

Module 2. Ethical Dilemmas in Sport Funding

Unit 2.1

Introduction

In this reading, we will outline the ethical dilemmas in sport funding. This is a complicated topic that requires an understanding of ethics in sport and how sometimes sport is unethical in terms of its funding. Then, we will discuss potential rules and regulations to encourage and enforce ethical funding, but even then, why this might be hard to achieve.

As we approach the end of the reading, we will give suggestions of how ethical sports funding can be achieved before providing some case study examples focusing on the various issues in this field. Firstly, though, how and why is sport funded?

Sport Funding

There are many different sports played globally, and all are funded in different sorts of ways. Why do they require this funding? Some sports can be expensive and require specialist equipment and facilities to be played at. All of these items will need paying for, and it might be too much for the athletes or players to fund themselves.

Even in sports that are perceived as being relatively cheap to begin with, such as football, the costs can soon rack up. The kit, the pitch, the stadium, the personal, all soon add up to a significant amount of money, which only increases the higher a club moves up the league system.

At the top levels, we, of course, see transfer fees for players who move clubs, with these sometimes reaching into the tens of millions of pounds. This money has to come from somewhere, where exactly, we will discuss next.

How They Are Funded

As we have said, they can be funded in plenty of different fashions. Historically, sport would be funded by those wealthy individuals who took an interest in the sport or the success of a local team in their local area. This still happens until now, investments into local clubs, organizations or individual athletes are still carried out by wealthy individuals, in some cases, without the desire for any form of return.

You do not have to be extremely wealthy to get involved in sport, for example, syndicates have become involved in horse racing. A group of people join together and pool their resources for the purchase and upkeep of a racing horse before sharing in any profits.



Governments also play a vital role in supporting the funding of sport. National governments will fund sport in terms of participation, facility, and coaching development, but also elite sport. It is not all sport that benefits from this elite funding, and is often tied to sporting events that the country is particularly good at or feature in the Olympics. The motivation for a government to do this is varied. By funding sport and physical activity they might be able to make positive societal change, for example, keeping more people active and reducing obesity levels, or they might want to project themselves as a successful sporting nation on the world stage. This is a powerful motive.

Regardless of wealth or governmental involvement, sporting organizations are always keen to attract further funding from sources external to sport. One of the most commonly used methods of sports funding is that of sponsorship. Sponsorship has been used in sport for many years and is a vital cog in the income of those sports. As we can observe from the figure below, it shows no signs of slowing down.

Figure 1: How can sport sponsorship benefit your brand?



Source: Blissett, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3H9YbMg>

Sponsors will pay an amount to a sporting organization so that they can be associated with them. This can be for a particular event or part of a longer-term yearly deal which gives some security to both parties. The aim is to connect with a club that positively influences consumers to buy your brand, hopefully as a result of sponsorship, an increase in sales will be realised.

Sport can also be funded through membership or match attendance fees. This used to be a much bigger part of top-level sport, and the numbers through the gate would be a much larger part of the balance sheet and ultimate success. While at lower levels of sports



competition it remains important for funding that sport, it has been replaced at the top level by sponsorship, but also competition winnings and television deals.

These new developments in sports funding have been brought about due to the commercialisation of sport and advancements in coverage, through television and social media. Sports, some more than others, have been able to capture huge revenues through these methods due to the appetite for sport from consumers all over the globe. With these revenues as large as they now are, this has created some issues in terms of how ethical these are, but first we must define and discuss the ethics within sport.

Ethics in Sport

In general terms, ethics can be hard to define. While it can be apparent in certain scenarios what ethics are, for example, in academic research, for other areas it can be quite hard as who is responsible for ethics? Why are they the moral compass that decides what is correct and incorrect? Sport is one of those areas where it can be hard to define what is acceptable and this can depend on many different factors, even though the rules on some behaviours are clear. For example, who does it? When do they do it? And what is the outcome?

Take diving in football, for example. It is against the rules to con a match referee in any sport; however, if you were trying to win the World Cup final, you would surely dive to get a penalty. Your fans would love you and call it part of the game, the opposition fans would hate you and call for you to never play the game again.

Back to our first question, how do we approach regulation for ethics? An approach suggested by Kvalens and Hemmestad to deal with ethics in sport “is to formulate a set of detailed rules to define the limits of what should and should not be done to perform well and win” (Kvalens & Hemmestad, 2010, p. 57). This is a good idea. By having rules there is less chance of grey areas appearing, or so it would seem, and therefore less unethical behaviour. Funding does have some of these rules already in place, which we will come to later.

Before we tackle all of that, what are the ethical issues that we can observe in sport outside of funding? As you would imagine, these are extremely varied, it could encompass the coach athlete relationship, actions of players both on and off the field, or the behaviour of managers in relation to the organizing sport. In practice, this could mean that these individuals operate against the expectations of other actors within sport. Why they do this is up for debate and possibly motivated by a desire to win, but nothing can be certain. What we do know is that there are many moving parts in sport, and it can be difficult to keep a handle on all the possible scenarios.

Is Funding in Sport Always Ethical?

The sad answer to this question is no. The funding that sport enjoys is not always ethical and can bring sport into a collision course with bad people, organizations, and rules and



regulations. Even when it does not, it might cause the fans to become upset with the choices an organization has made. We will outline some of the methods in which sport could be considered to be walking an ethical tightrope.

One of the main current issues is the link between sport, particularly football, and gambling sponsorship. Gambling and sport have a long history, from the very earliest days of competitive activity, populations have wanted to gamble on it. Gambling was reported as far back as the Ancient Greek Olympics, and it has not stopped, but only got much, much bigger. Take a look at the figure below, it details how gambling has, in fact, taken over some sporting fields.

Figure 2: Does the Premier League Have a Gambling Problem?



Source: Armstrong, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3LqtZiF>

It is not pretty much impossible to watch a sporting event without being aware that some of the sponsors are linked to gambling. And here lies the problem. Gambling companies are more than willing to appear on the shirts and in the stadiums of sporting clubs and, in turn, give them vast sums of money for doing so.

Legally, there is nothing wrong with promoting gambling, it is a business like many others and people are entitled to gamble as well as the gambling companies are entitled to make a living. However, there are concerns about the ethical nature of these types of companies



being so prominent in sport. Plus, the availability of gambling platforms, including social media, for a 24/7 betting experience have fuelled gambling across the world.

Research has suggested that, due to the increased availability of gambling in the world, problem gamblers, those with addictions, are becoming more prevalent. This is not only bad news for the people who have these problems, but for governments that have to look after them when they fall ill (McGee, 2020). Not only this, but the ages at which gambling is now being accessed, and the problems caused by this is dropping even lower due to the acceptability of the practice. How can it not be acceptable when it is on our favourite teams' shirts and on the television almost every hour of the day?

Fan groups and other actors within football are beginning to note that unethical practices of some gambling companies. For example, adverts appearing next to sections in match day programs designed for children. The targeting of those with clear gambling problems by companies to make them spend more. Almost unbelievably, 72 English clubs have agreements in place with competition sponsor Sky Bet to receive a cut of the losses from gamblers that bet on their team (Davies, 2022). This has led to accusations of exploitation of their own supporters.

In the same fashion as the concern around gambling sponsorship, other forms of sponsorship have had the same reaction. It appears that some clubs, at least in the view of the fans, they are only interested in the money that could be received from sponsorships rather than the link with a country or organization and what it says about both parties. Arsenal FC, from the English Premier League, have entered into a sponsorship agreement with the country of Rwanda, through their tourist board, Visit Rwanda.

Figure 3: Arsenal's Visit Rwanda sponsorship. The impact, criticisms and what fans think

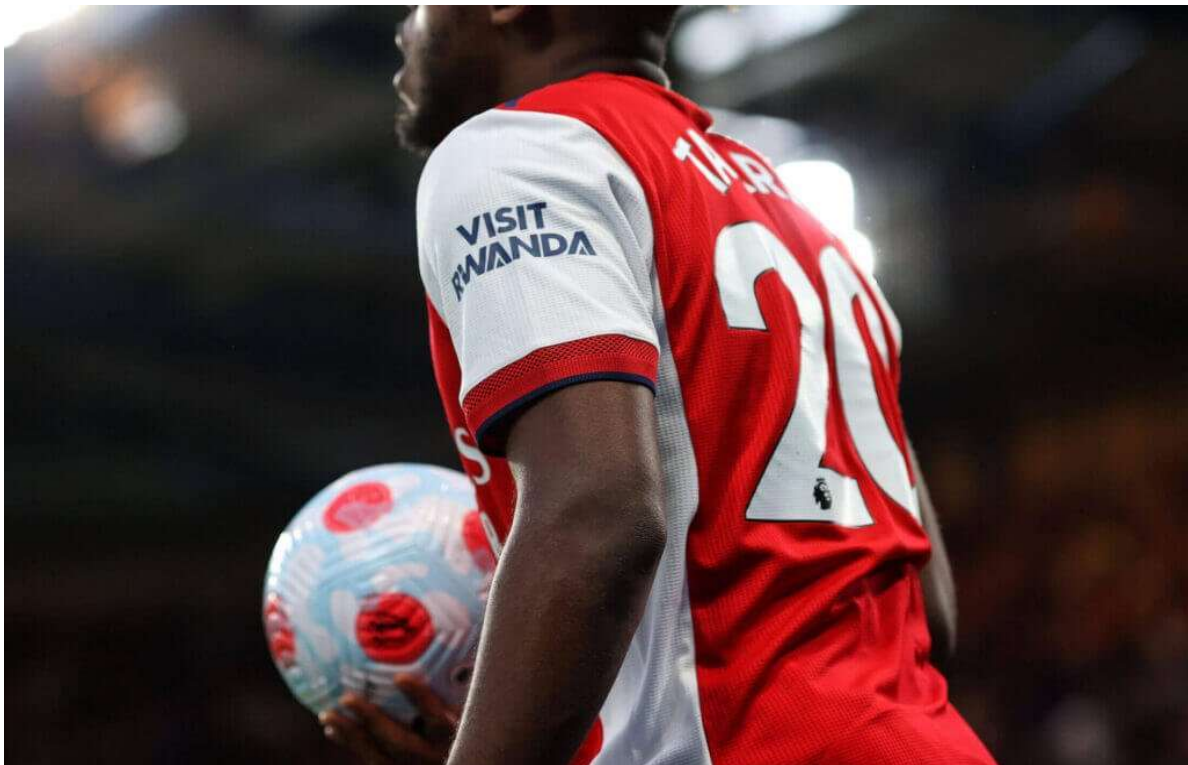


Figure: D'Urso & McNicholas, 2022, <https://bit.ly/41SQ1zN>

This has caused outcry in some corners of support due to the issues in Rwanda, such as unfair elections, opposition, and media suppression. The argument being that a team like Arsenal should not be associated with a regime of this calibre. Furthermore, by doing this, it gives legitimacy to the sponsor, Rwanda, and allows them to not be remembered as a part of a dubious political regime, but the sponsor of top-class football teams, a stable which also includes PSG.

Norwich City, then of the English Premier League, also had issues of this kind, although not with a nation state. Upon their promotion to the Premier League, the club was looking for a new sponsor. They signed an agreement with betting firm BK8 to be their new front of the shirt sponsor. However, as soon as the deal was announced, it was met with push back from various supporters' groups due to BK8 not only being a betting company, but the site was directly linked to sexist material (Bailey, 2021). The sponsorship agreement, worth a not insignificant £5 million, was cancelled after a mere three days, with supporters pointing out the community work the club did while running the hashtag #hergametoo.

The club agreed and released the following statement by way of mitigation and apology, a section of which states as follows: "Our club does not support or endorse degrading or upsetting images not maintaining our values as an inclusive community club. Our football club should not associate with anyone else who does" (MacInnes, 2021, para. 5).

The previous issue with Rwanda and other similar sponsorship deals takes us to one of the more interesting developments recently, the role of funding from nation states in sport. While sponsorship from tourist boards or national airlines is perhaps nothing new in sport the increase in funding from investment foundations with close or sometimes direct links to those nation's rulers is new.

It is providing sport, and football in particular, although this is not the only place in which it happens, with a bit of a conundrum. In some corners of the game, investment is generally to be welcomed, and the impact of the investment can often lead to a more competitive league. On the other side, is the concern about who controls these teams and who has the power and controls the interests of a product that means so much to so many people.

The question is, is it unethical? Most of these nation state investments come with a large fanfare and bank balance to match. It could be considered a form of financial doping, by investing large sums of money no one else in the competition could hope to match, you are taking away the competitive element of the competition. In fact, controls have been brought in, Financial Fair Play, to make sure that clubs are sustainable and that this type of financial input does not unduly impact on competition, something we will touch on in the following subsection. While these might seem sensible, are we not forgetting something? Football is a market like any other, why should the best performing businesses, as they are now, not want to get the most money and be at the top of the market?

Should we expect clubs or sporting organizations to vote for more competitive leagues, even when it might not do them any good? While it might be in the fans' interest to limit the spending of rivals, it is probably not going to be in the clubs. Again, this highlights the issue with what is ethical and what is not. One set of fans, for example, Newcastle United, are delighted they have been taken over by the PIF (Public Investment Fund) as it has allowed them to compete with teams at the top level in the Premier League. Fans of opposing clubs are less than pleased as it puts pressure on their operating procedures and squads with another strong and wealthy side in the league.

Figure 4: Newcastle supporters gleefully celebrated news of the club's takeover, ignoring the concerns over Saudi Arabia's human rights record



Source: Wilson, 2021, <https://bit.ly/40DlV2l>

Furthermore, and perhaps one of the biggest complaints with this type of investment, is the double standards that seem to occur through those employed by the investor in their home country and corporate messages sent by the club they are investing in and the league that they play in.

The criminalisation and persecution of LGBT+ rights in some of these nations goes against what the clubs, leagues and governments say they support. It is difficult to therefore consider that the words of these organizations mean much when put into this context. And by allowing these views into the sport through the investment, it therefore can be viewed as unethical.

In addition, the movement away from a game for the area, town or city that sport once was to the more high-profile commercialised industry it is becoming does not sit well with everyone. There is a feeling that what made sport special is being lost in a type of arms race, with more money being invested and taking it away from its roots. Again, perhaps this is just the way of sport now and is a form of progress where the fans are not the most important actors in the ecosystem.

We have now outlined and given examples of funding that could be considered by some to be unethical. But what are the impacts of these issues? Do people really care as long as their club is doing well?

Impact of Unethical Funding

The issues that we have highlighted above do not happen in a vacuum, they can elicit strong responses from fans, pundits, and governments. Fans of sport are the most vocal in this regard. If they deem something is unethical, then they will say so in no uncertain terms. Social media has played a big role in this, as they can directly contact and discuss these issues with others, but also directly with their clubs and other sporting organizations.

As we have seen in some of the examples, like Norwich City, they can have the power to make a club rethink some of their business decisions. The club in this regard was concerned with the impact that their decision could have on them, they might no longer be seen as a club that does things the proper way, but one that is only interested in profit above all else. This perception could lead fans and others that had links with the club to think that they no longer wish to support the team due to the perception of them being unethical.

There have been regulation changes due to perceived unethical practices. We mentioned earlier Financial Fair Play in football and how this was brought in due to clubs who attracted rich owners spending millions of pounds, dollars, and euros to attract the best talent. This is seen not only as unethical because it allows for an amount of financial doping, but also concern about the source of these funds. If these funds are appearing from a source which is unethical, no amount of good practice from a club or sports organization is likely to save them from questions about their actions.

Some clubs actually embrace perceived unethical funding models and seek to change that, using it as part of their marketing strategy. For example, there has been an effort to group together teams that would not support gambling sponsorship in their clubs, signing up to an anti-gambling charter and publicising that fact.

Figure 5: Lewes FC and Gambling with Lives launch gambling education programme



Source: Lewes FC, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3AqzU0n>

The above picture is from Lewes FC, who have signed up for the program called Gambling with Lives. The aim of this program is for clubs to sign up to a charter that refuses to use gambling sponsorship within their clubs. The stance has led to more engagement with the club, and while this was not the goal, an increase in purchase intention regarding membership and club kit.

In some cases, the idea of 'doing good' and behaving properly is not enough to make sure that individuals or groups behave in an ethical way, rules and regulations are needed.

Rules and Regulations

It is clear from observing any form of sport that those that partake in it might not always play by the rules. They might cheat whether that is before the game, during or afterwards or even perhaps not related to the game being played at all. This is no different when we consider funding.

One recent example that we can look at in this regard is Juventus FC. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were accusations that the board had manipulated players' salaries and bonuses. They had done this to present the club on a more financially sound footing than it was actually on (Aginì & Ralph, 2022). This was unethical as it allowed the club to report better financial positions than its rivals and avoid possible sanctions from the competitions it enters, Serie A and UEFA competitions.

But not only was it unethical, it turned to be very much illegal. Juventus are listed on the Italian stock market, meaning all financial figures need to be reported accurately. In this case, they were not reported accurately, which attracted the attention of not only the financial authorities, but the leagues themselves. As a result, the club was deducted points for a breach of league regulations. In addition, the entire board resigned, fearing that there will be some form of legal ramifications to come (Agini & Ralph, 2022).

It is not the only case of unethical funding that has needed to be dealt with by rules and regulations, but it is a case of showing why it is required. In a sense, clear rules and regulations are perhaps the only way of maintaining some form of order in this area. But this itself is not always straightforward. Take for example the situation with nation states that we have spoken about earlier. They are deemed as unethical in some circles and can also be against competition regulations if we consider Financial Fair Play. Some big clubs have been banned from Europe due to their non-adherence to these rules. An easy win for the governing bodies. Except it is not, the most severe of these punishments have been overturned through legal appeals.

This indicates, albeit in a small way, that just because things seem clear-cut in terms of law and regulation, it does not mean that they will be punished. Imagine how hard it is with purely the difference between what is ethical and what is not. A further way might be to link funding to ethical behaviour in terms of governance. This is something that UK Sport does when giving funding out to the many sporting organizations they do. The benefit here is that yes, you might be able to be funded unethically in part of the funding, but it will count you out or further and perhaps greater funding down the line (UK Sport, 2021).

The option for governing bodies or even legal action exists, but that does not always stop the unethical funding. So, the question we will tackle in the next subsection is, why is it hard to do?

Why Is it Hard to Do?

There are many reasons that some individuals feel that they can act in an unethical fashion. There are in truth probably too many to consider just in this reading, and therefore we will use the fraud triangle to bring our ideas together. It is important to say at this stage that we do not consider all sources or instances of unethical funding to be related to fraud, some are just missteps and a lack of appreciation of the impact of a particular funding stream and the reaction to it from wider society.

However, some funding is based on slightly more illegal means. The fraud triangle is made up of incentives, opportunity and rationalisation. If all three of those areas are met, then fraud is very likely to occur. If one or two of the points are met, then fraud could still happen, but is less likely.



Figure 6: The fraud triangle



Source: Turner, Mock & Srivastava, 2003, p. 1

If we think about this in the context of funding in sport, we might consider the incentive or pressure being related to sporting pressures, wins, or league standing. The opportunity could be that the offer of funding is there and has been offered to the club or sporting organization. The rationalisation will follow, is it really unethical? Will anyone notice? Or will they care if we are winning? In sport, these factors acting on an individual or group can be overwhelming, considering the competitiveness of the market. Therefore, it is no real surprise that there are often issues. So, if sport is sometimes not funded all that ethically and sport itself can sometimes be unethical, how can we fund sport in an ethical fashion?

Ethical Sports Funding

The following areas are perhaps guidelines, we make no claims that these will work or lead to better outcomes in terms of funding. They might not bring in the same amount of revenue that is needed or been enjoyed in the past. But in the modern day, where every decision is scrutinised as soon as it happens, perhaps this is something to consider.

Firstly, adherence to the rules and regulations of the competition or national regulations that the sporting organization is operating under. This allows a level of security for the sporting organization that they cannot be punished for the funding by the league. They may still have issues with the fans, but it might save them points deductions or fines.

We, of course, must still have some consideration for fans and invested partners. It will not always be clear how these parties might react, but it is important to garner their opinions and thoughts. A failure to do so might result in even harsher sanctions than a fine, like the loss of respect from their fans.

Finally, seeking out and working with ethical funding partners could not only provide a source of income, but a source of pride for the sporting organization. If a partnership is considered ethical, fans and non-fans could begin to hold the club in a higher regard than they did previously. This could lead to further interest in the organization, leading to further financial rewards. But it could also allow the organization to receive intangible benefits, a good reputation has no monetary value, but used in the right way it could be priceless.

It is important to say that it is unlikely we will please everyone, regardless of how good our intentions are. What we should aim to do, though, is attempt to follow these three methods and seek to always act within not only the best interests of the sporting organization, but the sport itself. To bring the reading into context, we will discuss some case studies.

Case Studies

The case studies that we will be focusing on are based on Dutch futsal club, 't Knooppunt and English football club, Blackpool FC. Each has their own unique stories that shed some light on the murky world of funding.

't Knooppunt Futsal

One of the more bizarre and recent cases focused on the Dutch futsal team, 't Knooppunt. 't Knooppunt were a futsal team from the De Pijp area of Amsterdam. Futsal is an indoor five-a-side game closely resembling football. Initially playing in the lower futsal leagues of the Netherlands, they rapidly rose through the leagues and began attracting high-profile players.

Following promotion to the top division, they performed well and signed a host of international standard players. Not long after, the club won the Dutch title and reached the group stages of the Futsal Champions League before being knocked out by Barcelona (Postma, 2017). However, all was not well in the offices of the Royal Dutch Football Association, as questions over how the rise had been achieved were beginning to be asked.

Figure 7: 't Knooppunt's dream comes true with a match against Barcelona



Source: NOS, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3Vazc0L>

The Dutch police had been made aware of several individuals linked to organized crime in the city that regularly attended team fixtures. The atmosphere at home games and finals was tense and occasionally bubbled over from the stands, as this quote shows.

"Supporters stormed the field, the opponent's goalkeeper was beaten and the cup and medals were stolen... A video shows an [opposing] player being chased into the dressing room" (NOS, 2018, para. 5).

Things began to reach a head in the 2017/2018 season, when the police started to investigate the source of the club funding. It quickly became apparent that the club, players and coaches' salaries were being paid by figures from the Amsterdam underworld. While it had brought success to the club, it had also brought unwanted attention. The police were concerned that the gang violence could even take place at the matches, so much so that they warned some of the more senior figures in the organization to stay away from team fixtures.

The story reached its conclusion in the summer of 2018 as 't Knooppunt, due to their links with organized crime, they were denied the ability to hire any indoor hall in the city of Amsterdam. As a result of this, and the ongoing investigation into the source of the club's funds, they were expelled by the Royal Dutch Football Association from all competitions. It is a cautionary story of how unethical funding, in this case with links to the criminal world, can impact on sport and take in top players, national and international associations and in turn show them in a poor light as well as the sport.

Blackpool FC

Blackpool FC are an English football team based in the north-west of England and currently playing in the second tier of English league football, the Championship. The club is most notable for winning the FA Cup with the famous Stanley Matthews in their side, and also for the one stint in the English Premier League in the early 2000s. Since the 1980s to 2019, Blackpool was owned by local business owner, Owen Oyston.

The fans began protesting after the club was relegated from the Premier League at the end of the 2010/11 season. The fans had hoped that some of the money that Blackpool had earned from their Premier League journey, through television, sponsorship, prize money, and ticket sales, to name a few revenue streams, would be invested back into the club. It turned out that very little would be invested back in to the club itself, with a large chunk of this money going to Owen Oyston himself. It was reported that Oyston had paid himself £11 million as a salary and argued that this was due to him as he had made many investments in the club since he had purchased it all those years ago (Conn, 2018). With the owner now taking legal action against anyone who criticised him, the fans decided it was time to act.

Figure 8: Blackpool. Boycotting supporters set for emotional return after Oyston exit



Source: Poole, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3L3XrJZ>

While the fan protests began to garner national and international media attention around 2014, that did not mean the relationship was harmonious beforehand. There were several calls for Oyston to step down, notably when he was sent to jail for the rape of a teenage girl. The protests coincided with action taken against the club by Valeri Belokon, who sued

Oyston for reneging on a verbal contract regarding ownership percentages of the club (Conn, 2018).

This particular story is one that is very interesting from an ethical standpoint. What Oyston did was not illegal, and he operated, regarding the football club, its entry into competitions and redistribution of funds, lawfully. And ultimately, it was arguably not the pressure of the fans that led to the club's eventual sale, but the court case with Belokon.

The fans viewed the actions of Oyston as unethical rather than illegal, and in terms of legality, they were right to do so. Neither the Football Association, the EFL, or indeed the police were able to act against him. The fans did argue that as the practice, in their view, was clearly unethical, there should have been some way to remove control of the asset from Oyston's control sooner. However, Oyston did still fund the club and as owner was entitled to do so in this fashion. Is it unethical? Well, that depends on whose ethics we are measuring this by and to whom sport has the ultimate responsibility to. Is it the fans or is it those who supply the money? Perhaps in an ideal world it should be one, but it is, in fact, the other. And can we do anything about that? A question for another day.

Summary

In this reading we have covered the basics of sport funding, why it needs to exist at all, and the issues in making sure this funding is from ethical sources. We have discussed what an unethical source is and how it can impact on the organization, but also those related to the club. We have also noted how hard it can be to stop these types of funding schemes and even through regulation why they continue to exist. To sum up the reading, we have provided two case studies that show the darker side of sports funding.

Activity: Module 1 & 2

To bring the last two readings together, there is now an activity.

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