

The Professionalization of Soviet Sport: The Case of the Soccer Union

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In recent years, the Soviet Union has come to abandon its longstanding policy of official amateurism in sport. In some cases, it has gone so far as to embrace an open professionalism that draws inspiration from western models. This shift was not sudden. Rather, it is the result of a long and complex process that actually antedates the Revolution of 1917. The meanings of amateurism and professionalism have, over the last century, varied significantly, depending on time and place. These decades of interaction have led up to the present moment of what may seem like swift, even precipitous change.

Some of the steps in the process of professionalization will be familiar to readers of this journal. Yet, I want to retrace them here in order, first to establish the ways the two approaches to sport have related to each other and second, to demonstrate the historically changing definitions and social character of amateur and professional sport. We are not witnessing the final acceptance by the Soviets of some unchanging notion of professionalism. Rather, we have come to a moment when, after many years, the distinctions between amateurism and professionalism have been blurred in both the east and the west.

During the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism in Western Europe created an ever growing urban working class.¹ By the end of the century, workers and their political leaders, through trade union and party struggles, had succeeded in shortening both the working day and the work week.² A flood of entrepreneurs emerged to cater to this increase in proletarian leisure time. These new industries of mass culture included music halls, amusement parks, the movies, and, of course, big-time professional spectator sport.³

Not only were these sports watched by workers, but in such places as England, nearly all the players were drawn from the working class as well. The

1. See Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863-1915* (Sussex, 1980) pp. 2-3. Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914," in Terence Ranger and Hobsbawm, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 283. Robert E. Wheeler, "Organized Sport and Organized Labor: The Workers' Sports Movements," *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (April, 1978): 191.

2. John Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin, 1984), p. 147. John Hargreaves, *Sport, Culture, and Power* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 204-223.

3. See David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise of Public Entertainment in America* (New York, forthcoming). Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 171.

mode of professionalization seemed about to take over a wide variety of sports, not just a few major ones like soccer. This trend threatened the dominance of the gentlemanly amateurs who had controlled sport when it was not a way of earning a living. Sport represented a way out of the factory for those few workers able to succeed at it. This alone made them far more motivated competitors than their aristocratic counterparts.

The emergence of proletarian athletes, in turn, gave rise to the movement of Victorian amateurism in England and elsewhere. The wealthy sought to find a way to keep the poor out of their games.⁴ It was this movement that particularly influenced the French conservative, Baron de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympics. Given the aristocratic concerns and gentlemanly leadership of the Olympic Games, it should not be surprising that the young Bolshevik state wanted no part of the movement, and the USSR did not participate until 1952. Instead, during those years, the Soviets organized their own workers' sports international, as did the Social Democratic parties of Europe. Before the second World War, these two groups struggled fiercely against each other, much as their parent parties did.⁵

After World War II, the Soviet Union emerged from its isolation. It sought to join the so-called community of nations, many more of which were now Communist. The Soviets embraced the Olympic movement and its official amateurism.⁶ This was not a difficult step, as they had been claiming since the 1930s that professional sport had been eliminated inside the USSR.⁷

Over the course of the next few decades, the Soviet Union came to dominate the Olympics. It claimed to be the greatest sporting nation on earth and argued that its high-performance athletes were merely the tip of a vast participant iceberg of healthy workers playing in lavish, state-provided facilities. However, after not too many years, it became clear to outsiders that the "students" and "soldiers" who comprised the vast bulk of Soviet and other East bloc athletes were not amateurs but state-supported professionals.

This eventually led western authorities to urge looser eligibility standards. Companies have now been allowed to fund athletes and teams. Trust funds have been created, and in some sports professionals now compete in the Olympics. After some initial resistance, the Soviets came to embrace this trend. By 1988, the Olympics had become a huge commercial enterprise, and Soviet athletes had contributed much to the financial success of this and other international sports ventures. Not only did they now want a piece of the action, but they came to see open professionalization as a better way to organize their own internal sport system.

Today, the Soviets are actively involved with a wide variety of sports promoters, and are in the process of restructuring their domestic sports prac-

4. Hargreaves, "Sport and Hegemony: Some Theoretical Problems" in Hart Cantelon and Richard Gruneau, eds., *Sport, Culture, and the Modern State* (Toronto, 1982), p. 132. Hoberman, p. 15. See also John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago, 1981).

5. Wheeler, p. 192; Hoberman, p. 84; James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 108.

6. Henry Morton, *Soviet Sport: Mirror of Soviet Society* (New York, 1963).

7. A. Starostin, *Sport in the USSR* (Moscow, 1939), p. 7.

tices along professional lines. It should come as no surprise that the game that has led the way in this process is soccer, by far the most popular sport in the USSR.

At the outset, it should be noted that soccer differs from other sports in a way that is crucial for our present concerns. Soviet soccer players have been competing against the world's best professionals at least since Dinamo Moscow's famous tour of England in 1945. For decades, they have taken part in the World Cup, the European Cup, and the various annual club competitions in Europe. Soviet specialists have long interacted on a formal basis of equality with western professionals, and in these years, Soviet teams have been quite successful. At the same time, those who have earned their livings from Soviet soccer have long been unhappy with the way the game has been organized at home, and they have seized the present historical moment to bring about change. The debate over the restructuring of big-time soccer has been intense, and the arguments raised during the discussions reflect the broader difficulties facing the process of perestroika.

During 1987, a number of interested groups suggested the creation of a "Soccer Union" (*futbolnyi soiuz*). A government resolution of August 1988 also called for a restructuring of the sport. A new group was to replace many of the functions of the existing Football Federation and put the sport on an openly professional basis. The Union was supposed to resolve many of the problems confronting Soviet soccer and bring its practices into line with those prevailing in western nations. In August, 1988, the Ministry of Sport (Goskomsport)'s Main Administration for Soccer and Hockey, headed by Viacheslav Koloskov, issued a resolution suggesting new rules for the organization of soccer. Koloskov's group later published a draft charter for the new Union.⁸ These steps were taken in conjunction with representatives of the trade unions, the official party youth organization (Komsomol), the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Interior. As such, this particular document reflected the views of established sports bureaucrats rather than the opinions of professionals, specialists, coaches, players, journalists, and fans.

The new organization was to divorce big-time soccer from its responsibilities in the field of participation. The Union was expected to conduct the annual league season, support clubs taking part in European cup tournaments, and organize national teams for various international competitions. The old federation was to continue to organize participant and youth soccer, including support for the special schools that train future generations of players.⁹

Koloskov's group envisioned a league in which self-financing (*khozruscher*) teams would co-exist with the traditionally state-supported clubs of the Army and the Ministry of Interior (the Dinamo clubs). New rules were also suggested for the payment of players, the terms of contracts for coaches and players, the payment of television rights from state television, and the compensation of

8. *Futbol-khokkei*, December 4, 1988; *Sovetskii sport*, August 20, 1988

9. *Soverskii sport*, August 13, 1988.

referees. Distinctions were also drawn between full professionals and those formally in the armed forces.¹⁰ Goskomsport was to continue in a close relationship with the new union which was called a “social-professional” rather than an “independent (*samostoiatelnaia*)” organization.¹¹

As soon as these proposals were published, they evoked a hail of criticism. Through letters to the press and to television, the general public expressed grave doubt about Goskomsport’s plan. However, the loudest outcry came from those who earned their livings from the sport-players, coaches, team officials, referees, and journalists. Their complaints revealed one of the central difficulties facing the broader process of perestroika. A reform in one area of life may require changes in others. The full consequences of certain proposals may not be fully understood at the time of their formulation. For such plans to be successfully implemented, there may be a necessity to create still other complementary rules, procedures, laws, and cultural practices. Such was the case with the Soccer Union.

The critics of the draft charter focused most of their attention on what the original organizing committee had either omitted or neglected. The national sports daily, *Sovetskii sport*; published a wide variety of letters, most of them from professional insiders. Many, including the legendary goalie, Lev Iashin, complained that the new group did not differ very much from the old federation, nor was it sufficiently independent from Goskomsport and other bureaucratic structures.¹²

Others argued that insufficient attention had been paid to the legal consequences of the planned reform. The new union should, in their view, be a juridical entity with the rights and obligations of coaches, players, and teams precisely spelled out. With players and coaches now expected to sign contracts, it was by no means clear how Soviet courts would view the inevitable disputes that would occur.¹³ The always murky issue of player transfers, a crucial element in any professional sport, was left unresolved.

The presidents of several teams also complained about the virtual omission of any concern for financial matters. They were especially displeased that the draft charter envisioned Goskomsport providing a considerable portion of the new Union’s revenues for an unspecified number of years. Instead, team directors sought to generate a wide range of revenues on their own, including those that would produce hard currency. Only this way could the union enjoy the professional autonomy these specialists ought.¹⁴

When the founding conference of the union was held in Moscow on December 13, 1988, it was clear the the players, coaches, and administrators who attended were still extremely dissatisfied with the shape of the new body. Valerii Lobanovskii, coach of the national team and of traditionally powerful Kiev

10. *Sovetskii sport*, August 20, 1988.

11. *Futbol-khokkei*, December 4, 1988; *Sovetskii sport*, November 26, 1988.

12. *Futbol-khokkei*, December 12, 1988; *Sovetskii sport*, November 29 and December 10, 1988

13. *Sovetskii sport*, December 1, 1988.

14. *Futbol-khokkei*, December 11, 1988.

Dinamo, advanced an alternative charter for what he called a "Union of Football Leagues." This group was to unite the clubs of all three divisions of Soviet soccer into a "self-administered organ" of Goskomsport that would be a separate juridical entity and have complete financial independence.¹⁵

Lobanovskii sought to create a fully autonomous organization of soccer professionals that would be free of bureaucratic tutelage. It would be divorced from any concern for participant sport and would be free to generate money from a wide range of sources. It would also be based on a rigorous concept of legality in which the rights and obligations of players, coaches, and teams would be clarified and protected. This approach differed sharply from the original proposal which envisioned a continuing role for those bodies and institutions that had traditionally dominated the sport and maintained a greater sensitivity to the needs of the state than did Lobanovskii's professionals. He and his allies wanted, more or less, to be left alone to run a money-making soccer enterprise.¹⁶

The debate produced by the conflicting proposals was, to borrow a phrase, stormy and prolonged. A fundamental issue had been engaged. Would control of the Soviet Union's most popular sport remain in the hands of those government and party figures who had shaped it for official ends, or would soccer pass into the control of an elite of trained specialists who sought to protect their own positions, while producing entertainment for the public?¹⁷ After much wrangling, the conference ultimately decided to form a new committee to amend the original charter.¹⁸ A second congress was called for June 1, 1989.

Lobanovskii continued to be the staunchest and most important supporter of professionalization. In an interview with the British magazine, *World Soccer*, he argued that such a course was necessary to allow Soviet teams to continue their success at the international level, but Lobanovskii also touched on the deeper question of the dignity and motivation of the athletes:

[T]here has to come a time when the players have to be protected and have certain guarantees as professional sportsmen. The need for this is made even more so because of the big changes happening in the country. These improvements would act as levers to get the best out of our players . . . if the Soviet Union is to perform and compete for the World Cup, then our players must have equal opportunities open to the top professionals in the West . . . we cannot slacken our efforts to introduce real professionalism as soon as possible. In sports preparation we are no worse than the West. Yet, in the motivation for a result, we are well behind them.¹⁹

Lobanovskii had in mind the creation of monetary incentives as a basis for assuring maximum efforts not only at the international but at the club level as well.

The commission established at the December congress met in Moscow on January 5, 1989. According to the later testimony of one of the group's

15. *Sovetskii sport*, December 15, 1988.

16. *Futbol-khokkei*, December 12, 1988.

17. Soviet television, first program March 12, 1989.

18. *World Soccer*, February, 1989, p. 22.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 24. Lobanovskii proved prescient, as the problem of motivation cropped up during the Soviets' disastrous defeat in the 1990 World Cup.

members, a new document was worked out that incorporated most of the concerns raised by Lobanovskii's proposal.²⁰ On March 12, the head of this commission, V. S. Artemev, appeared on the weekly "Football Roundup" television show and announced that his group had finished its work. He said that the new charter differed sharply from the old document in which "there was no autonomy." Artemev promised that the planned association was to be an "independent *khozraschet* organization."²¹

These statements raised expectations. As a result, there was shock and outrage when Goskomsport published a new draft charter on April 6 that differed little from the original unsatisfactory document. Eventually it became clear that Goskomsport functionaries had largely ignored the work of the editing committee and produced a charter that satisfied no one's interests but their own. Journalists and specialists were outraged again. V. V. Ponedelnik, editor of the popular weekly, *Futbol-khokkei*, bitterly attacked sports bureaucrats. He quoted Vladimir Ivanov, a member of the Administration for Soccer and Hockey, who according to Ponedelnik, said, "I don't know anything about soccer, but . . . I can put together documents and letters." Ponedelnik was criticizing the fact that people trained in administration and not sport ran Soviet soccer. He condemned these figures as incompetent and said their presence in positions of power was "accidental (*sluchainyi*)." ²²

Lobanovskii was equally quick to express his dissatisfaction. "In comparison to the old document that was rejected, there is nothing new in this one." He criticized Goskomsport's language on a "transition" to self-financing "by stages." Nowhere was it clear how long these stages would be. He re-emphasized the need for an independent organization, run by professionals, not by bureaucrats who happened to find themselves assigned to soccer.²³

The press was again flooded with letters from fans as well as specialists. They were joined by journalists who concentrated on the important elements that the second draft charter had neglected. These included the issues of finances, contracts, player transfers, and the legal obligations of teams, coaches, and players.²⁴ Many others picked up the theme of anti-bureaucratism, repeatedly and bitterly denouncing the interference of Goskomsport.²⁵ The attacks became so sharp that Koloskov and several representatives of the old Football Federation felt it necessary to criticize the tone of the criticisms, even as they admitted the validity of most of the complaints.²⁶

The intensity of the debate seemed to have cooled somewhat by the eve of the

20. *Futbol-khokkei*, May 21, 1989. Several days later, in an article in *Sovetskii sport*, the presidium of the Football Federation denied that any such agreements had been reached. *Sovetskii sport*, May 25, 1989.

21. Soviet television, first program, March 12, 1989. At the June I gathering that voted for the Lobanovskii proposal, Artemev spoke and affirmed that the document originally worked out by the editing committee did, indeed, more closely approximate the so-called Kiev variant. *Futbol-khokkei*, June 1, 1989.

22. Goskomsport had issued a variety of new rules in March concerning the operational aspects of soccer. These changes showed some willingness to make adjustments to new conditions. *Futbol-khokkei*, March 5, 1989.

23. *Futbol-khokkei*, April 16, 1989; *Sovetskii sport*, April 13 and 25, 1989.

24. *Sovetskii sport*, April 25, May 4 and 19, 1989.

25. *Futbol-khokkei*, May 28, 1989.

26. *Sovetskii sport*, April 15 and May 28, 1989.

June 1 meeting. Koloskov and Lobanovskii gave simultaneous interviews to *Izvestia* that were mutually respectful and indicated a willingness to compromise. Koloskov admitted it was desirable that the future organization be fully independent. He restated his belief that Goskomsport's financial assistance would be required for a transitional period which, in response to Lobanovskii's complaints, Koloskov specified at two or three years. For his part Lobanovskii admitted that the prospect of autonomy had "intoxicated" many in the world of Soviet soccer, leading them to expect more than was presently feasible. He stated that his proposal was only the beginning of a process moving toward independence, one in which it would be necessary to work together with Goskomsport.²⁷

When the delegates finally assembled in Moscow on June 1, a compromise did, in fact, occur. Press accounts reported that Lobanovskii's "Union of Football Leagues" had won support of the gathering (174 of 295 votes). V. V. Ponedelnik was elected president of the new group. On the surface, it appeared that the soccer specialists advocating full professionalism had won the battle.²⁸ However, in return for professionalization, they granted Goskomsport a considerable measure of continuing control. According to the final agreement, "The Union of Leagues is a self-administering professional organ working together with Goskomsport and the Football Federation on the basis of parity."²⁹ Soviet soccer had at last abandoned its false amateurism, but, as the representatives of the Union would soon find out, it was still far from being genuinely independent.

At first, the new group was scheduled to begin operation with the 1990 season. Immediately after its creation, the Union engaged in little public activity, leading several traditional figures, who had been forced out by the changes, to criticize the Union and its leaders for being "invisible."³⁰ These complaints were only a prelude to Goskomsport's attempt to limit the authority of the Union. On October 25, 1989, Koloskov's group announced that the union would be responsible only for the operation of the domestic league season in the first and second divisions (*vyshaia* and *pervua liga*). The vast third division (*vtoraia liga*) with over 150 teams was to remain in Goskomsport's hands. Koloskov claimed that soccer at this level was not fully professional and so should stay under the control of the old Football Federation.³¹

The response of the Union was to announce unilaterally that the 1990 season would be played under a reorganized divisional structure. The first division was to be expanded from sixteen to eighteen teams. The second division was to grow from twenty-two teams to thirty-eight clubs, divided into two geographically based sub-groups. By this strategy, the Union would have controlled 56 rather than 38 teams, giving it greater authority and much larger revenues.³²

21. *Izvestia*, May 23, 1989.

28. *Futbol-khokkei*, June 4, 1989; *Sotsialisticheskaia industriia*, June 2, 1989; *Leningradskaia pravda*, June 2, 1989; *Komsomolskaia pravda*, June 3, 1989.

29. *Sovetskii sport*, June 3, 1989.

30. The attack appeared in *Sovetskii sport*, September 23, 1989. Replies to the accusations appeared in *Futbol-khokkei*, October 1, 1989 and in *Sovetskii sport*, October 23, 1989.

31. *Sovetskii sport*, October 25, 1989.

32. *Sovetskii sport*, October 25, 1990. Each team paid thousands of rubles in membership fees to participate in league play, and these monies represented a sizable portion of the Union's revenues. More importantly, these

The Federation had also historically been the Soviet Union's representative to the bodies of international soccer, the International Football Association (FIFA) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). For several years, Koloskov had been a vice-president of FIFA, and he had enjoyed close personal relations with the organization's highest officers. He and his colleagues in Goskomsport had no intention of giving up their international positions and the considerable perks, primarily foreign travel, that went with them.

The players and teams that participate in the various international team and club competitions have always been drawn from that level of the sport (the first division) controlled by the new body. The Union, rather than the Federation, would seem to be the logical representative of Soviet soccer on the world scene. Yet, the Union had never been able to enjoy this position for the simple reason that, until 1989, it did not exist. Rather, the Federation continued to be recognized by the international bodies. Logically, the Federation should have turned this clearly professional task over to the Union. Yet, Goskomsport's officeholders were prepared to use all available arguments to retain a measure of power. Koloskov claimed that the two functions of organizing the national teams and of running internal league play were handled by separate organizations in most western countries and that the charter of FIFA expressly forbade such overlapping authority.³³

Predictably, Lobanovskii and his allies were outraged by Goskomsport's attempt to preserve its authority by decree. Given his role as coach of the national team and given the professional character of its players, Lobanovskii argued that it was only logical for the Union to have control at the international level. Others in the Union were especially incensed by the anti-democratic character of Goskomsport's continuing control of the third division. The vast majority of coaches at this level had voted for the Union's creation.³⁴ The secretary of the Union, V. Petrov, described Goskomsport's actions as a "remnant from the period of stagnation," i.e., the Brezhnev period.³⁵ The Union announced its intention to put its proposals forward for approval by the Council of Ministers and the newly empowered legislative body, the Supreme Soviet. Yet, this step would never be taken and such approval would never be obtained.³⁶ Indeed, the very contradiction of an organization seeking government approval at the same time it claimed to be a group of autonomous professionals demonstrated the Union's enormous disadvantages in the struggle for power.

By the fall, it had become clear that Koloskov's concessions of the summer had only been a temporary retreat. The June agreement had placed the Union under the control of Goskomsport's Main Administration for Soccer and Hockey, and the Union's leaders would soon find it difficult to resist the power of the traditional

funds were generated independently rather than from Goskomsport.

33. *Sovetskii sport*, November 11, 1989.

34. *Sovetskii sport*, November 11, 1989. *Komsomolskaiapravda*, October 29, 1989 and November 2, 1989. In separate telephone polls set up by the youth newspaper, *Komsomolskaia pravda*, the Union won the support of both specialists and the general public by wide margins.

35. *Sovetskii sport*, November 11, 1989.

36. *Sovetskii sport*, December 7, 1989. *Futbol-khokkei*, January 7, 1990.

authorities. Late in November, 1989, the Football Federation published a revised charter, projecting a newly reorganized group in which the Union of Leagues was to play a limited and subordinate role.³⁷ The conflict had clearly been joined, and the central issue was to be the structure of the league season for 1990.

In January, 1990 the Federation called a national conference to ratify its new charter and affirm its control of Soviet soccer. Koloskov announced that there would be no changes in the structure of the league season and that the Union of Football Leagues was but a "committee" of the Federation. The Federation's conference was attended by a wide range of figures, many of whom had supported the creation of the Union in June. These leaders included the chief organizer of national teams, Nikita Simonian, and Lobanovskii himself, both of whom now advocated compromise.³⁸

It soon became clear that the tide had turned against Ponedelnik and his allies in the Union. The new group was denounced for acting without consulting league coaches in changing the structure of the season. They were also accused of running a purely commercial enterprise.³⁹ The Union responded by calling a conference of its own. Yet, this gathering, while well-attended, was dominated by journalists and fans. Those coaches and players who took part enjoyed less authority than the men who had come back to Koloskov's fold.⁴⁰

Ponedelnik came to realize that compromise was in fact necessary, and meetings were soon arranged with Koloskov.⁴⁰ Early in February it was announced that the league season would be run according to the old formula and that the Union had accepted the authority of the Federation. The Union was to run the season in the top two divisions. Ponedelnik called this formula a "compromise," but in fact it represented a victory for Koloskov and Goskomsport.⁴² While different figures would be organizing the domestic league, no autonomy had been admitted or gained. It had, of course, been precisely the desire for autonomy from bureaucratic tutelage that had motivated the movement toward professionalization in the first place. The forces for renewal had been given a piece of the pie, but real power remained in the hands of those who had always controlled the USSR's most popular sport. To add insult to injury, FIFA soon sent Koloskov a letter expressing complete support for both the Federation and for Koloskov personally.⁴³

As a microcosm of the contradictions of perestroika the struggle over professionalizing soccer revealed the considerable power state organs are still able to muster. The Union was never able to win support for its existence in either the Council of Ministers or the Supreme Soviet. At these levels of state power, Goskomsport was able to find many willing allies.

It must be noted that the world of sport is unlikely to produce the sorts of

37. *Sovetskii sport*, November 21, 1989.

38. *Sovetskii sport*, January 10, 1990.

39. *Sovetskii sport*, January 13, 1990; *Futbol-khokkei*, January 21, 1990.

40. *Futbol-khokkei*, February 14, 1990.

41. *Sovetskii sport*, January 30, 1990.

42. *Sovetskii sport*, February 8, 1990; *Futbol-khokkei*, February 11, 1990.

43. *Sovetskii sport*, February 13, 1990.

principled dissidents and politically adept critics that have had successes in other fields. Coaches are figures who seek to gain acceptance for their own authority. By nature, they are not rebels, nor are players. When faced with an unbending order, the forces of movement in Soviet soccer proved incapable of advancing their struggle to a higher level. Yet, this defeat is not likely to be the last chapter in the struggle. Professionalization has taken over many other sports within the Soviet Union. The appeals of participation in the international market for sport spectacles are too great for even the most ardently anti-commercial elements to resist. Goskomsport itself has always been actively involved in money-making ventures. This latest round in the battle has been less about the long-term goal of professionalization than it has been about the question of who should control and profit from Soviet soccer when it inevitably becomes openly and fully professional.

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For all the public debate among organizers, coaches, and players, the reaction of the public to the process of professionalizing soccer has been minimal. Attendance dropped sharply at games during the 1989 season.⁴⁴ The causes of this decline are numerous, and most are beyond the scope of this particular essay. Nevertheless, for the fans the question of who ran soccer proved to be a secondary issue. Their first concern has always been for the attractiveness of the game on the field. The Soviet public has always taken the attitude that big-time soccer was played by professionals. In this sense, their enjoyment and appreciation of the game has differed little from that of fans in capitalist countries.

Nor can it be said that those teams that have reorganized their business practices on a professional basis have done much to change their own working practices, particularly as they related to the fans.⁴⁵ Despite continued success on the field, the USSR's first team to go professional, *Dnepr*, experienced a sharp drop in attendance, along with most other clubs. This weakness at the gate is a crucial failing. Without a dramatic increase in ticket sales, it is difficult to see how fully professional soccer could hope to succeed in the Soviet Union. Without growth in ticket revenues, the only other obvious quick source of money would be a dramatic increase in the payment of television rights by Gosteleradio, something which seems highly unlikely at the present moment.

Considerable hard currency has been raised by the sale of star players to West European teams. Yet, this practice has lowered the quality of league play, and caused fans to lose a measure of interest. Accordingly, such one-sided participation in the international transfer market cannot be pursued without raising

44. In 1989, the average attendance was 18,302 per game. The year before it had been approximately 23,000 a game, down from 27,000 in 1987.

45. The first Soviet professional club, *Dnepr*, drew repeated complaints from fans about the prices of tickets and the poorly organized methods for distributing them. While *Dnepr*, has done well on the field in the last two years, its attendance has also declined. Recently, it was revealed that many of the plans announced by Kiev Dinamo when it went professional remain strictly on paper. Fan club memberships, sold at ten rubles a head, elicited thousands of requests, but as of September, 1989, no fan had received any materials in return for his money. Special sections for supporters, meetings with players, cafes and discoteques still are not realities. *Sovietskii sport*, September 9, 1989.

certain obvious contradictions. Soviet fans take pride in the ability of their athletes to succeed at the highest levels of international competition. The successes and failures of Soviet soccer stars in Western Europe have been closely followed. Their participation in foreign leagues is seen as a sign of the normalization of Soviet relations with western nations. Yet, at the same time, no one, not fans, officials, or journalists, has any desire to see the Soviet domestic league become a farm system for the wealthiest teams of Europe.

So far, Soviet fans have proven indifferent to the restructuring of Soviet soccer. As noted above, most of them have long felt the sport to be professional in any meaningful sense. Their concern, instead, has been with the quality and entertainment value of the sporting spectacles they have chosen to consume. The creation of the Soccer Union did little to improve matters on the field or in the stands.

At its heart the battle for professionalization has been a struggle between competing elites for control of the production rather than the consumption of sports spectacles. The fans, the consumers of these events, remain on the sidelines. It is still possible that changes in the process of production (including more aggressive marketing) will eventually affect the process of consumption. Changes in the types of personalities who organize and present sports events may have an impact on the ways Soviet citizens perceive these events.

In making spectator sport a branch of the entertainment industry, professionalization threatens the link between passive spectating and active participation (more imputed than real) that has been one of the most salient characteristics of Soviet sport ideology since the 1930s. Those who watched were supposed to be inspired to exercise, and in the process become healthier, more productive workers and better defenders of the Fatherland. For decades, this approach strengthened authoritarian elements in Soviet society. Yet, we now know that the relationship between watching and doing was more apparent than actual.⁴⁶ Success in high-performance sport was purchased at the expense of mass participant sport. The physical health of the nation suffered as a result. Nevertheless, this relationship between what was called *masterstvo* and *massovost* did represent an element of Communist sport doctrine that was both distinctive from western practices and not altogether negative, even if it scarcely existed in practice.

More traditional elements do have reason to fear the ideological consequences of professionalization. For years, the state-supported teams of the army and the Ministry of Interior have dominated domestic sport (somewhat less so in soccer). The vast majority of Olympic medal winners have come from one or the other of these two systems. As a result, most sports heroes officially have been soldiers or police officers-guardians of order and role models for a disciplined and obedient citizenry. In the new competitive structure, a trade

46. On this emphasis, see an interview with the new Minister of Sport, Nikolai Ivanovich Rusak in *Fizkultura i sport* (August, 1989), p. 2.

union, factory, or even a cooperative will have a better chance of organizing a successful team. Heroes will be civilians, not warriors.

Professionalization may signify an end to bureaucratic interference in sport. It may also contribute to the independence and dignity of athletes, coaches, organizers, and journalists. Eventually, fans may enjoy more entertaining spectacles without regard to their political meanings. Sport's relative autonomy from politics could be enhanced. However, as the history of western sport has clearly shown, modern spectatorism represents a set of practices that can be every bit as dangerous and unhealthy as they may be liberating and healthy. Removing bureaucrats may be seen as a democratic step. Yet, it also creates opportunities for the elitism, special privileges, corruption, illegal gambling, exploitation of athletes, and irresponsibility of organizers associated with big-time professional sport under capitalism.

The struggle over professionalizing soccer is typical of many battles now raging in various areas of Soviet society. For all the faults of the old ways, it has become clear that not all new solutions are panaceas. Experiments can fail as well as succeed. It is difficult to say if the changes now occurring in Soviet sport will produce the desired results, or even what those desired results might be. Will Soviet soccer borrow uncritically from highly problematic western practices, or will a new socialist approach to big-time sport evolve in the USSR? In this sense, sport reflects the problems of perestroika. Sport will not be independent and autonomous, an oasis from politics. Rather, it will change in much the same ways the surrounding society changes, just as sport has done everywhere else on the planet.