

Breakfast Club Report:

Is Money Killing Sport?

The Panellists:

Hugh Robertson MP

Minister for Sport and the Olympics

Ed Smith

Times writer and former England cricket player

Mihir Bose

Evening Standard columnist and sports journalist

These are the eight things I learnt from the discussion:

1) Money per se is not the problem

Rather, it is that governing structures are not using it properly. Sports are still governed by antiquated structures that made sense when the games were invented – often hundreds of years ago – but do not function well in the context of big business and large flows of money. Governing bodies need to adapt more readily to this new environment. FIFA could learn from the way Major League Baseball in America developed new standards of behaviour for handling money after a spate of corruption scandals.

2) The wrong people are controlling the wealth

It is not uncommon for sport administrators in the UK never to have played the game for which they are responsible. Sports administration needs to be seen as a proper career that requires rigorous training and a deep familiarity with the game for which one is responsible.

3) Too much free enterprise leads to tension

There is a conflict between the clubs that are run as businesses and the FA that also needs to serve the interests of the national team. The basic problem is that there is no centralised body that has control over how football is run in this country. There is a case to be made for English football to have a more autocratic structure, so that the relationship between private enterprise and the interests of the national team can be managed more effectively. This is what happens in Germany. There is a central body that regulates commercial activity in the Bundesliga (preventing Abramovich from bagging Bayern Munich) and controls the relationship between the league and the national team.

4) Concentration of money is a growing problem

Football's vast wealth and constant coverage is threatening to marginalise other sports. But people often forget that after the tragedy at Hillsborough, TV coverage of football decreased rapidly. It was only through public funds that the game was put back on its feet. Perhaps it is time for English football to repay this debt by diverting some of its riches to lower-profile sports that badly need the funds.

5) Seeing money as the root of moral degeneration in sport is too simplistic

Successful sportsmen have always led out-of-the-ordinary lives – it is our attitudes towards, and expectations of, sports stars that has changed. For example, George Best's antics used to be widely tolerated, even indulged. Now, sports stars are expected to set an example, behaving as ambassadors for their teams and representing the very best of their countries.

The relationship between society and sports has hardened. Prince William was a central part of the England World Cup bid, and President Lula da Silva wept for joy when Brazil won the bid to host the tournament in 2014. The association between sport and the integrity of a society has resulted in players being expected to behave to the highest standards, both on and off the field.

6) It is often argued that players' desire for success and higher pay lead to unsportsmanlike behaviour

Refusing to walk from the crease, or calling a ball out that they know to be in are examples that seem to be more commonplace in sport today. This is overstated. Sportsmen and women care about success regardless of pay. It is more likely to be the particular culture in which a sport is played which mandates certain behaviour. For example, in cricket, it is accepted within the profession that batsmen can legitimately refuse to walk, even if they know the umpire's verdict of 'not out' is incorrect. However, for a fielder to claim a catch that they know has hit the ground is considered cheating. These cultural norms are the problem.

7) The relationship between money and community participation is clear.

There is no doubt that as televised sport has become an increasingly lucrative industry, it has also touched and inspired an ever wider audience. However, the downside is that the relationship with fans has become increasingly commercialised. Clubs now generate most of their income by selling broadcast rights to TV companies, not selling tickets to fans. The 'real fans', as they seem themselves, have thus become less important to the club.

At the grass roots level it is too little, not too much money, that is the problem. Sport is being subordinated to other disciplines: it is not uncommon for school playing fields to make way for new science blocks. However, the government is trying to combat this by only approving field closures when provisions are made for replacement facilities. Most importantly, more money needs to go into training good teachers. If the teaching is right, you can still have great sport on poor quality facilities.

LONDON – MUMBAI – SHANGHAI

Chartwell Partners Ltd, 3rd Floor, King House, 5-11 Westbourne Grove, London W2 4UA
Registered in England Company No. 06239184

8) It is unclear whether the 2012 Olympics will increase sport participation at grass roots level

The Games have generated a huge amount of interest from local communities, but they all want to boost grass roots sports in different ways. It is very hard to fulfil such diverse expectations. The fear of losing support for upcoming Games can lead organisers to make promises for its legacy that they cannot possibly fulfil. This can lead to damaging levels of disillusionment and disappointment. After the Sydney Olympics – widely regarded as one of the most successful Games ever – community sports participation in Australia decreased.

Leo von Bülow-Quirk

Head of Research

leovbq@chartwellpartners.co.uk

LONDON – MUMBAI – SHANGHAI

Chartwell Partners Ltd, 3rd Floor, King House, 5-11 Westbourne Grove, London W2 4UA
Registered in England Company No. 06239184