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The Market Work of Football Agents and the Manifold Valorizations of Professional Football Players

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The dynamics of professional football today rest largely on market transactions, in the sense that financial negotiations with players and between clubs are among its most obvious working principles. The term “transfer market” refers to the very fluid contours of players’ mobility as they move from one club-employer to another. That mobility is underpinned by the so-called “limited time” contract introduced in 1973 – at the behest of player-employees – under State control in France (Wahl and Lanfranchi 1995), later spreading to all the countries of Europe (Kuypers and Szymanski 1999). Limited time contracts have replaced the life-time agreements that attached professional players to their clubs until age 35 (in other words for the duration of their entire career), and give them the right to negotiate limited contracts that can be terminated ahead of time in exchange for financial compensation (paid by the club “buying” the player from the original club). That development significantly transformed the rules governing professional careers as well as the competition and cooperation between clubs, where sports and economics are inextricably linked.¹

The importance of transfers – those actually completed or those simply imagined – explains why commenting on them, along with reporting on games and on the results of competitions, is today such an important part of the narrative presenting professional football. More than any other sport in Europe, football is structured by those exchanges, and the competitive success of a professional football club depends largely on its ability to attract the best players. In fact, the “differentiated modes of managing players’ employment contracts”, chosen by the clubs according to their means, are what allows them to respond to the tre-

mendous economic uncertainty of professional sports (Bourg and Gouguet 1998: 153). Their strategies fit in with players’ career plans, making for very intense matching. From that point of view, professional football is as much the result of market and salary dealings as it is of a sports competition; the two aspects are tightly interwoven, as shown by the fact that sports performances, reflected in the championship rankings, and the amount of money clubs spend on salaries, are (spectacularly) correlated (Kuypers and Szymanski 1999; Dobson and Goddard 2011; Drut 2011).

The escalation of European professional football clubs’ financial resources, further amplified by the explosion of rights to television coverage (Andreff and Staudohar 2000), has made economists sit up and take notice, and begin analyzing the players’ job market. In particular, they have attempted to explain what determines the ever greater discrepancy between salary levels and the amounts involved in transfers (for an overview, see Frick 2007). In the light of that research, the status of the sports labor market as a “laboratory” is today well established (Kahn 2000; Rosen and Sanderson 2001). The field can also be considered an arena for debate and collaboration between economics and sociology, for sociologists have also and simultaneously become interested in players’ work and careers. Today, a series of studies containing information on the situation of football players viewed from various angles are available, among others: the inequalities of remunerations; forms of employment and their connection to the clubs; working and training conditions, etc. (see e.g. Bertrand 2012; Faure and Suaud 1999; Rasera 2012; Roderick 2006b; a). These publications highlight the fragility of individual careers and the instability of work collectives; they show that the vast differences in recognition and remuneration make modern professional football closely resemble a “winner-take-all market”, typical of a “super-star economy” (Rosen 1981; Rosen and Sanderson 2001; Benhamou 2002; Frank and Cook 2010 [1995]).

Sports agents today are the inevitable middle-men in that economy, they are at the heart of the rounds of negotiations about transfers. Yet, their place in sociological and economic analyses has remained marginal.² We thus have available few indications of their role as catalysts in the mobility typical of contemporary football. Sociological interest in the activity of matching is also stressed by the development of that profession alongside the ever-growing financial flows that define football economics. Such concomitance at the very least bids us look beyond the most common discourse on the subject, which whittles agents down to being economic parasites, or holds them responsible for the excessive commodification of the “noble arena of sports”. Based on ongoing research,³ we propose to analyze the role and influence of players’ agents on the forms and contents of the transactions that characterize the economy of professional football. We will start by accounting for the properties that structure the market of professional football players, before illustrating the main features of what sports agents actually do on that market, as individuals and collectively.

1 A market with specific properties

According to the legal French definition, a sports agent is someone who “for a fee, introduces players to clubs with a view to negotiating or renegotiating an employment contract or introduces two clubs to one another with a view to concluding a transfer agreement, in compliance with the provisions set forth in the Regulations Governing the Application of the FIFA Statutes”.⁴ The agent is therefore a labor market intermediary, defined as the third party on whom relations in the game of supply and demand depend, and who participate in a transaction by researching eventual players, preparing the choice and providing information on the candidate (Bessy and Eymard-Duvernay 1997). The agent is paid when the matching is successful, not for all the contacts he may have had a hand in arranging. A “players’ agent”⁵ represents players in front of the clubs likely to employ them, and usually pockets between 7% and 10% of the total salary negotiated for each player (either during the hiring process or when the contract is being renegotiated). For the player, association with an agent enables a better defense of his interest; it also helps him to assess his worth on the labor market. In today’s football world, it is part of his professional socialization and, for young men fresh out of training academy, proof they have “caught on to yet another of the obligations of the job” (Bertrand 2008: 40). Players take on an agent earlier and earlier in their career – as of their first profes-

sional contract, or even sooner (informally). As their representatives, agents have become indispensable mediators when negotiating a contract between a player and a club, and in that sense they participate in the social construction of professional football markets. Nevertheless, the transfer market possesses structural traits that influence their activity: though at first sight it appears particularly fluid, the way exchanges are arranged is very complex and, on top of that, it is an ambivalent market.

1.1 Fluid but constrained

First of all, it is hyperactive, functioning at top speed with a large volume of transactions relative to the number of employers (professional clubs) and employees (professional players). Those offering work are limited in number since only the clubs in the higher divisions of the championships pay their players salaries (though in the lower divisions there also exist non-salaried ways of remunerating a player). The number of those looking for work is larger than the number of jobs available – about twenty per club – so structurally speaking the market is in over-capacity.⁶ Such hyper-activity on the market is partly due to the legal rules and regulations that govern the circulation of players and define the form of employment contracts. At present, contracts are limited to five years and most are actually shorter or terminated at an early stage. The same rules for contracts and transfers are in force in all European countries, especially since the 1990s, when the European Court of Justice came forth with a series of decisions that contributed to intensifying the international circulation of players on the labor market (Gougnet 2005; Pautot 2011), and perhaps even to deregulating it (Manzella 2002). In fact, various studies⁷ show that mobility is accelerating, as illustrated by the rise in average number of clubs for which a footballer will have played over the course of his career.⁸ At the same time, careers tend to become briefer and be interrupted earlier,⁹ increasing mobility and the fluidity of the market still more.

That fluidity is channeled however, since negotiations and actual transfers are only permitted at specific times of year: the inter-season period and mid-season *mercato*, i.e. during approximately four months. Transfers and, broadly speaking, preliminary contacts between clubs and players are therefore reined in by strict temporal limits. The players’ market is especially active and liquid at the beginning and end of the transfer periods, more particularly during the last days and even the last hours, when the pressure of the imminent closing incites the parties to clinch an

agreement before it is too late. That intensity¹⁰ suggests that agreements are not always easily arrived at. For, except in cases when a player's employment contract is about to expire, any transfer supposes the consent of the three parties involved: the player, his present club and his future club, which generally means long, drawn-out negotiations.

1.2 A particularly complex exchange

A typical exchange on the transfer market is complex and can be subdivided into three quite specific sorts of exchange that must be finely coordinated for the transfer to actually take place. The first concerns the clubs directly – potentially buyer and seller – and what is mainly at stake in the transaction is the indemnity paid for the transfer and the modalities for paying it.¹¹ The indemnity reflects the extent of a player's market value, which depends on a variety of disparate parameters: the length of his present contract (in this case, the indemnity plays the role of compensation for an anticipated breach of contract), his talents as footballer (on which the parties do not necessarily agree), his age (i.e. his potential to get better and anticipating the profit to be made when he is resold), his degree of substitutability (a partly interpretative and subjective and partly objective feature based on performance, such as the number of goals scored by a striker), both clubs' respective strategies (their determination to sell or buy a player), the economic situation of the transfer market (a bullish trend over the long term is neither uniform nor regular), etc.

A second aspect of the exchange concerns the player and the club that wants to recruit him. In this case, the object of the negotiation bears on the conditions of the contract, i.e. an ensemble of factors such as duration, salary, but also a whole series of options such as being awarded a bonus upon signing the contract or extra remunerations, advantages in kind, or inserting particular clauses based on the team's performances – "exit vouchers" in case the team counter-performs or is demoted to a lower division, a specific bonus for exceptional performance such as qualifying for a European competition or winning a trophy, the conditions related to breach of contract (inserting a surrender clause specifying a minimum sum for the transfer indemnity), etc. Also, often the deal between the employer and the new player is not fully contained in the employment contract: other elements may have been negotiated or agreed upon morally or verbally before signing, e.g. features concerning the future work context: the club's sports policies and declared ambitions, its playing style and

the coach's preferred tactics, the player's assigned place on the team and his role in those tactics, his guarantees as to playing time, the number of players on the team vying for his position, the other recruitments presently being considered and the changes that might ensue in the short term, etc. All these elements are meant to give the player a glimpse of his future role, and in this sense, negotiations do not only bear on the conditions and characteristics of the contract but also more concretely on the conditions and specifics of the job.

The third component of the exchange concerns the player and the club getting ready to transfer him. In fact, every departure presupposes an agreement between both parties, concerning the possibility as well as the circumstances of his leaving, in particular the destinations accepted or rejected – for example, a club may not want to strengthen a direct competitor and refuse the transfer, or a player can reject the perspective of joining a club or league he doesn't admire. There again, an agreement is necessary, and accordingly, it may be the result of exchanges taking place over the long term between employer and employee, or even of a pre-arranged decision – such as when a club promises to grant an "exit voucher" for a given date – or it may be the outcome of a conflict between the two (a tug of war due to a disagreement as to a possible transfer or its conditions). Preparing a transfer involves far more than the moment the agreement is negotiated; in other words, any (future) transfer compensation is also at stake in the relations between a player and his club. Adjusting the conditions of the employment contract, especially a time extension or a raise in salary, is not only a way of acknowledging and rewarding a player for his performance, it is also a way for the club to enhance the player's market value in view of a future transfer. This is why employment contracts are often subject to adjustments, usually concerning their duration and the remuneration. The relationship between the player and the club that employs him thus combines both attachment and detachment, it means at once strengthening the contract and getting ready to end it.

1.3 A ambivalent, double and segmented market

The complexity of that relationship is also the result of the ambivalent nature of the player market, which combines two interconnected features: it is a job market where hiring and salaries are negotiated, where changes in employer take place and professional careers develop; but it is also a securities market where employment contracts are

“bought” and investment strategies develop. Players are not only their employers’ employees but also, via their work contracts, financial assets of sports firms, and they figure as such in the latter’s yearly balance sheets (Ascari and Gagnepain 2006; Minquet 2004; Paché and N’Goala 2008). The superposition of those two modes of perception explains our proposal to describe the player market as ambivalent.

The importance of the financial (speculative) logic must nevertheless be tempered by the category of football player concerned. Remunerations and market value are extraordinarily disparate, but those inequalities can be interpreted as a duality (Bourg and Gouguet 2001) with, on one side, a small number of renowned, top-level players and on the other, a mass of average players. Typically, the two categories occupy opposite positions on the market. The second category of players are in a situation of fierce competition and exposed to a high risk of unemployment, receive relatively modest salaries and their contracts are financial assets of little consequence, whereas the first category are in a situation close to an oligopsony, are paid very high salaries¹² and represent top value assets. Bourg and Gouguet oppose a “primary sector”, “characterized by jobs implying high levels of responsibility and initiative”, where “salaries boost incentive, i.e. are set at a higher level compared to ordinary salaries”, to a “secondary sector in competition with the primary one”, where salaries are “decided by supply and demand, because the productivity-salary link is much weaker than in the primary sector and turnover costs are low” (Bourg and Gouguet 1998: 155). Though it is remarkable that the lion’s share of clubs’ profits is captured by the “primary producers”,¹³ the uneven distribution of those revenues must also be noted. Also, players who rate highly on the transfer market enrich the clubs by virtue of being valorizable assets (Franck and Nüesch, 2008). That dichotomy also impacts flow and mobility strategies, meaning that “crossing the borders between segments is clearly less usual than crossing them inside the secondary segment – a downward mobility, which in many cases means they stop being professionals. Conversely, overstepping the borders within the primary market basically means upward mobility, while passing from the secondary to the primary market – a rare occurrence – depends on one’s position on the waiting-line” (Bourg and Gouguet 1998: 150).¹⁴

The way a player relates to his club and career thus varies according to the market segment where the contract was signed. These segments are not reducible merely to con-

tracts’ register zones; they are characterized by styles of interactions, forms of resource management and specific cultural representations that make them resemble V. Zelizer’s “commercial circuits” (Zelizer 2006). Each segment is for instance marked by a dominant form of competition: in broad strokes, club rivalry (those placed at the top of the sports and economic pyramids) to attract the star players, or rivalry between players (not at the top of the sports hierarchy) to find a club. Professional footballers are thus confronted with conditions and types of mobility depending on whether they are recognized as non-substitutable workers, or whether they are seen as interchangeable with run-of-the-mill qualities. In both cases, however, they call upon an agent to “manage their interests”, i.e. see to it that their talents are given the recognition they deserve both sports-wise and financially, and that their career is made more secure with each new contract.¹⁵

2 Agents at the heart of the market

Seen through a frequently critical lens, agents are viewed as collective actors who have managed to gain control of commercial exchanges and to orient part of the financial flows for their own benefit. Nevertheless, the place that agents occupy in the market seems to be less the result of a concerted and coherent strategy than it is dependent on the “grips” or “affordances”¹⁶ that the evolution of professional football has gradually revealed. In this sense, market work points to collective action which is neither necessarily intentional nor clearly original: football players’ agents emerged as a professional group when it became apparent that they had appropriated an activity they did not control the apparition, but from which they then derived a certain form of expertise.¹⁷ Thus, though they must be associated with the recent transformations of the world of professional football – increase of financial stakes, rising number of transfers, globalization of exchanges, erasing of borders, individualization of contracts, etc. – it is hardly realistic to credit them with the responsibility for its commodification. It seems more appropriate to examine their collective history in terms of A. Abbott’s historical sociology of the professions (Abbott 1988, Abbott 2005). Players’ agents built up their “jurisdiction” in the ecology of professional football by responding to a problem encountered by its main actors (clubs and players), and made more complex by legal and economic evolutions, i.e. mainly the problem of job matching. Imposing their presence as matching experts, offering to reduce the uncertainties connected to sports contracts, they have managed to profitably integrate the economy of professional football and

become major players in the field. Despite constant criticism, the success of their integration is such that according to many insiders – club staff-members, players or former players – now “agents control the market”.¹⁸ Top agents are described as “the most influential individual[s] in today’s game” and their power is referred to as defining football’s new age, “and the true transformation of the game”.¹⁹

As we have seen (*cf.* 1), the players’ market is a particularly complex one, not only because transfers suppose an agreement has been arrived at by three actors and not two, as is classically the case,²⁰ but also because each bilateral relationship has a temporal and relational consistency, and involves a multiplicity of stakes and concerns.²¹ The expertise of players’ agents represents a cognitive equipment adapted to that complexity, and their growing importance has accompanied (and stimulated) the intensification of players’ mobility. From that point of view, far from being simple carriers of information, agents significantly participate in regulating the transfer market. They inform it in the sense that they contribute to configuring it, to giving it the traits with which their professional partners must make do. In other words, they “work the market” (Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier 2000). We will underline three facets of their job: representing players to the clubs, which pre-supposes both producing and shaping sportsmen’s qualities; trying to capture quality players in their portfolios (which fits in with the permanent struggle between agents); and developing relations of trust within the clubs (which implies penetrating very personalized networks).

2.1 Producing, shaping and protecting players’ qualities

Albeit asymmetrical, since it is more about players than about clubs, information on the professional football market is particularly plentiful. Football players are constantly being evaluated, partly in the privacy of their training centers and fitness rooms (Rasera 2012) and partly in public spaces, exposing masses of data on their individual performance. The public nature of games and their systematic media coverage (at least for the elite divisions), regularly replenishes the flow of information. The evolution of specialized commentary tends toward a growing individualization of judgment, and the generalization of performance indicators allows evaluation of the quality of a player’s accomplishments. These metrics can be applied to a single match (the distance he ran, number of times he touched the ball, number of successful passes, number of duels

won or lost, etc.), a season (number of times he was included in the starting team, average mark, etc.), or an entire career. Available information is therefore not lacking; on the contrary, it is in abundance, and concerns a variety of registers and aspects of players’ work: their physical form, tactical sense, decisive actions, self-control, etc. The circuits of relationships between members of the football world are an additional source for gleaning more information about a player, asking for opinions, requesting advice. Many clubs also engage “scouts” who scrutinize players during matches.

Few employers can boast of having as much information so easily accessible about a vast number of players whereby to organize their hiring activities as professional football club managers do. Information on players’ qualities nevertheless tend to peter off as one descends the sports hierarchy: the performances of football stars, especially the most famous ones, are what are most in the public eye and watched, and their consecration eliminates any doubt about their talents. If hiring a star always implies a degree of uncertainty – especially concerning the fact they are entering a new group – and represents a risk,²² recruiting more obscure players, whose qualities as sportsmen are more unsure, is another sort of wager for the employer clubs. From their point of view, the professional football market is not transparent. Though information is available and plentiful, it does not abolish the sporting or financial risk associated with each recruitment. The agents’ role is to contribute to producing and shaping players’ qualities in order to reduce the uncertainty as to what they will contribute to the sport and/or how well their contract will sell in the future.²³

A survey carried out among agents in the five largest football leagues in Europe (Germany, England, Spain, France, Italy), shows that 58% of all football players represented by an agent are not professionals; they play for the most part in the junior leagues (Poli, Rossi and Besson 2012: 63). For those candidates waiting to enter the market, appearing unique is crucial and is the aim of their agents’ efforts.²⁴ The latter use classical devices such as videos to demonstrate a player’s best performances. Above all, they make a player’s portrait more attractive by stressing a different criterion: his personal qualities. All the agents we interviewed mentioned how essential it is, during discussions with club officials, to insist on what they call “the character”, “the personality”, the “state of mind”, the “mind frame” or “psychology” of the player, to train the spotlight on qualities otherwise difficult to see and define.

For them it is a particularly valuable source of differentiation, because it is often imperceptible to those unacquainted intimately with the player and because it provides an inexhaustible source of arguments.²⁵ Their job on the “secondary market” usually consists in generating supplementary – and decisive, since they reassure the employer – differences between players who otherwise possess comparable or interchangeable technical, physical and tactical competences. That is the form taken by “the economy of singularities” (Karpik 2007; 2009) in this market segment.

We also perceive how agents, by (commercially) exploiting their familiarity with the players, are able to influence the way the latter are evaluated, thus promoting a different form of judging in the hiring process (Marchal & Rieucan 2010). Their personal standing with the players gives them credit among those they are addressing, and allows them to play the role of trainer, “developer” of qualities, which is what mainly makes their activity meaningful. To fill that role, agents must above all win the trust of their professional partners, meaning both the trust of those who are offering as well as those who are looking for employment, though for different reasons and thanks to other sorts of interactions.

Their presence also impacts the inherently strained relations on the labor market between player employees and club employers. Though the intensification of the rivalry between players and between clubs (see above) makes those relations tenser still by undermining the contracts, the presence of an agent permits separating the management of the employer-employee relationship from the acknowledgment of players’ qualities.²⁶ By concentrating employers’ critiques on themselves, agents manage to safeguard the professional reputation of the sportsmen they represent. That protection is all the more necessary as the fluidity of the players’ labor market also allows quick reversals between adversity and cooperation (a given coach might for example come across a given player in another club, several months after a conflict).

2.2 Capturing and ensuring players’ loyalty in a competitive context

The trust established between player and agent is even more imperative when the proxy agreement between them is somewhat fragile. A mandate guarantees the legal remuneration of the agent who carried out a transfer or contract adjustment negotiation successfully. But practically speaking, mandate’s validity is limited to such events and

is more a verbal and moral understanding than a legal contract promising the lasting nature of the relationship. The fragility of their contractual and legal association must therefore be compensated for through the reinforcement of their interpersonal and service relationship. It is hardly surprising, then, that agents tend to broaden the range of services they render their players, on one hand to make sure of their lasting loyalty, on the other hand to diversify their sources of revenue (Masteralexis 2005). Many of them develop, either alone or with a partner, activities as legal, fiscal, financial consultants or in image management. Some make it their business to see to various facets of a player’s daily life, such as finding them a place to live or a baby-sitter, organizing a house move or a pleasure trip, etc. Agents also demonstrate their solicitude in terms of psychological support and personal attention, in domains that only partly relate to the sport or are even completely private. That attachment and allegiance affect the agent-player relationship, making it extremely personal, which is visible particularly in the fact that the former is totally available and open to the latter’s demands, wishes, and expectations. It is abundantly clear to everyone that these are also investment strategies, since they are opportunely modulated according to the variation of the player’s performances and agents’ estimates of the amount of economic benefits they might derive from them (Roderick 2006b). The interpersonal dimension and commercial calculations are inextricably linked; for an agent, a player can be all at once a friend and a profitable commodity. All the more as agents’ careers rest not only on the publicity given their competence as negotiators but also on the quality of their relationships with their players.²⁷

Clearly, following up agents’ activities works as an antidote against a simplified vision of the market that opposes commercial and sentimental logics (cf. Zelizer 2011: 314). Like the authors of letters of *raccomandazione* (or “of credit”) in the Italy of the *Quattrocento*, which are the core of “the art of the network” studied by McLean 2007 (p. 150 ff.), agents do distinguish between the two sorts of logic, but alternate, stressing one or the other as in a musical counterpoint, blending them or keeping them separate, depending on the situation.

2.3 Developing trust and infiltrating networks

Empirical data suggest that players whose careers are on an upward course tend to change agents, preferring one who operates in the higher segment. The game of selective matching is all the more obvious as the population of

agents itself is structured like a pyramid. A minority of sports agents dominates the elite professional football market, and deals with the transfers of the best-known and best-paid players.²⁸ In other words, agents too function on a market where resources are rare, where the mechanics of cumulated advantages – Merton's "Saint-Matthew effect" (Merton 1968) – give their full measure. For competition among agents does not only imply attaching players and having access to the most gifted, it also means, symmetrically, being able to access information about who is offering work (in view of a transfer but also in view of salary enhancement), and retaining the wealthiest clubs. The market on which they operate is in fact one of "quasi-employment": "jobs that have not as yet been clearly created and waiting to be filled, but can be if an opportunity arises" (Bureau and Marchal 2009: 582). The outcome of competition among agents depends on knowing the milieu, developing know-how not only with players but also with their employers: pin-pointing the needs of the clubs adapted to their representatives, gaining access to those interlocutors who have the power of decision, entering into a productive relationship with them, etc. The importance of these contacts makes for a practically obsessive relationship between an agent and his electronic address book, as we noted during our interviews.²⁹ It must be said that with the growing number of agents and rising financial stakes connected to transfers, those lists of contacts have become proportionally weightier. A player's agent is in fact the archetype of the entrepreneur as seen by R. Burt, who notices and takes advantage of the "structural holes" in the network (Burt 1992). Some of them manage to become "indispensable go-betweens" when concluding a transfer towards the best clubs, thus monopolizing access to resources. In this case, the way agents "work the market" obscures the information propagated in its most central places.³⁰

The thickness and quality of an agent's address book bear witness to his integration in the network of professionals: it is a status symbol. The telephone numbers of decision-makers in professional football clubs are an all-important resource and source of information. Being able to call them up on the phone means having an essential tool to work with and is a show of trust on the part of an insider. Our interviews allowed us to measure the power of that sort of equipment compared to an official French Football Federation sports agent's License. All the studies point to the gap between the official permission to exert an activity and actually exerting it: the majority of those who could be agents are not active on the market, never have been, and

have lost any illusion of ever being so. At the same time, a significant number – though it is difficult to indicate a precise figure – of agents practice without a license, sometimes in association with an authorized agent (Demazière and Jouvenet 2011; Poli, Rossi and Besson 2012; Sekulovic 2013). These observations show that the real hurdle for entering the profession is not obtaining the official permit but the capacity to develop relations of trust within the professional network so as to have access to reliable, even exclusive, information concerning a club's needs. From that point of view, it is significant that many agents share a history of previous, significant experience in the world of football: as professional or good amateur players, journalists, talent scouts, coaches, etc. Aside from giving them the comprehension of how that specific world functions, with its codes, values and norms, that experience allows them to accumulate a precious network of relationships.

The extreme geographic mobility that agents put forward as a key feature of their lifestyle is not only due to frequent salary negotiations. Most of their displacements are aimed at "keeping up their contacts", i.e. improving the quality of their relations with potential partners and informers, in and around the clubs. Direct face-to-face relations are thus a vital cog in the machinery of the professional football market. They are far more essential than clinching a transfer deal, and in reality represent an agent's most important (albeit immaterial) investment. It is all the more obvious as, despite regulations and an increasing control of transactions, relations in the agent-player-club representative triangle remain strongly marked by informality, verbal promises, and handshakes. Various studies (Roderick 2006b, Shropshire and Davis 2003, Poli 2010) have shown that business is not only done, but even prepared thanks to those interpersonal relations that fit into a complex system of debts and credits, mutual "back scratching" and reciprocal exchange of services.

3 Conclusions

As a player's representative, sports agents work at facilitating transactions and mobility between clubs at the same time as they work on furthering their client's career and making it as successful as possible. The activities they deploy to that end affect the economy of professional football, and their impact can be considered the professional group's "market work", made up of both getting actively involved and adapting to structural properties. Several aspects of that impact have been presented here, concerning the evaluation of players' qualities, the special relation-

ships between professional associates, the balance between the opacity and transparency of the network for its leaders. Our analysis shows how this market work is consistent with the fact that employee mobility is “self-reinforced”, as described by Granovetter (“mobility between companies creates contacts that in turn promote further mobility”; conversely, “internal markets are self-sufficient”, which in fact counteracts employee mobility, Granovetter 2008: 183-184).

Investigating “market work” also exposes the salient traits of the economy of professional football, and, from that standpoint, is a good indicator of the way it presently functions both from a structural and a cultural point of view, for example, by setting up barriers for entering, by its pyramidal structure, informal relations, etc. It also shows the value, when analyzing the transactions that inform that economy, of crossing perspectives belonging to economic sociology, the historical sociology of professions, and the sociology of work. This is how it will become possible to further refine the comprehension of the processes involved in the regulation of the “players market” – a regulation that depends on the evolution of legal and sports rules, but also on the bets placed by the media and sponsors on football as a show, as well as on innovations in sports organizations and on the cultural inclinations of professional groups such as sports agents. Those refinements are all the more necessary as it is a somewhat inconsistent form of regulation, depending on segments of the market: analyzing the variations, and the practices they imply, would allow one to better grasp the multiple modes of commercial valuing (cf. Beckert and Aspers 2011), as well as their fluctuations in the course of a career.

Agents’ work hinges on two main features of the market and how they combine as careers unfold. In fact, accompanying their client means playing both sides of the field: developing their career in the long term, i.e. seeing the player as a worker for whom it is necessary to negotiate the transfers that will allow him to progress; and seizing each opportunity as it occurs, i.e. seeing the player as an asset that must be cashed in on as fast as possible. That tension is the main paradox of the commercial work that agents accomplish: to give precedence to the first means running the risk of not being able to accompany the player all the way because the selective matching system weakens a player’s attachment and loyalty; but giving precedence to the second means risking not being able to achieve an interpersonal, trusting relationship with one’s players and having to constantly renew one’s portfolio. Do agents, by

their activities, contribute to reinforcing the gap between job and securities markets, or on the contrary, does the market work they do reinforce the linkage between the two? Certain viewpoints, in particular those recently expressed by professional football trade-unions, favor the first option, deploring the increasing hold that short-term norms have on player management,³¹ or, put otherwise, the fact that job market logics have been overshadowed by security market logics. But the *ambivalence cultivated by the agents* might also be analyzed in terms of “robust action”, i.e. as a source of power in a multi-dimensional network (cf. Padgett and Ansell 1993). This implies questioning the ways sports agents interpret their own work, the way they conceive of their job and their definitions of professionalism. It also points to a new avenue of research where analysis could deepen our comprehension of the economics of professional football.

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Endnotes

1If cooperation can take place between competitors, it is because, in football economics, “a joint intervention by two teams is necessary to achieve the final product” (Bourg and Gouguet 1998 : 154). It is also clear that those relations concern mainly player transfers, because their work is the “practically exclusive, single factor of production and it is impossible to reduce its uncertainties by replacing work by capital” (*idem*).

2Roderick, 2006a is one of the few exceptions.

3This research concentrates on players’ agents but also concerns their professional associates, i.e. other players, trainers, bosses of clubs and federations, specialized journalists. The difficulties encountered during our investigation – which are not unique (Poli, Rossi and Besson 2012) – illustrate the opacity and closed nature of the professional group. We also collect and analyze various documentary sources: press articles in which agents discuss their work, reports on professional football, legal texts, and so on.

4http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/administration/51/55/18/players_agents_regulations_2008.pdf, consulted August 16, 2013. In France, the law defining the profession of sports agent was promulgated on June 9, 2010 and codified by articles L222-5 through L222-22 of the Sports Code.

5An agent can also free-lance for a club, for instance to find a new employer for a player fallen from grace, or to search for a player with a very particular profile.

6The number in excess varies; it depends on the national market, since international mobility, according to the migratory balance it induces, contributes to reducing or amplifying the imbalance between offer and demand (on footballers’ international migrations, see Poli, 2010). In the case of France, it is possible to give an approximation of the over-capacity of the work-force by counting the number of players belonging to the National Union of Professional Footballers (*Union Nationale des Footballeurs Professionnels*) who still have no contract at the end of the 2012-2013 season (243, according to the Union’s website.

<http://www.unfp.org/unfp/ce-que-nous-faisons/la-liste-des-joueurs-libres.html>, consulted July 17, 2013).

7The data presented in the demographic studies of the CIES, *Centre International d’Étude du Sport* (or Professional Football Players Observatory, PFPO) give an objective view of the extreme fluidity of the market today (Besson, Poli and Ravenel 2013).

8A shorter contract is not very significant when evaluating the actual length of a collaboration, for it can be extended just before it ends and bought by a different club.

9A study on the German Bundesliga shows, for example, that over 90% of careers last less than nine years and that over a third only last a single year (Frick, Pietzner and Prinz 2007).

10We have access to precise information on international transfers: in 2012, “64% of transfer activity took place in January, July and August (...) Average number of minutes between each transfer on the two busiest days (31 January and 31 August): 5 minutes” (FIFA 2013: 18).

11The object of the agreement is more complex, since it systematically includes how the indemnity should be paid (eventually by installments), and may include clauses on interest rates if a profit is made when the player is sold in future. Besides, other players with inverse mobility may be included in the exchange, reducing the net amount involved in the transfer.

12Steiner 2011 presents an analysis of the gap between these salaries and “the ordinary economic realm”.

13Economist J. Lancaster notes: “As for where the revenue goes, the answer is: straight to the players. That makes football, indeed professional sport in general, a model for workers’ power; there isn’t another business in the world where so much of the revenue goes straight to the primary producers” (Lancaster 2011).

14For Bourg and Gouguet, “the uncertainty of the clubs’ environment is the source [of that] dualism”: keeping up “two different but uniform categories of players, [...] with very unequal levels of remuneration, aspirations, behavior patterns and negotiation power” gives the clubs the elbow-room required to reduce the economic risks inherent in any sports competition, and within the means they can afford (*idem*: 145, 158).

15However, our study shows that an agent’s activity covers far more than (re)negotiating contracts, cf. Demazière and Jouvenet 2011, Demazière and Jouvenet, forthcoming.

16We extend the concept revealed by the pragmatic sociology of expertise developed by Bessy and Chateauraynaud 1995) to the collective actor at hand (players’ agents).

17Precise, socio-historic research retracing the emergence, development and institutionalization of sports agents’ activity is lacking. See Abbott 1988; 1995 for empirical and theoretical models.

18There is a striking contrast with e.g. the impresarios studied by J. Rosselli, intermediaries who are torn back and forth by the decisions of the powerful bosses of the music industry of the time (Rosselli 1984). On the other hand, there is a similarity with the role of “market operator” of the artistic intermediaries analyzed in Lizé, Naudier and Roueff 2011 and Kemper 2010. The history and sociology of artists’ agents (or top models’ agents, cf. Mears 2011) reveal many points of comparison with our analysis, impossible to detail here.

19“Now, with the rise of the super-agent (...), the fourth age is reached, and a collection of businessmen hold all the power”, wrote an editorialist (<http://www.football365.com/f365-features/8755839/F365-Focus>).

20Except in the special and quantitatively marginal case – understandable given the foregoing developments – of the mobility of players whose contract is coming to an end. To give an exhaustive view, we must mention another form of employment wherein the exchange concerns only the player and the club employer: hiring a young person formed in the club's own training center. On this point, cf. Slimani 1998; Bertrand 2012.

21This intricacy is further reinforced by the clubs' habit of lending each other part of their work force, a loan than can be accompanied by different clauses, such as the employer accepting to pay part of the salary, or an option specifying that the club receiving the loan will buy back the contract. It also may happen (and does more and more) that companies – mainly South-American – own the "rights" to a player, thus acting as "co-owners" of his employment contract.

22"It is our job to take risks", declared M. Seydoux, president of a large French club, in response to criticism of the excessive salaries of some of his players. "Criticizing after the fact is easy" (in "L'after", Radio Monte Carlo, program heard on June 24, 2013).

23Also see Demazière and Jovenet forthcoming.

24True, research on the training of junior footballers shows that singularity is one of the aim of the learning that structure the way training centers operate (Juskowiak 2011, Bertrand 2012). During this phase, individualization takes place quite generally in the technical training – and more broadly speaking, in the ways of behaving towards educators and peers – but it is when they are put on the market that their singularity actually becomes real; and players' agents then become a major link.

25This is quite clear in the expressions they use: a player may be "well educated", "attentive", "self-controlled", "respectful", "uncomplicated", have "an exceptional mind set", "nerves of steel", etc.

26Equally, the emergence of literary agents in the "culture and commerce" of publishing depended on their ability to play a double role: quality filter for the publisher and "tension absorber" between the latter and the author (Coser, Kadushin and Powell 1985: 289, 294).

27One of the most successful agents today can thus brag about the quality of his work by comparing himself – when addressing the clubs – to a "Bible or vacuum-cleaner salesman", or – when addressing "his" players – to a doctor who inspires trust in his patients ("I don't wait for the *mercato*, I create it myself", interview with M. Raiola, *France Football*, 23, April 2013, 3498).

28In the five top European leagues, 50% of the players are represented by 12% of the agents, and the five top agents of each country represent between 19% (England and Italy) and 31% (France) of the players (Poli, Rossi and Besson 2012: 17, 32).

29By extension – in the midst of a culture of mobility and availability typical of the professional group – that fixation also applies

to their cell-phones. S. Zafirau made similar observations in his ethnography of "talent agencies" (Zafirau 2008: 102).

30Central in the sense that "the overlapping of the actions of [actors] present on the market and their organization create a 'center' that brings together teams with large and stable budgets, who have high returns, are exposed to and stimulated by international competition, who dispose of efficient technical structures and a cutting-edge training, medical and administrative staff" (Bourg and Gougnet 1998: 176).

31From that point of view, the International Union of Professional Footballers (*Syndicat international des footballeurs professionnels* or FIFPro, 60.000 members in 42 countries) recently set up a workshop "to study the substance and form of the conditions that would allow it to lodge a complaint with the European Commission against today's transfer system". According to Vice-President Philippe Piat, the initiative is justified by the fact that "the transfer system is heading straight into a wall (...) Players are made to sign a contract and then sold again. The system is crazy, it must be stopped". Cf. "FIFPro opposes existing system" (*La FIFPro contre le système actuel*, <http://www.lequipe.fr/Football/Actualites/La-fifpro-contre-le-systeme-actuel/379931>), put on line and consulted June 20, 2013.

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