 20,000,000 fans in China’.

Meanwhile, Manchester United stars Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney have held online discussions with Chinese football fans through the official Chinese website. Anson has described said football fans as the biggest assets of Manchester United. ‘The number of fans has reached 40,000,000 in Asia. Asia, especially the Chinese market, is looked upon as the most important market in the world by United.’ According to data from the Chinese Football Association, the number
of Chinese football fans has reached 110 million and United will target this group first\(^3\) (see Figure 3).

Even though this research is exploratory, the authors believe it leads to some new horizons on the value that a brand and branding represent for sports teams. As such, the mode of governance of a team is essential to the success of a brand strategy. The management team needs to be able to work on a long-term perspective with control over the team brand. Teams could be tempted to externalise this activity as they do with other marketing tasks, but this would be a terrible mistake, as the brand is the heart and soul of an organisation and one source of competitive advantage.\(^4\)

Furthermore, the reputation of the league could have an impact on the potential of a team to expand its brand internationally. Indeed, if some leagues, such as the English Premier League, are perceived as being better or stronger than others, like the French football league, the respective leagues would probably have a better chance of selling television rights to more countries and, consequently, expose the product to a wider international audience.

The authors also believe that the strategies presented herein could be a source of reflection for other industries, especially for brands that have a natural fit with sports. These brands could benefit, for instance, from sponsorship and co-branding initiatives in order to strengthen the emotional connection they share with their consumers beyond borders. In fact, some brands already do so very successfully (Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, New Era caps, Nike, Reebok, etc). That
being said, the authors recognise the need
to expand their reflection beyond the case
of European football teams in order to
articulate a model on the
internationalisation of a sports team brand
that will take into account the nature of
the sport involved, the club's country of
origin and the way the league is managed.
The desire is to propose such an integrated
model on the internationalisation of a
sports team brand. It is hoped that this
model would fit most sports team brands
and would take into account the
importance of the cultural context. This
paper has paved the way for future
research.

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(20) Anderson et al., ref. 16 above.

(21) Cheng et al., ref. 17 above.

(22) Kapferer, ref. 18 above.


(25) Johanson and Vähnle, ref. 13 above.


(33) Kapferer, ref. 18 above.

(34) Hill and Vincent, ref. 6 above.

(35) Kapferer, ref. 18 above.

(36) See Bauer et al., ref. 1 above.


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(39) Ibid.

(40) see http://www.manutd.com/default.sps?pageid=%7B235041b8-c516-8d04 54517-th882b8a%7D&sponsors=air%20asia (accessed 26th January, 2009).
