Football, Development and Identity in a Small Nation: Football Culture, Spectators and Playing Styles in Twentieth Century Norway.

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Abstract

Norway historically has had only one form of football, 'association' football or soccer. Rugby and other football codes were unsuccessful in establishing themselves on the Norwegian sports scene. Soccer, however, has been the largest participant sport in Norway since the 1930s. The main concern of this article is soccer's role in identity-creation, with some discussion of Scandinavian rivalries.

Norwegian international soccer history had not been a story of wonderful success. Still, there has always been interest in the national team and its performances. This interest was most notable in the late 1930s and again in the 1990s. This article then explores how an imported sport from England has impacted on Norwegian national identity. One area of discussion surrounded the national team's style of play, parlicularly during the 1994 World Cup. Heavily criticed internationally, the Norwegian style was celebrated at home. Links between local and national identities are also explored. Finally, the article addresses the issue of whether the intensification of support during the 1990s marks a new type of identification.

This article deals with historical aspects of a football culture from a country definitely not considered to be an inventor of the game. Today much of football's identity-functions are based upon local and regional allegiances. The main concern here, however, will be football's role in identity-creation on a national level. Norwegian international football history has not been a story of wonderful success, Still there has always been a potential of interest around the national team, especially visible in the 1930s and the 1990s.

It may be necessary to discuss Norway more broadly for the international audience, to make this more understandable. (Norwegians of course believe themselves to be the most normal of all people and consider Norwegian standards appropriate norms also in sports). So, when football is discussed here, this means the only kind of football which has been played regularly in Norway; the association or soccer type. Until recently this was, and still is in part, amateur based. Of other football codes there is not much to say. American football struggles to survive in a small local series, which has been going on for the last ten years. Rugby has not progressed very far. In fact, underwater rugby has a more solid organisation in Norway than traditional rugby of any sort.

Two more comments are necessary here. Compared to other countries, historically Norway has been an ethnically homeogenous nation, with only a small Lappish minority in the north (the Sami people). Also when it comes to divisions based upon social class, Norway has been a much less class-divided society than England or even Australia. This obviously does not mean that social inequality has ceased to exist, rather that a unitary state schooling system has levelled out some of the things considered important in other countries. Admittedly neither play, nor football fandom were invented in Norway. However, the ways such cultural impulses have been adopted in new surroundings are always worth investigating. So, this paper will collect its materials from international football's lower, district divisions.

Football's Historical Development in Norway

The way football was introduced to Norway can lead one to discuss traditional concepts such as like cultural imperialism, though this will not be the issue discussed here. The first football match in Norway was played in Bergen in 1886. The contestants came from The British Empire's Naval Fleet visiting Norwegian shores. This was, of course, not the only influential factor to determine the diffusion of the game across the North Sea to Norway. Britain, particularly England and Scotland were in those days more of a neighbouring region as sea transport was the main communication.

After episodes like this in the 1880s the game eventually managed to get a grip on young, male Norwegian city-dwellers around the turn of the century. In the next two decades it was pupils and students in secondary and higher institutions who formed football's hard core or basis. Socially this meant that football was a game for academicians and other 'bourgeois' elements, like merchants' sons. Only during and shortly after the First World War did football start to spread and become a really *popular* sport. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, this expansion gained momentum, making football by the late 1930s an even larger participant sport than skiing, the so-called national sport of Norway.

This social role has been with the game since the 1930s. The Norwegian Football Association has up until today been the nation's largest sporting organisation by number of participants. Since the 1960s the major growth markets have been the youth, that is children's, level and on the female side. In the beginning of the 1990s football also became Norway's largest female sport, passing gymnastics, skiing and handball. Spectator wise football's position has been the same, regardless of how good or mostly bad the national representatives have been doing internationally (in fact the last decades' attendance at football matches have been higher in Norway than in the much more successful neighbour Sweden). This is the very brief national scene on which I shall attempt to place the following outlooks.

Norway in the Nineties: a Nation of '90 Minute Nationalists'?

Football's history must be seen in the light Of the general political situation. After the upheaval of the union between Norway and Sweden in 1905 had caused some turmoil on the Scandinavian scene, amongst others the first Norwegian political boycott of an international sports event (The Nordic Games in Stockholm 1905), things had settled after the Stockholm Olympics of 1912. Since then it was the encounters on the sports arenas between the two former 'brother-peoples' that stood out as settlements of national honour. The first ever victory of Norway on 15 September 1918 (2-1) was reported by the Norwegian press as a final confirmation of 'equal worth, also in sports'.[1] Norway's political history has in this way made Sweden the nation to beat throughout the twentieth century, illustrated in the saying: 'The most important thing is not to win, as long as you beat the Swedes', a saying with many international parallels. The Swedes on the other side, have never accepted this rivalry as an equal challenge. With attitudes much resembling the 'big brother' in family relations, they have felt much more inclined to look elsewhere, for example to Denmark, for real challenges in football, and have considered the occasional Norwegian threat to their position as superior in family matters as something of an annoyance.[2]

One should, historically, be aware of football's role in Norwegian identity. As a 100 per cent imported sport, by contrast to skiing, which was more or less a local invention, football could never be said to represent Norwegian *identity,* understood as something genuinely Norwegian. What it could provide though, was objects for *identification,* the ones representing *us* in the meeting or battle with *them,* or *the others/Other.* This was very evident in the years around the turn of the century. But still in the post-World War Two era of sports history this difference between skis and football as national symbols can be traced. In the autumn of 1945 Norway without any discussion could play its first post-War international away against Sweden. The result was not a good one, to put it mildly. Norway lost 10-0, and collected a heavy '*Råsunda-* complex', named after the stadium, which was hard to bear. Even though the result could be explained from uneven conditions the preceeding five years, some football journalists just as well argued to erase the match from the official statistics of the Norwegian national team. Yet, such a defeat was more comfortable (though this is hardly the right word) to live with, than a similar defeat and following complex would have been in skiing. Therefore a possible invitation of Swedish skiers to the traditional big event of the Holmenkollen Ski races the first winter of peace, in 1946, caused much more controversies in skiing circles. The main reason being that the Swedish Ski Association had kept the World Championships in *the Norwegian national sport of skiing* going during the War, in collaboration with Germany and Italy. The discussion in 1946 ended in a technical solution; one declared the 1946 Holmenkollen races as a national event with no foreign invitations, thus keeping

the Swedish skiers out. The Norwegian skiers were national *icons* not to be 'muddied'. Norwegian footballers also fought for national glory, but their equipment and playing object, the boots and the ball, could in contradiction to the skis, not be attached to any *totemic,* national virtues.

Football's globalisation in this manner makes its identity-functions both more widespread and more subtle. Only a few nations (the British and some Latin countries) can claim that the sport/game of football itself represents something outstanding of their specific culture. Others like Norway, The Faroe Islands (and Sweden) must stick to their sides as sources of identification. It is not *our* (or *their)* sport, but it can be used for representations of *us* against *them*

For the national team this function has been clear in what stands out as its only two periods of achievement; the last half of the 1930s and the 1990s. Even though Norway did beat England at the Antwerp Olympics in 1920 it was not before the Olympic Games in 1936 that Norway for the first time had a team that could make itself respected through a whole international tournament. In the opening rounds in Berlin, Norway's victory over Germany with Hitler present on the terrace was noticed both at home with reports of relatively vivacious celebrations, and, in those days, especially in other small European nations.[3] Norway reached the semi-finals where they lost an even game to the coming Olympic champions from Italy, thereafter beating Poland in the game for third place and so earning the nick-name the 'bronze team'. This name ever since has followed and burdened later national squads who never could live up to something like this. The 'bronze team' itself however, showed its qualities at the World Cup in France two years later. Here the team again was narrowly beaten by champions to be Italy, on what al] present Norwegian journalists described as a very dubious referee's decision, or in fact a scandal. 'It was *never* an offside' as the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's man on the spot reported to home on the radio. The referee in 1938 was German, and according to Norwegian press cager to assist his comrades from the other European Axis power. The French spectators in Marseilles were on the other side reported to be unanimously in support of David fighting the favorite.

In this period the team held up a potential for national interest that could compete with other Norwegian sporting achievements of the time and then one must consider that the 1936 Olympics were one of the most successful in Norwegian Olympic history with many victories also coming in the Winter Games in traditional Norwegian sports such as skiing and skating. Nevertheless football's success in these years concerning both player and spectator attraction and international achievements made the team captain of Norway and journalist Jørgen Juve bold enough to name the game 'our national sport of summer', in a book he published in 1934 with the modest title *Everything about Football.*[4] Bold, because skiing's position as *the* national sport for long had been, and still

was, unquestioned, even though football now could point to more active participants. Skiing's cultural role as a carrier of what was claimed to be typical Norwegian virtues could not be matched,[5] even though Juve, as we shall see later tried to define the kind of football the national team was playing as 'Norwegian'.[6]

The globalisation of football and hence the difficulties of acheiving international success also represents the special challenge of this sport; to be able to *eat cherries with the big ones* has been the great dream of teams from small nations, parallel to the traditional individual dream of becoming a professional player 'abroad'. This is something of the background of the potential and latent interest which has surrounded the national team, an interest that sometimes also has been noticed abroad. Most famous was the ourburst of the radio reporter Bjørge Lillelien after a World Cup qualifying, match in 1981, when Norway beat England for the first time since the Olympics of 1920. The result (not the play) made the reporter go rather wild:

> *We are the world's best, we are the world's best . . . it is absolutely incredible, we have beaten England! - England, land of giants; Lord Nelson, Lord Beaverbrook, Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Anthony Eden, Clement Atlee, Henry Cooper, Lady Diana. We have beaten them all . . . Maggie Thatcher I have a message to you . . . We have beaten England! Maggie Thatcher: Your boys took a hell of a beating! Your boys took a hell of a beating! We are the world's best . . .*
> (Bjørge Lillelien, NRK radio 19.Sept. 1981)

What is worth noticing here is not the extensive interpretation of the value of the victory, but the use of the *we-* term. *We* had beaten all the heroes of English history which the reporter could come up with on the air: *We* had beaten them all! Against this the new pop-match songs of the 1990s become rather anemic.

This incident of the 1980s, which never became more than an incident, showed an interest that was latent, and ready to blossom the few times the team succeeded. The shape this interest has taken in the 1990s is interesting in our connection. Parallel to the growing success of the national team, the eagerness to follow *Norway* increased strongly. At international matches the home crowd was aware that the national honour was at stake. The national anthem was sung so forcefully that veteran spectators could not remember having heard anything similar.[7] At the same time the national symbols became more and more visible. Flags were worn and waved. The national belonging was not hidden, but rather held up assertively.

Such expressions of national identification happened at a time when political nationalism started to acquire a rather negative mark, through developments in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. In Norway political nationalism was alive as an

aspect of the struggle over membership in the European Union, mostly in accusations from the unionists favouring Norway's admission to be Union against the no-voters wanting to stay totally independent. However, the football crowds meeting their European rivals waving national flags and dressed and draped in red, white and blue, were never accused of being conscious Union resisters. No research has appeared supporting a hypothesis that the politically conscious part of the spectators are the ones who first dress up in national garb, rather than the opposite.

Equally interesting is the fact that these new displays of national belonging have appeared in the days of so-called *modernity,* when traditional forms of belonging have been said to lose their significance for an individual sense of identity.[8] How can we, then, explain the increasing use of national symbols at modern international football matches? Are these new habits related to a growing identity-vacuum, or are others factors at work?

The identities that are displayed around international matches are doubtless national. But it is almost always restricted to the area of the match, and it rarely lasts longer than the match itself (I am not talking about the minority gangs of hooligans rioting streets and city centers 'abroad', but about the 'normal' dedicated fans who follow their teams. The last ones are the most interesting in a Norwegian setting). It could be argued that the originally Scottish expression '90 minute nationalism' is an adequate term for describing not only national attitudes towards football in Scotland, but for making a representation of a widespread 'modern' attitude towards football and identity.[9] Especially in late modernity, characterised by a weakening of traditional belongings, the identification offered through the 90 minute nationalism seems to fit in nicely. This kind of temporary sentiment stands out as an answer to modernity's contemporary urges for short and un-committing, but also strong and affectionate belongings. The 90 minute nationalism in this way has no consequences for other political issues - not even during a time of intense national-political struggle in Norway like the controversies of the European Union.

The term, however, used in historical circumstances also illustrates the methodological problems involved in historical debates over identity, and it stresses the importance of being aware that identity-creations have dynamic elements, being shaped and re-shaped in continuously new surroundings.

A National Playing Style?

The Norwegian national team in the 1990s provides proof of this dynamic re-shaping of identity. The team is led by a (former) communist whom the media labelled 'man of the year', after Norway qualified for the 1994 World Cup, for the first time since 1938. The team is a mix of professionals playing abroad, mostly in the English Premier League, and local semi-professionals, The team

plays with a style not very appreciated by foreign (conservative) *afficionados,* and discussions have evolved around the team's style of playing. Heavily criticised among football's traditional greats, especially the Danes and the Dutch, this way of playing went almost unquestioned and instead has been celebrated in Norway. In fact the *direct play* of the team, with players not afraid to use long balls against a defence in balance, and playing absolutely not possesion oriented football, at home was taken as an indication and a proof that *we* that is Olsen, the coach much renowned for his video and computer analyses -- and also one of Terry Venables' rivals, had outsmarted *them,* that is football's traditional greats. With playing material that player by player never or only in exceptional cases would have qualified for any other national squad at the same level, the Norwegian learn proved that football was just that: a team sport. In such a frame even an unconvincing substitute of an English Division One side, Jostein Flo, formerly of Shefield United, could become a dangerous weapon when used for his extreme skills and nothing else, and eliminate English stars from World Cup participation.

This team, named 'Drillos' after the coach - initially a controversial figure in Norwegian football circles, became a national group of heroes after it won the World Cup qualifying group over the Netherlands, England, Poland and Turkey. For over a year the team became the focus of media and popular attention, in heavy competition with the Lillehammcr Olympics. In fact, the first half of 1994, which included the highly successful Winter Olympics and a World Cup victory against Mexico, gave Norwegian self confidence more than was healthy according to many analysts. Some commentators included their sporting success in their explanations of why Norwegians voted No to the European Union; the nation had proven it was good enough as an independent entity. At the first match of the World Cup the Prime Minister herself, Harlem Brundtland, turned up in the TV studios of the national broadcaster to emphasise the importance of the event. Her comments in no way tried to reduce the meaning that Norway's participation in such company had for a small nation.

Norway's style of playing, called by some foreign critics 'primitive, destructive or defensive', and by less hostile ones 'more physical than skilful', was not discussed in Norway until some time after the World Cup, when the team failed to qualify for the Euro '96 finals. Some commentators began to argue for a more 'technical and offensive' style played by many other national teams. The Norwegian 'playing style' was not always beautiful to watch, but it had proven efficient, others argued. Too often, however, Norwegian teams, attempting to play 'continental', had found their technical skills lacking. The direct playing style of 'Drillos' seemed to bring the days of painful big numeric losses, all too often experienced by followers of Norway, to an end. This has, combined with acceptable results, kept an astonishing consensus around the playing style of the

national team. It seems that people tend to overlook the lack of finesse and brilliant technique found in other places, and accept that Norwegian players are apparently made from other materials. Both players and followers seem to concur with the reasoning that the object of football is to score goals, and to have scoring opportunities, players must bring the ball into or near the penalty box, not tunnel the ball around in the midfield.

This discussion could be brought much further. One could suggest that the willingness to adopt a style of play ridiculed by other members of the football family is a result of 'backwardness', or even 'primitiveness' of Norwegian football, or that members of this culture would grasp anything that brings results. Such ridicule was also levelled at the Republic of Ireland team under Jack Charlton who played a similar direct style, This tendency to disregard what some would regard as the 'inner values' of the game; skill, finesse, blending technique, in favour of what the coaches call 'efficient football', was heavily criticised by foreign observers. The Danish press reporting on a match between Norway and Denmark just prior lo the World Cup, where they themselves failed to qualify, quite openly marked the Norwegian play 'primitive'. Referring to the spectators cheering for such play they commented: 'Regarding the way of play, they are not used to much more here'.[10]

The Norwegian coaches not surprisingly found a market for a new book in these days, called *Efficient Football.* Here they openly admit that 'we are willing to sacrifice the fleeting beauty of aesthetic style in the name of efficiency'.[11] In other words; the choice of playing style is a rational strategy, based upon almost scientific research on efficiency, namely goal-scoring, in football and the player material available.

Two things can be said to result from this process: Norwegian football was made aware of the content in the term 'playing style', a discussion which previously had been taken care of by judging the play 'good' or 'bad'. Secondly, in a cultural perspective one could also say that the Norwegian spectators learned to see football a new way through their own relatively successful team in the 1990s.

The match between Norway and Denmark just referred to also had other ingredients that illustrate that national attitudes and stereotypes with such historical roots still vividly exist, finding sports encounters as a fruitful ground for breeding and cultivation. Even in 1994 it took no more than a Swedish referee not quite on top of the situation before the high-paying middle class spectators of an international friendly match between Norway and Denmark made their preconceptions of national stereotypes heard loud and clear. The Swedish referee got the unison label *'svenskefaen',* directly translated 'Swede devil/bastard', an expression of which only the two parties involved know the strengths and which based on earlier historical antagonisms, such as the Union, 1905 independence

from Sweden, and partly World War Two. It took no more than one or two dubious whistles before about 80 per cent of the crowd, not known for any hooligan tendencies, cried out an insulting, expression, targetting all Swedes, football referees or not.

Discussions about playing styles also appeared around the earlier 1936 bronze team As mentioned earlier, there were efforts to describe the team of the 1930s as playing in a 'Norwegian' way. If we look at the words used to illustrate this Norwegian way of the 1930s we see that it is quite another use of reasoning than in the 1990s. While the latter team representatives try to describe their way of playing in almost scientific terms, without national descriptions, the team of the 1930s were described in strong nationalistic terms, which seems rather peculiar in the 1990s. A few quotes illustrates this point: 'Norwegian football is built upon the best national qualities of our youth; the speed, the force, the simple and tough technique, and the tactical brain'. These qualities were also compared to other nations:

> Football develops among the Germans forwardness and systematics, among the Latin-Americans it keeps the warmblooded temper under control, while their love of excitement can thrive freely, among the Englishmen it strengthens their stoicism, their tactical skills and their fairness, among the Danes their speed, joy and humour, and among the Norwegians their velocity, their force, their technical skill and their ability to tight is growing.[12]

National Fans or Middle Class Tourists/Consumers?

One last question should be considered in this context: Are national and local identities in sport an impossibible combination? World Cup football is the West End of football. Does this mean that followers of the national teams are middle class tourists in the West End? Or are some fans simply more nationally oriented than others? Do we have a constellation of tourists versus supporters here?

The followers of clubs and national sides are obviously interested in football, however, the genuine interest of the national team followers have been questioned. They have been accused of being tourists either able lo pay the high gate fees or being handed free tickets by sponsors. In Norway, a new type of interest, not commitment, arose in the 1990s and identification increased particularly during the World Cup qualification of 1994. At the first match of the tournament the Prime Minister on national television told her compatriots what a great moment this was in the nation's history. Television commentators and newspapers followed up, creating a hype towards the team and a frenzy

unparalleled in Norwegian sports history. The interesting thing here is the enormous attractiveness of the Norwegian national team, drawing people who never before had shown any particular interest in football.

The contemporary communities built around football have different functions from this frenzy of national identification that surfaces when teams succeed internationally. To put it in stereotypes; locally there is still a tendency for 'old-fashioned' partisan affections to dominate, nationally the 90 minute tourists are the majority, also as a result of the ticket policies of the Football Association. The coming together around the matches of the national team are much more infrequent than the regular club encounters. Local fans seem to form more lasting communities than the more immediate and imagined national community of the 90 minute tourists. This can seem strange, as the basis of the national team - the nation state, in Norway and perhaps Europe - historically has proven to be more solid than local, sometimes privately owned clubs, which can change owners and location. At the present one could conclude that this is a phenomenon needing exploration from *several* national perspectives.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be seen that national idenification around the Norwegian football team has been transitory and often latent, surfacing in periods of heightened international success in the 1930s and 1990s. Comparison with other societies where international success in football or other prominent sports has generated moments of heightened national idenfication and national imagining should be read against this Norwegian case. We perhaps know more about cases where teams have had long-term success such as in Brazil, Argentina and Italy in soccer or New Zealand and South Africa in rugby union. Cases such as the Norwegian one highlight active moments of the construction of national identities surrounding sport and begin to demonstrate how such processes work.

NOTES:

1 Matti Goksøyr, 'Phases and Functions of Nationalism: Norway's Utilisation of International Sport in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in J A Mangan (ed) *Tribal Identities: Nationalism, Europe, Sport.* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 141.

2 See Fredrik Schough who, referring to Swedish newspapers between 1992 and 1994, stated that losing to Norway in skiing and similar winter sports (though of course not ice hockey) could be accepted to a certain degree, but in football. never! (F. Schough, 'Självbekräftelse och nationalkaraktär i sportens väld', *Kulturella perspektiv. Svensk etnologisk tidsskrift,* 3, 1993).

3 Jean Claude Bussard, Les Jeux de 1936 dans le presse Suisse de langue Francaise', in R. Renson, M. Lämmer, J. Riordan and D. Chassiotis (eds) *The Olympic Games through the Ages: Greek Antiquity and its Impact on Modern Sport,* (Olympia, 1989), pp. 363-4.

4 Jørgen Juve, *Alt om fotball,* (Oslo, 1934). p. 2.

5 Matti Goksøyr, 'Our games - our virtues? "National Sports" as Symbols: A Discussion of Idealtypes', in Floris van der Merwe (ed) *Sport as Symbol, Symbols in Sport* (Berlin, 1996)

6 Juve, *Alt om fotball,* p. 14.

7 Matti Goksøyr, 'Med fedrelandet på forballkamp', *Aftenposten* (May. 1993).

8 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity - Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1991).

9 Matti Goksøyr, 'Norway and the World Cup: Cultural diffusion, sportification and sport as a vehicle for nationalism', in John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson (eds) *Hosts and Champions, Soccer Cultures, National Identities and the USA World Cup* (Aldershot: Arena, 1994), p. 183-94. It is intersting to note that Jørgcn Juve already in 1934 mentioned 'the new communality. . . where everyone are brothers for an hour and a half", Juve, *Alt om fotball.* p. 5.

10 Information, 2 June 1994.

11 E. Olscn, Ø. Larscn and N.J. Semb, *Effektiv fotball* (Oslo, 1994). See also Olsen and Larsen, 'Use match analysis by coaches', Unpublished Paper, 1995.

12 Juve, *Alt om fotball,* pp. 19-20.