



Breaking Through: Establishing Football through a Professional League in the United States and the Philippines

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ABSTRACT. The popularity of football across various continents and nations has allowed it to be distinguished as the “world’s game.” However, in countries like the United States and the Philippines, football has failed to be recognized as a major spectator sport. The creation of professional leagues, such as the North American Soccer League (1968-1984) and the United Football League (2009-present), is clearly an attempt to popularize the sport in countries that have previously shown little interest. Beginning with a brief historical overview of the events that shaped the creation and legacy of both leagues, this research note shall aim to identify key similarities and differences between both leagues and highlight how these have affected the emergence of football as a major spectator sport within these societies.

KEYWORDS. football · North American Soccer League · United Football League

INTRODUCTION

Football¹ is a global phenomenon. A study conducted by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in 2006 reported that there were 265 million registered male and female football players and 5 million referees and officials. These amount to about 4 percent of the world’s population actively involved in the sport. Furthermore, the television coverage of the 2010 World Cup, which was broadcasted to every continent including Antarctica and the Arctic Circle, reached 3.2 billion people or 46.4 percent of the global population (FIFA 2011). In a world divided by differences in geography, culture, and religion, most countries share a common bond through their people’s love of football. From its roots in England, the game has acquired a following that encompasses almost every major continent.

However, there are exceptions. In the Philippines, football has largely been viewed as a secondary sport. The recent success of the

Philippine Men's National Football Team and the establishment of the United Football League (UFL) are the first serious attempts to change that perception. The league's growing popularity has been enhanced through its association with the national team. Media coverage has also helped dramatically increase public interest in the sport. The UFL is still very much in its infancy but its existence as the only professional football league in the country is an important factor to establish football as a major sport in the Philippines.

This strategy of building credibility as a major sport through a competitive professional league is nothing new. The United States from 1964 to 1984 had the same experience in football through the North American Soccer League (NASL). The league peaked during the late 1970s. The importation of foreign players was a major factor in its success. Essentially, the growth of the sport was synonymous with the growth of the NASL. Attendance records would peak in 1980, but the NASL would close down after only four years.

The purpose of the research is twofold. The first is to draw comparisons between the NASL and the UFL—specifically, the conditions, attitudes, and strategies that both leagues had in their attempts to establish football as a major sport in their country. The second is to highlight the major characteristics that make both leagues distinct from each other. The UFL and the NASL had very different strategies even though both had a common goal. It is these differences that may help us assess the likelihood of success of establishing football in the Philippines through the UFL.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NORTH AMERICAN SOCCER LEAGUE

The 1966 FIFA World Cup was the first football competition to be televised globally. A total of seventy-five countries broadcast matches live or telerecorded. The spectrum of countries ranged from European powerhouses, such as Italy and West Germany, to lesser known ones like Iraq, Jamaica, and the Philippines (Chisari 2006, 49–50). It was estimated that an audience of four hundred million worldwide tuned in to watch the games. In the United States, NBC New York was responsible for bringing international football to the living rooms of Americans via satellite. An impressive audience of nine million Americans tuned in to the broadcast, considering that it started at 9 a.m. on the West Coast. The massive global appeal of football and its relative obscurity in the United States led many American entrepreneurs and

investors to believe that there was an opportunity to capitalize on it. Large audience numbers from the 1966 World Cup had reinforced their belief that it would be a sound investment (Wangerin 2008, 126).

By 1968, the North American Soccer League was created through the merger of two rival leagues, the United Soccer Association and the National Professional Soccer League. Both leagues had gone bankrupt after the first season and the merger was the only solution to keep professional football in the United States alive. Unfortunately, the 1969 inaugural season of the NASL ended in disaster as all but five of the original seventeen teams ended up folding and unable to participate. In fact, over the next five seasons, the NASL would struggle to attract enough talented players or sizeable crowds.

Officially, the NASL was a professional league but in reality it was more semiprofessional during this time. Teams were composed of amateur players, and their wages were so low that most of them had to take on other jobs. Werner Roth, a defender for the New York Cosmos in 1971, worked for an architectural firm while his teammate and goalkeeper, Shep Messing, was a schoolteacher on weekdays.² This part-time playing arrangement had an impact on the players' fitness and skill levels, which were nothing compared to real professional teams such as Santos FC in Brazil (Pelé 2006, 222).

The signing of Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known as Pelé, by the New York Cosmos in 1975 signaled a turning point for the NASL and football in America. It was no secret that Pelé's role on the team went beyond his playing duties. Despite being in his mid-thirties he still had the reputation as the best player to ever play the game. Pelé admits, "I was past my peak as a player. I managed to convince myself that what they wanted was for me to promote football in the US to the rest of the world—and that it was my name they were hiring as much as my skill as a player" (2006, 220).

Pelé and his association with the New York Cosmos would catapult the NASL to fame in the eyes of the American public. The period 1975–1980 would be the league's most prosperous years. Average attendance for games rose year-on-year, reaching a peak of 14,440 per game in 1980. The most famous team, the New York Cosmos, would regularly attract seventy thousand people for a single match. Meanwhile, the number of participating professional teams had also grown significantly. From five teams during the 1969 inaugural season, the NASL expanded to twenty-four in 1977. Team franchises were based all over the United States and Canada.³

But by the early 1980s many of the teams were struggling to keep afloat. Many franchises attempted to copy the New York Cosmos strategy of bringing in big-name players at the expense of higher salaries. Jack Daley who was the president of the San Diego Socker claimed, "It became fashionable to chase the Cosmos. Everyone had to have a Pelé. Coaches went around the world on talent searches, forcing the prices up." Unfortunately, this did not translate to bigger crowds or an elevated level of play all around the league. Lee Stern, owner of the Chicago Sting, declared, "we spent too much money trying to market teams as if they were instant big league franchises before the attendance and money justified it" (Gammon 1984). Within only four years, from 1981 to 1984, a total of fifteen teams went bankrupt. The 1984 NASL season showcased only nine teams, including the New York Cosmos. This was the final season before the league closed.

PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL AND THE UNITED FOOTBALL LEAGUE

In 2009, eight individuals formed the Football Alliance under the common belief that football in the Philippines could prosper as a major sport if given the proper structural and logistical support. They gained control of the United Football League and attempted to "professionalize" it by sending invitations to the best teams around the country and marketing the league to potential sponsors and media outlets. Similar to the NASL, the inaugural season of the UFL was a subdued affair. Not many people turned out to watch the games. In addition, Metro Manila did not have the proper facilities to host a professional football match so fans were not treated to a typical "fan-friendly environment." A lack of monetary incentives for participating clubs⁴ led many of them to take the competition lightly, resulting in lackluster performances on the field. By the end of the 2009 season, the UFL was still perceived as a Sunday amateur league rather than a professional league (Jamlang 2011).

Football as a sport received very little attention among the Filipino public. This perception changed when the Philippine National Football Team, better known as the "Azkals," beat Vietnam in the 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) Football Federation (AFF) Suzuki Cup. Vietnam is widely recognized as one of the strongest teams in the ASEAN region. The shock victory of the Azkals led to overwhelming media coverage and brought the sport into the spotlight for the first time. This rise in public interest would continue into the

next year when the Azkals attempted to qualify for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Commercials and live coverage of each of the four qualifying matches were televised nationwide.

This sudden interest and media attention on football and the Azkals greatly benefited the UFL. Many of the national team players had already been playing in the UFL while others were quickly signed by UFL teams. Players such as Phil and James Younghusband, Aly Borromeo, and Chieffy Caligdong became household names due to their exploits with the national team. They were also associated with their club teams in the UFL, such as the Loyola Meralco Sparks, Kaya FC, and Philippine Air Force FC. In addition, the league received a huge boost on September 16, 2011, when AKTV channel acquired the rights to broadcast UFL games over the next five years (Olivares 2011). Expanding its coverage to a wider audience further enhanced its reputation as the top league for football in the Philippines.

Currently, the UFL operates under two separate competitions. From October to December, it holds the UFL Cup, patterned after most cup competitions held in Europe. This is a unique setup wherein any established football club can compete alongside Divisions 1 and 2 teams for a common trophy. Meanwhile, the UFL league season is held from January to June. Twenty of the best teams around the country are separated evenly between Divisions 1 and 2. The format is also similar to the European setup where match results correspond to points on the league board. The team with the most points at the end of the season is declared the league champion.

SIMILARITIES: NASL AND UFL

Stiff Competition from Established Spectator Sports

According to Waddington and Roderick (1996, 31) of the University of Leicester, some historians have argued that the relative failure of football to become a major sport in countries like the United States and the Philippines can be attributed to the assumption that each society has a limited amount of “space” for sports. Once this “space” has been filled by one sport there is no room left for a new sport to be introduced. Both the NASL and the UFL were established in societies where football had to compete with other sports to be properly recognized. In the United States, “most spectator sports cultures emerged during the 1890s to 1930s . . . [this was] when the “space” of

sports culture was created and filled” (Veseth 2006, 194). By the 1970s and 1980s, the NASL was competing against the big three of American sports: baseball, basketball, and American football.

For the most part, baseball and American football have been able to maintain their status as American sports despite their historical roots in the English games of rounders and rugby, respectively. Waddington and Roderick would cite that the development of American football “eventually came to have nationally distinct rules which marked it out not only as distinctively American but, by the same token, as distinctively non-British” (1996, 43). The same could be said about baseball where “in order for the game to come to be seen as distinctively American, it was necessary for those involved in developing the game to sever any possible link with the English game, and also to establish an American origin” (ibid.). To sports fans in America, these two sports represent “a set of values and characteristics which are uniquely American.” As a result, American football and baseball have become the two most popular sports at the professional level in the United States (ibid., 34). Meanwhile, football at the professional level has largely been presented and perceived as a foreign sport played by foreign players (Veseth 2006, 192).

On the other hand, football and the UFL must compete with basketball and boxing, which have become the most famous sports in the Philippines due to the success of Filipino athletes in international competitions. Basketball is undeniably the nation’s biggest spectator sport, which boasts a competitive professional league in the Philippine Basketball Association (PBA) and a strong following at the amateur level through the University Athletic Association of the Philippines (UAAP) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Most recently the Philippine Men’s Basketball Team qualified for the 2014 FIBA World Championship, the basketball equivalent to football’s World Cup. In boxing, the Philippines has boasted of a host of current and former world champions. Manny Pacquiao is considered by many to be one of the best fighters today. The recent popularity of the Philippine Azkals has elevated the awareness of Filipinos to the sport of football, but whether it can call itself among the top spectator sports in the country remains to be seen.

Lack of Fans Identifying with the Football Clubs

One of the main ingredients that make football such a successful spectator sport is the passion that fans have for the game and, more

importantly, the club or team they support. Veseth puts it bluntly, "Soccer is an 'us versus them' game and therefore can be an especially effective way to define identity, both who we are and who and what we are not" (2006, 186). To fans around the globe, the football club they support has become more than just a professional team but an institution that represents their individual identity. An example would be the people of Catalonia, Spain, and their relationship with FC Barcelona. Their support for the team goes beyond the club's success on the field. During the regime of General Franco, any form of Catalonian expression was banned for decades. The only outlet people had at the time was when they went to football matches. There they felt secure to chant and sing songs that expressed their unique Catalan identity. The fans were supported by FC Barcelona instead of being banned. This common stand against the Franco regime cemented a special bond between Catalans and FC Barcelona, which exists to this day (Burns 2012, 200-202).

This almost fanatical love for one's club is noticeably absent among fans in the NASL and the UFL. In his study of football fan culture in the late 1970s, Roadburg observed that "because soccer evolved over a period of six hundred years in Britain, as opposed to North America where the professional game was commercially guided in a single decade, the average British soccer fan is more able than his North American counterpart to identify with the game as a product of his heritage and culture" (1980, 268-69). This argument could also be used to explain the American sentiment for American football and baseball over other sports. In addition, the availability of more than one professional sports team in a given area means that the sporting loyalties of American fans are spread across different teams and sports (*ibid.*, 272).

In the Philippines and the UFL, club loyalties are almost nonexistent. The team that is most closely associated with football is the Philippine Azkals. Although many of its players belong to clubs that play in the UFL, this has not translated to the development of stronger fan bases for club teams or the league itself. When comparing loyalties between the Azkals and a UFL team, it is easier for fans to identify with the national team because it is meant to represent the entire country. In fact, most clubs in the UFL have yet to understand the need to create a strong fan base among Filipino football audiences much less provide avenues for them to form a common identity with the club (Quilloy and Topular 2012, 205).

Player Personalities as a Substitute for Club Loyalties

Without the strong fan base that other clubs around the world rely on for sustained revenue, both leagues relied upon the appeal and star power of player personalities to elevate their fame among the general public. For the NASL, the player with the greatest impact was Pelé. His fruitful career in the NASL made the league a viable option for other top players to come to North America and play. Despite his relatively abrupt retirement in 1977, the list of players who went on to play in the NASL remains impressive, to say the least. Johan Cruyff, known for developing the principles of “total football,” played for the Los Angeles Aztecs and Washington Diplomats. Franz Beckenbaur, the captain of the West German national team, was a New York Cosmo with Pelé from 1977 to 1980 and 1983. George Best, an icon of Manchester United, played for three different teams in his five-year career in North America.⁵ The NASL became a league where “each team had several American players besides the ‘internationals,’ but the fans clearly came to see the exceptional skills of the foreign players, even if they were a little past their prime” (Veseth 2006, 114). This was an effective strategy in terms of attracting an audience in the short term, particularly immigrants from soccer-playing countries (Veseth 2006, 192).

Meanwhile, the surge of interest for the Philippine Azkals and its players has rubbed off to the benefit of the UFL. Many of its players have become household names, and given the sporadic calendar of international matches they remain visible through their participation in the UFL. The roster of the top four teams during the 2013 league season reads like a who’s who of the Philippine Azkals lineup. James and Phil Younghusband, arguably the most famous players of the Philippine Azkals, both play for Loyola Meralco Sparks alongside fellow internationals Matthew Hartman and Simon Greatwich. The Azkals team captain Aly Borromeo and defender Anton del Rosario play for Kaya FC. Global FC, which finished second in the league, boasts the most number of Philippine Azkals members in its lineup, including Angel Guirado, Misagh Bahadoran, Marwin Angeles, Ed Sacapano, and Jason de Jong.

DIFFERENCES: NASL VS. UFL

Audience-driven Changes

Some aspects of the game of football certainly reinforced the American public’s perception that it was a foreign sport. The fact that a football

match could end without anyone scoring or with both teams tied was totally different from any other spectator sport in America. The general sentiment can be expressed thus: “every sporting contest needed a winner and a loser. Draws, the catchphrase claimed, were ‘like kissing your sister.’ Thus, a sport ending not only with a level score but without any score at all was an abomination” (Wangerin 2008, 165). Baseball and basketball games would always end with a winner by playing extra periods until a team won. In 1974 the NFL, the professional league for American football, enacted a “sudden death” period to prevent games from ending in a draw even though the last draw that took place was back in 1943 (*ibid.*).

Realizing this, the NASL created its own set of rule changes to alter the game of football and customize it for the benefit of an American audience. A fifteen-minute “sudden death” overtime period was created to avoid games ending in a draw. The first team to score within that time period would win the game. If the game still remained a draw then it would move on to an NASL “shootout.” Players would be given five seconds to beat the goal keeper thirty-five yards away from goal. Most foreign players had never encountered anything like this on the field. Johan Cruyff would say, “I think it was fantastic, I still think in Europe they should try it.”⁶ In addition, to encourage more goals in a game, the league experimented with re-marking the field. With FIFA’s consent, a thirty-five-yard line was made a part of NASL fields of play. It would signal that a player could be offside only if he was thirty-five yards or less from the goal line (Wangerin 2008, 152). To many NASL owners this was a liberating innovation that gave attackers an advantage over tight defenses by giving them more space to maneuver in front of the goal and possibly score.

The strategy of altering the game to cater to the specific demands of American spectators is in stark contrast to that of the UFL, which seems to be adopting most of its policies from the European model of football leagues. Some similarities include its current league structure. The UFL, like most football leagues in Europe, uses a point system to rank teams according to their performance throughout the season. A win corresponds to three points, a draw corresponds to one point, and a loss means no points on the board. The champion is determined by the team with the most number of points at the end of the season.

The UFL adopts a relegation system. The UFL is composed of twenty teams every season, the top ten teams compete in Division 1 while the rest compete in Division 2. Ideally, since the best teams are

competing in Division 1 it is a much higher level of play than Division 2. The adaptation of a relegation system means that the top two teams of UFL Division 2 have an opportunity to compete in UFL Division 1 while the bottom two teams of Division 1 “go down” to Division 2. Most Filipino spectators will be unfamiliar with these concepts since they are features that are more popular among European professional sports leagues. Most Filipino sports fans are familiar with the American structure of leagues, which includes a regular season and a postseason or playoffs to determine the champion. Furthermore, the possibility that a professional team can no longer compete in the league because of poor performances has never been seen in Filipino professional sports until the UFL.

Reliance on Foreign Players

The strategy of signing big-name foreign players, even if they were past their prime, had a twofold effect on the NASL. The first was that foreign stars would bring more people to the stands to watch NASL games. As discussed earlier, this was effective in growing attendance numbers at least from the period 1975–1980 when the league was at its peak. The second was that they would elevate the level of play around the league. An article from *Sports Illustrated* in 1977 would say that “many experts challenge the quality of play in the NASL . . . Manager Eddie McCreadie of Chelsea, an English second-division side, intimated that the level of play here was about mediocre English second-division—or not very good” (Reed 1977). On the other hand, Pelé himself would reflect that when he retired, “the NASL had got a lot tougher. It was now a serious league. Our rivals had brought in more strong reinforcements from Europe. I thought to myself it was a very good time to stop” (2006, 233).

What was unforeseen at the time was that it created an unsustainable business model for most of the clubs involved in the NASL and ultimately led to the collapse of the league in 1984. Franchise owners were paying bigger salaries for players who could not fill the stadiums and slowly drove them into debt. Worse, there was hardly any homegrown American talent that emerged (Goldblatt 2008, 531). Veseth believes foreign players played a role in the decline of the NASL “because the fans identified with the foreign players, who inevitably had to move on or out, not with their ‘home’ teams themselves. How many fans came to see a Cosmos game? How many came just to be able to say that they had seen Pelé play?” (Veseth 2006, 192). In the end,

the NASL could not survive despite the large financial investments poured into it.

The impact of foreign players on the UFL, on the other hand, is quite different. The recent media and public attention to the league was initiated by the interest surrounding the Philippine Azkals. The fact that the Azkals is the Philippines' national football team composed of homegrown talent and foreign-born players of Filipino descent means there is less possibility for them to "move on or out." In fact, the more common trend is that most of the foreign-born Filipino players have decided to stay in the country and play professionally in the UFL. The most famous players on the team, the Younghusband brothers, are a clear example of that. Although a select few play in the top leagues of Europe, the majority of Azkals team members play professionally in the Philippines.

The UFL appears to be well informed of the dangers of creating a league that is reliant on the importation of foreign talent. In the 2013–2014 season, the league has established a limit on the number of foreign players for each club. "In the foreign player rule, five imports will be allowed on the pitch for each team during a match. Two more foreign players can play, provided that they have been permanent residents of the Philippines for at least five years" (Decena 2013). This policy was created in order to nurture the talent of Filipino players with the end goal of fielding a stronger national team during future international competitions. Stallion FC head coach Ernie Nierras was quoted by Decena (2013) saying, "Our local players need exposure to build their confidence. Teams with foreign players tend to do well, as long as you have good local players also. What the local players have done is show that they can compete with the imports, and that is what this league needs."

Linkage with the National Setup

Bringing the best players to compete on the same stage is not just good entertainment for audiences but also an important factor in the development of players. The journey to becoming a professional athlete is one of consistent rebuilding. From the grassroots level to the professional level the ideal athlete must constantly hone their skill sets to prepare them for the next level of competition. Becoming a professional football player represents the pinnacle of this journey. This is the platform where all the best players can compete. As a result, national teams rely on professional leagues as a steady stream of talent that they can draw from.

The responsibility of developing football in the United States and maintaining a competitive US national team falls on the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). Throughout the period when the best professional football in the country was being played in the NASL, the USSF was largely distant. During the final years of the NASL, a *Sports Illustrated* article would describe it as “a small committee of little international prestige that was overtaken by the rise of the NASL and the boom in youth soccer.” In the same article, Chicago Sting owner Lee Stern claimed that the NASL “had to operate with no really effective support from the USSF, which was jealous and disorganized” (Gammon 1984).

This fractured relationship between the NASL and the USSF had an important impact on the development of players for the US national team. It appears that the temptation of importing players was greater than allowing even the best American-born college players to play in the NASL. The playing time given to the supposed future of American soccer was described as “derisory” during the 1970s (Wangerin 2008, 154). This meant that despite a higher standard of play and relative popularity and interest brought by the NASL it had still failed to produce a US national side that could compete on the international stage. From 1971 to 1984 it would only win thirty of its ninety-three international matches.⁷ Participation in international tournaments was also limited to the 1972 and 1984 Summer Olympics. Both teams failed to bring home any medals. The United States also missed out on the World Cups of 1974, 1978, and 1982.

In contrast, the recognition by members of the UFL and the Philippine Football Federation (PFF) that they are working toward the common goal of developing football in the country has developed into a mutually beneficial relationship for both organizations. Officials from the UFL and PFF agree that growing the game at the grassroots level is a key objective for sustainability. Although largely in the hands of the PFF, the benefits of a grassroots campaign may potentially benefit the UFL by bringing the interest on football to a new generation and ensure that talent for the future is properly developed.

On the other hand, the importance of the UFL within the national setup is expressed by an official as “[before the UFL] what’s the point in being an Azkal, what’s the point in breaking my knee, who’s gonna (sic) provide food in my plate when I grow up, it’s nothing . . . Now you see the UFL and say we’re gonna (sic) play football, I’m gonna (sic) play football in high school, shift in college and learn a lot in the UFL”

(Quilloy and Topular 2012, 209). At present the level of play in the UFL has not been high enough to stop the PFF from recruiting foreigners to field a competitive national team. However, the same UFL official says, “the league quality is not there yet but it’s very apparent that it is growing. So there will come a time when it’s no longer sustainable or viable for the national team. Now we get from the national league” (ibid.). The ban on foreign players, as previously discussed, is another important indication that the UFL embraces its role as a venue for the continued development of the best Filipino football talent.

CONCLUSION

Does the failure of the NASL signify that football has no more place in countries that have already established its major spectator sports? Certainly, for both the NASL and the UFL, the lack of public affinity for the sport of football meant that establishing a sustainable professional league was always a major challenge. Both leagues have relied on the star power of players to boost audience attendance in an effort to make up for a lack of a strong fan base. Although the overreliance on foreign players was a major factor in its eventual collapse, the foundation for the sport to gain a foothold in America for future generations had also been established through the NASL. Today, football is the most played sport among American youths and the US National Team is among the best teams in world football, consistently qualifying for the World Cup over the past decade.

For the UFL in the Philippines, now in its fifth season, it is too soon to judge the impact and legacy the league will have in cementing football’s place in the Philippines. Since its creation in 2009, the league has made credible progress toward achieving its place among the major spectator sports in the country. The policies to prioritize the development of local talent and maintain strong links with the country’s national setup are positive signs that the UFL is looking to build a sustainable future. But as of today there is still much work to be done before we can concretely say that football is a major sport in the Philippines. ❀

NOTES

1. The terms “soccer” and “football” are used interchangeably throughout the text but both refer to “association football.” This is to distinguish it between “American football,” which draws its origins from rugby.
2. Taken from interview of former NASL players in the documentary *Once in a Lifetime* produced in 2006.
3. Statistics provided by the NASL history portal of the website American Soccer History Archives.
4. “Football club” and “football team” are also used interchangeably throughout the text.
5. Player profiles collected and accessed through the NASL history portal of the website American Soccer History Archives.
6. Taken from interview of Johan Cruyff in the documentary *Once in a Lifetime* produced in 2006.
7. Statistics provided by USA Men’s National Team portal of the website American Soccer History Archives.

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