

# The Training of Football Players in Brazil

Arlei Sander Damo<sup>1</sup>

Brazil's capacity to continuously foster football talents is internationally acknowledged. It is rightly said that Brazil is a bottomless *celeiro de craques* (storehouse of football stars). But this metaphor might be outdated, given the changes in professional training in recent decades. Rather than thinking of Brazil as a storehouse for supplying players ready to be recruited by the market, as the term *celeiro* suggests, what is seen in practice is a tightly articulated network of agencies and agents aimed at turning youngsters into professionals. Training centers, whether autonomous or linked to traditional football clubs, have a leading role in this process. Their success stems from the abundant supply of teenagers and children available to the networks specialized in recruiting and selecting these talents, the vital technologies for improving them, experts in the coordinated management of such processes and other factors.

Since some of the football players trained in Brazil are destined to the international market, the special characteristics of this flow should be highlighted. The sources used herein are non-ethnographic; they were published by the agencies involved in intermediating transactions or even by the specialized media. The data is part of an ongoing study aimed at understanding the flow of players and images across national borders.<sup>2</sup> The first part of this article lends support to the second, whose main source is ethnographic research on the training of players conducted between 2001 and 2005, in which

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Graduate Program in Social Anthropology, Federal University at Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> Since football players are at times treated as individuals and at other times as commodities, I use the terms "training" and "production" interchangeably. In describing the pedagogic investments made in specialized centers, the term 'training' is undoubtedly more convenient. However, in order to understand the logic of club directors, and especially of the players' agents, the term "production" is preferred.

I compared the models prevalent in Brazil and France.<sup>3</sup> In that study, I showed that in order to become a professional player, more is needed than a natural inclination towards the practice – what some call a “gift” and others “talent”. In other words, the Brazilian success in grooming and training players, notable for both its quantity and quality, is achieved thanks to a network of multiple and relatively well-articulated devices that go beyond the limits of the football field.

### **The market for Brazilian *pés-de-obra* <sup>4</sup>**

Football players have been crossing borders for quite some time. The very dissemination of football association, whose genesis dates back to mid nineteenth century Britain, was the work of amateur players. These were for the most part expert technicians working in railroads, electrical utilities, the textile industry, ports, banks and other businesses marking British commercial and industrial dominance at the time. In the case of Brazil, the promotion and popularization of football was also championed by the sons of local elites, especially those returning from studies in Europe, where they had learned to enjoy that sport.

There are, however, salient differences between the flux of professional players with which I am concerned here and that of 100 or 150 years ago. When amateur competition was predominant, player transfers were not mediated by money. The players did not – or were not supposed to – receive any pecuniary retribution for their sports performance. Progressively, amateurism lost momentum and players, especially those with less means, began to accept compensation for their time and effort on the field. In the 1930s, football enjoyed a well-established public following in many of Europe’s and South America’s large cities; so it became possible for clubs to charge football fans for their tickets. Part of the money collected was used to attract players from smaller, or even rival, clubs. This eroded the basis of

---

3 In order to avoid citing my own work, I refer the reader to my Ph.D. thesis (Damo, 2005) and to the book published thereafter (Damo, 2007) for a more extensive and better-documented discussion of virtually all arguments included here about the training of players.

4 The term *pés-de-obra*, a neologism in Portuguese, is derived from the common phrase *mãos-de-obra* (manpower, or labour power), substituting *mãos* (hands) for *pés* (feet) to highlight the labor relations involved in playing football.

amateurism. Many of its advocates, especially the more orthodox, abandoned football for other sports. There were even cases in which clubs banned football altogether, attempting to forestall what they saw as degeneration.

In Brazil, an agreement made in 1933 among clubs in the two leading cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo is considered the watershed in the transition from amateurism to professionalism. Part of the reason for the deal made by the football club directors was that the advocates of professionalism had finally achieved the hegemony towards which they had been struggling for over a decade. Another factor was the need felt by Brazilian clubs to protect themselves from ever-bolder Uruguayan and Argentinean competitors. They had already lured Domingos da Guia and Leônidas da Silva, top Brazilian stars at the time, with appealing and regularly-paid wages. Given the increasing threat of a drain of Brazilian stars, the strategy was to legalize the payment of football salaries in Brazil.

Clubs established criteria for regulating the transfer of athletes in order to prevent plundering by foreign clubs. The contracting party was responsible for paying compensation in case no agreement was reached with the player's-"owner" or manager. It was also established that an athlete could not play for more than one club at a time. In practice, this turned him into an immaterial asset of the club to which he was attached. The deal struck by the club officials allowed only a unilateral breach of contract by the employer. If the athlete abandoned the club because of a dispute, the club had no way to require his return. It could, however, withhold the player's release certificate. This would prevent him from signing a contract with another club. Inspired by practices in other countries, this apparently simple mechanism grew into the so-called "pass law" – which created a polemic that lingers until today, albeit now disguised under the new label "federative rights."<sup>5</sup>

Although the football market was still very incipient in the 1930's, the agreement among club officials turned athletes into commodities. They could be bought and sold according to the interests and purchasing power of the clubs. A form of barter, however, prevailed. A deal made in 1954 between two clubs from Porto Alegre, capital of Brazil's Southern most state, illustrates this point well. *Grêmio*, at the time an already solid and nationally-

---

5 The safeguard mechanisms were almost simultaneously adopted by all leagues wherever football was already consolidated during the 1930's. For further details on the Brazilian process, see Caldas (1990) and Pereira (2000).

known club, hired the fullback Airton from *Força e Luz*, a modest team sponsored by the public utility company that ran the city's streetcars. The payment included part of Gremio's old stadium bleachers. Airton, the player, was promptly nicknamed *pavilhão* [bleacher pavilion] by local, sportswriters, commentators and team supporters. Inclusion of second-hand sports material – balls, uniforms, etc – in transactions for athletes between top and smaller clubs was routine until not long ago. Also common was the direct trading of players – one for one, two for one, and so forth.

The current stage of player commoditization, which corresponds to the consolidation of football as a highly profitable spectacle, gradually crystallized after the 1950s. Europe's economic recovery was a decisive factor, but the transnational articulation of agencies for controlling and managing football, such as FIFA and its subsidiaries, was even more important for the development of a football expansion policy, driven by capitalist ethics.

Although the commoditization of athletes is our focus here, it is worth remarking that the consumption of goods associated with football is much broader. The current situation can be considered in terms of three large exchange circuits: a) a **market of symbolic goods**, composed of the spectacles in the field and their reproduction in the media, including daily news reports; b) a **market of players**, that is, a circuit of buying and selling athletes, as opposed to a market for players;; c) a **market of material goods**, involving the equipment used to play football by both laymen and professionals, especially fashions inspired by the sport.<sup>6</sup> In this new landscape, Brazilian athletes play a paramount role – quite differently from what happens with the sporting events and products developed here. In any case, even the burgeoning export of players is influenced by certain variables that are worth explaining.

Part of the market for *pés-de-obra* trained in Brazil is only accessible to top-layer football superstars. It is basically concentrated in clubs from the top leagues of England, Italy, Spain, Germany, and France – “the Hollywood of football,”<sup>7</sup> one might say. Conversely, athletes with a remote possibility of

---

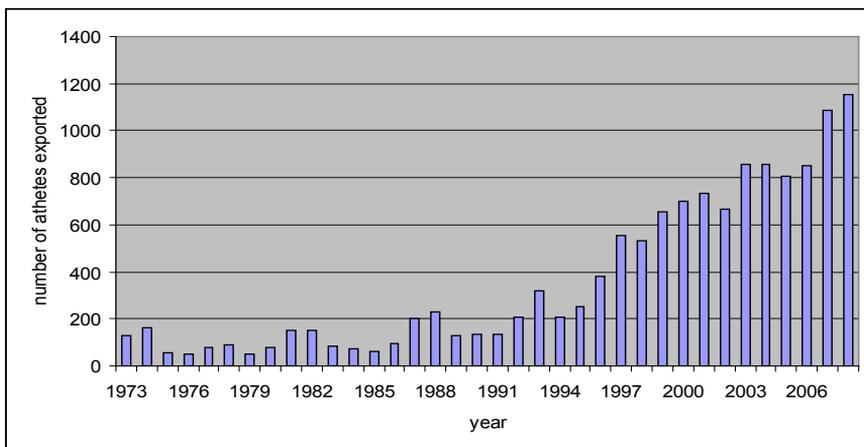
6 One example of sports apparel in which football has significantly contributed is shoes. “The great majority (80%) of sports shoes bought in the United States are now worn off the field, in daily life,” (Bensahel and Fontanel, 2001: 83).

7 There is an extensive range of arguments supporting this statement. As an illustration, it is worth recalling that, among the 20 best paid football players in the world according to France Football (n<sup>o</sup> 2978, 6/5/2003), five were born in Italy, four in England, two in France, two in Brazil, and seven in other countries. However, when the list was published, eight played in Italian clubs, six in English, five in

playing professionally in Brazil stand a chance of joining second-tier lower-division European clubs, perhaps even third or fourth division teams. These athletes are also hired by clubs from countries in which football is less competitive, such as in the Middle East and Asia. Opportunities are also found in all continents but Africa for athletes with intermediate-level football skills. Be that as it may, both for internationally-hailed as well as for less than star players alike, to play abroad is seen as a real and attractive possibility, a chance for financial independence, to help their families, prestige, experience or even for just plain adventure (Rial, 2008).

**Graph 1** shows the steady climb of the exodus of Brazilian players to foreign clubs starting in 1973, when nationwide competition began in the country. It also highlights the intensified migration during the 1990s. From the perspective of the football market,<sup>8</sup> two sets of factors had direct influence on the explosion of Brazilian exports: changes in the Brazilian legislation regarding professional athletes, and the consolidation of our stars' careers abroad.

Graph 1 – Exodus of Brazilian football players \*



\* The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF), which releases this data, lacks information prior to 1973 (Proni, 2000).

Spanish, and just one in a German club. Since then, there may have been some variation, but not outside this narrow group.

8 Global economic oscillations certainly influence the movement of athletes, but here I will emphasize factors related to changes within the football sector itself. In fact, the steep rise of this exodus in 1993 (from 1992 to 1993 there was a 57% rise in transactions) was followed by a retrocess (in 1994 virtually the same number of athletes was exported) that corresponds to the implementation of the *Real* currency, when the Brazilian economy showed its best results in the 1990s.

In just one decade, Brazilian sports legislation underwent two substantial reforms. The first one, known as the “Zico Law,” was enacted in 1993; the other, the “Pelé Law,” in 1998.<sup>9</sup> Both initiatives were marked by a neo-liberal bias common to a time in which major and polemic privatizations were taking place in Brazil in the energy and telecommunications sectors. Their announced goal was to make athletes less dependent on club officials by granting them autonomy to manage their own careers. The publicity around these debates led to the conclusion that the “pass law” would be overthrown, and players would be set free, as had happened with slaves in Brazil in the late nineteenth century.

Faced with such compelling arguments, officials at the traditional clubs had little room for maneuver. In the adjustments that followed, some had better vision than others. Those club directors who realized that the Pelé Law, more radical than the Zico Law, could be bypassed through longer contracts (of up to five years, as allowed by legislation) fared better. Foreign clubs continued their intensive luring of Brazilian players but, except for some cases where club directors were not careful enough, they had to pay for the breach of contract.

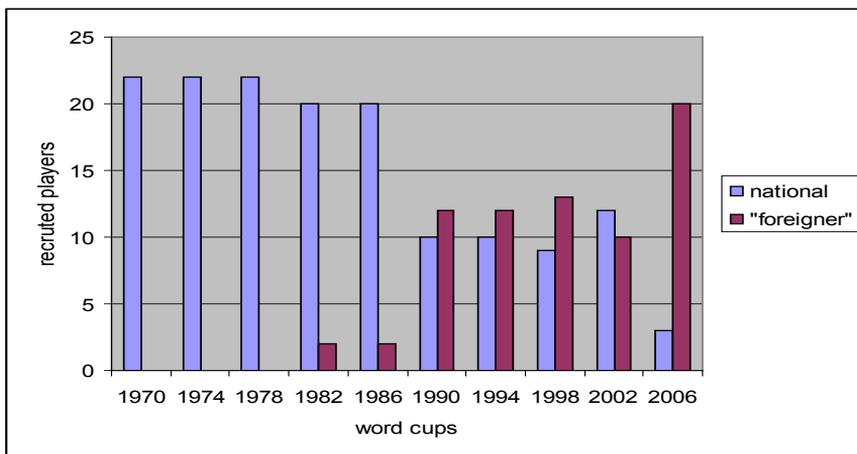
Within a decade, virtually all clubs adapted to the new rules and the situation basically returned to the where it had been before. Athletes, hitherto hostages to club directors, now became dependent on so-called agents, a peculiar type of career manager who handled their professional contracts, investments, and even their private lives. Also known as *empresários* (a combination of middlemen and managers), these new actors in the football arena are often former players, former club officials and maverick entrepreneurs of all kinds. Their dubious reputation is widely questioned by professionals working in player training, who dismiss them as “vultures,” “pimps,” “parasites,” “mercenaries,” and other similar harsh terms. These agents are largely responsible for the increase of Brazilian exports as they receive hefty bonuses for these transactions. Their profits are, therefore, proportional to athlete turnover in the market – exactly the opposite of what club supporters want.

---

9 The names were inspired by the respective Brazilian Sports Ministers at the time these changes were enacted into law. Pelé needs no introduction, as he is internationally recognized as one of the best players of the twentieth century. Zico became famous on Rio’s Flamengo club, on the Brazilian national team and in Japan, where he is considered a football pioneer.

On the other hand, the opening and consolidation of the international market was largely due to the action of a select group of pioneers. **Graph 2** shows the distribution of Brazilian athletes summoned to World Cups, according to the clubs for which they played at the time – whether these clubs are Brazilian or not. Brazilian players abroad were first called to the National Team for the 1982 World Cup, and they remained a minority in the 1986 Cup. However, four years later, there was a clear shift in perspective, as the percentage of “foreigners” for the first time overtook that of “nationals” on the Brazilian Team.<sup>10</sup>

Graph 2 – Composition of the Brazilian National Team in terms of players recruited from domestic and foreign clubs



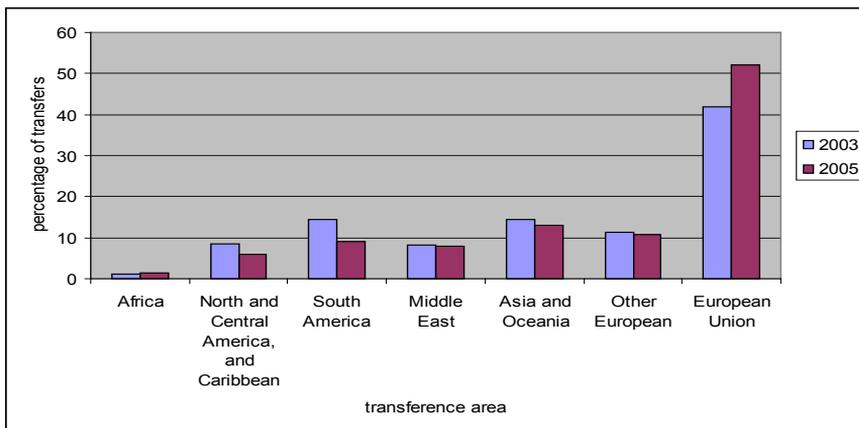
**Graph 2** suggests an abrupt shift at the time of the 1990 World Cup held in Italy, but the context should be well understood. Throughout the 1980s, Brazilian athletes faced difficulties adapting abroad, and it was not rare for stars to return home after one or two seasons outside Brazil. Foreign clubs themselves took charge of providing the conditions needed for adaptation – including the grouping of several athletes from a common nationality. A director of Olympique Lyonnais whom I talked to during my ethnography in France in 2003-2004 confirmed that athletes already established in the club were consulted regarding newly-hired players (at the time there were four Brazilians in Lyon), since they were expected to play a decisive role in the adaptation of newcomers. This and other strategies contributed to ease adaptation to food, climate, the city, distance from family and, above all, the idiom (Rial, 2008).

10 For further details about the protest of Brazilian’s supporters regarding the “foreign” players on the National Team around the 1990s, see Guedes (2006).

It is worth noting that the first two Brazilian stars to win the much-coveted annual awards offered by FIFA and the newspaper *France Football*, Romário and Ronaldo Nazário, did so during the 1990s. Sócrates and Zico, two icons from the previous generation, had irregular careers on European clubs, and they were never nominated for the *France Football* award, which has existed since 1956.

From 2003 on, the CBF (Brazilian Football Confederation) began issuing an annual report of player transfers. This allows mapping the destination of Brazilian footballers with greater precision.<sup>11</sup> **Graph 3** clearly indicates the outflow of Brazilians to Europe. The transfer of athletes to the “European Union” and “Other Europeans” combined account for over 63% of all transfers. Between 2003 and 2006 there was even an increase in this market, with transfers to EU member countries growing almost 69%.

**Graph 3 – Foreign Markets for Brazilian Footballers**



Another important aspect of the database underlying **Graph 3** is that in 2008 Brazil exported players to all European countries, except Georgia and Ireland. In contrast, the flux towards Africa is inexpressive, comprising little more than 1% of Brazilian transactions. In addition, there was no

<sup>11</sup> CBF makes public the “transfers” from Brazilian to foreign clubs, some of which involve players with other nationalities, especially South-Americans who are repatriated by Brazilian clubs or transferred to other countries. In the data with which I have been working there is no discrimination vis-à-vis such cases, which, in thesis, do not amount to an “exodus of Brazilians.” However, this bias in the sample does not harm my interpretation here, since it emphasizes trends without a strict statistical concern. Moreover, the share of non-Brazilians in the transfers managed by CBF does not amount to 5% of the total, according to a preliminary inquiry.

change between 2003 and 2008. In 2008, Portugal was the gateway for more than one third of the players who left Brazil for the European Union – a 48% increase over 2003.<sup>12</sup> Intimacy with the Portuguese language, which makes Portugal the chief destination of Brazilian migrants to Europe, is certainly one of the reasons for the intense flow of football players. In 2001, a Brazilian Congressional Inquiry (*CPI da Nike*)<sup>11</sup> disclosed a number irregularities among Brazilian athletes playing in Europe (many of them in Portugal); it would not be surprising if some of the same subterfuges still persist including false passports, fake marriages, etc.<sup>13</sup>

To grasp the importance of the production of Brazilian *pés-de-obra*, it is important to look into not only the quantity and geographic range of the transfers, but also the quality of such production. Collating the nationalities of the athletes from 58 clubs playing in top leagues during the 2007-8 season in the “Hollywood of football”, reveals that Brazil is the main foreign supplier of footballers for that market. Among players recruited outside their native country – who include, for instance, Frenchmen playing in Italy and Spaniards defending British clubs – Brazilians appear first, comprising 11% of all “non-nationals.” When only players from outside the European Union are considered – 763 of the 2,976 sample – this percentage rises to 18.60%, and further climbs to 23.2% when only those recruited from outside the European continent are considered. In other words, virtually one fourth of all non-European players in the “Hollywood of football” hold Brazilian citizenship. Moreover, starting in 1991 – when FIFA began awarding the year’s best football player prize – Brazilians have won eight of the trophies, only two fewer than the athletes from all other nationalities combined. As for the *Ballon d’Or*, which has been awarded by France Football since 1956, Brazilians have received five, the first by Ronaldo Nazário in 1997. The regularity of these awards have crystallized the prestige of Brazilian footballers’ in Europe and strongly influences the imagination of young players training in Brazil.

---

12 Other major employers in the European Union in 2008 included: Germany, which accounted for 9.45% of the Brazilian players; Italy, 6.63%; Sweden, 7.49%; Spain, 5.34%; and Greece, 5.21%. These five countries, together with Portugal, accounted for over 70% of Brazilian exports to the EU.

13 The Parliamentary Investigative Committee (CPI) was nicknamed the *CPI da Nike* because one of its goals was to investigate that multinational’s interference within CBF. It was sparked by the events involving star footballer Ronaldo Nazário right before the 1998 World Cup final match (Rebello and Torres, 2001).

## The Multifaceted “Brazilian way” of Producing Football Players

Training of footballers is the stage following the acquisition of basic elementary techniques, which in Brazil takes place in streets, squares, parks and yards, vacant lots – that is, outside sports and educational institutions. This stage precedes professional football activity. Training is carried out in specialized centers, usually pertaining to CBF-affiliated clubs. It comprises a variable set of methods and facilities to convert children and adolescents of acknowledged talent into ready professionals. These facilities include: physical spaces called training centers, with their supporting infrastructure (dormitories, cafeterias, training fields, among others); techniques for recruiting and selecting precocious talents, the sophistication of which tends to increase with market demand; organizational work principles, articulated according to the economic investments and political interests of clubs and companies; technologies for honing playing skills, preparing for matches and professional practice, gauged according to the availability and demands from clubs; experts, former players and or professionals who are college educated; the relationship networks orbiting around training athletes; and legal codes resulting from deals between the training centers or imposed by the state aiming at disciplining (or not) procedures for the legal care of minors. In sum, a wide range of heterogeneous elements define the procedures and singularity of this process. Articulated from distinct logics, these devices fulfill the strategic function of promoting the footballer market according to the demands of club teams.

In order to become a professional footballer today, around 5,000 hours of training, spanning approximately 10 years, are needed. Investments are made directly to the body through disciplined, strenuous and monotonous routines. The targets are children and adolescents, many of whom come from the lower social classes. They are invested with representations of masculinity that make them suitable to the challenges exacted by football, on and off the playing fields. Their career effectively starts – and sometimes ends – in the training centers. This contrasts sharply with trends prevalent until a few decades ago, when the migration of athletes from amateur to professional football was common. It is not possible to understand the reasons adolescents submit themselves to control, by football capital, to the degree of intensity and broad commitment that the profession demands, without considering that they are induced from the beginning to think of themselves as

skilled and talented potential players.<sup>14</sup>

In order to arrange the diversity of training devices probed during ethnographic fieldwork (Damo, 2005), I came up with a typology outlining three logics or framings, defined as endogenous, exogenous, and hybrid. This typology seeks to understand aspects more narrowly focused on football dynamics. This is the case, for instance, of pressures for clubs to train professionals to be emotionally empathic with their sponsors, or of the relationship among the clubs that produce, intermediate, and consume footballers.

**Endogenous training** is carried out by clubs with the goal of meeting their own professional demands. This endogenous perspective may be an economic strategy for reducing costs associated with assembling the club's main group of players. For this to happen, it is necessary to have a supply of talents in enough quantity and quality to offset the investments made, that is, for making the investment in young talents more profitable than the acquisition of professionals available in the market. An endogenous production program can also be activated as a political strategy to meet demands by supporters wishing to see in the main team athletes engaged in the club since an early age. Fans believe that, in this way, athletes will become as attached to the club as they themselves are.

From an empirical standpoint, it is difficult, in the current stage of football commoditization, to find a club that exclusively follows the endogenous model. Of the cases found in the field, the best example is not Brazilian (as will be seen below, other models are dominant in Brazil). This best example is Bilbao's Athletic Club, from Spain, which refuses to recruit non-Basque players in the market. Correspondingly, it maintains heavy investments in its own production of players. In other words, Athletic's training center primarily meets a symbolic need, a political demand by its supporters. They surely would not mind if the club would recruit athletes trained somewhere else as long as they were Basque or Basque-descendants, but Athletic has developed various strategies for optimizing its own production. According to the

---

14 The "gift" and similar "native" representations, which are at the origin of all investments, add quite particular social and cultural hues to the training process. The fact that natural talent is seen as the root of success and that, as a received gift, it does not belong completely to the players, gives money (a product of the gift) a unique meaning. That is why it is redistributed throughout the relationship networks in which athletes are enmeshed – among relatives, friends, and other allies (Damo, 2008).

creators of this project, centered at the Lezama training center, no Basque football talent can be wasted. This is a necessary condition for Athletic to remain at the top of Spanish football without changing its policy for player recruiting, one which runs against (or perhaps at the vanguard?) of globalization.

**Exogenous training** is the reverse process, that of training athletes with an eye on the market. It is a burgeoning logic, especially in Brazil and other peripheral countries, bolstered by the changes undergone by the spectacle of football following the increase of media interest and, consequently, economic interest. The RS Futebol Clube (RS Football Club, henceforth, RS FC) is a prototype very close to the ideal model of exogenous production. This club, located in the Rio Grande do Sul State in Southern Brazil, was, at the time my inquiry was being carried out, a company called Talento Desportivo (Sports Talent S/A, henceforth, Talento S/A). Talento S/A was an enterprise whose legal status had been made possible by the changes in Brazilian sport legislation implemented by the aforementioned Zico Law. In fact, Zico himself founded a club-company on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, but the project never attained the expected results. Different from other training centers working from this perspective, Talento S/A overtly acknowledged its market vocation.<sup>15</sup>

RS FC has no supporters. It exists as the basis of a team which is targeted towards exogenous production – the opposite of Athletic. The Basque club uses training as a means to fulfill supporters' demands, convinced as they are that the club exists to celebrate Basque identity. In contrast, production geared towards the market, such as that of Talento S/A, reverses the positions. Here, it is the club which becomes a necessary means for the enterprise's success, since FIFA does not grant credentials to teams that are not attached to clubs. Talento S/A had excellent facilities, providing young players in their training centers with an infra-structure equivalent to that of major Brazilian clubs. This is not the case of other centers I had the opportunity to visit. At those, athletes being trained were lodged in precarious dormitories or even on bleachers in obsolete stadiums owned by clubs with which the players' agents, eager for immediate profit, made deals.

---

<sup>15</sup> The RS FC was founded in 01/01/2001 – the date, I was told by one of its directors, was a “well planned marketing strategy.” The club's colors are yellow, green, and red, the same as those of the Rio Grande do Sul state flag, and its name, known in the football universe just as “RS,” matches the state's acronym to create an attachment in the minds of its clients. The goal, according to this director, is to share “the positive image of Rio Grande do Sul, associated with serenity, hard work, and competence.”

Meanwhile, training from a **hybrid perspective** combines the premises of endogenous and exogenous training according to circumstance. Players are produced to meet supporters' demands, but if the right market opportunity arises, they are promptly sold.<sup>16</sup> In the hybrid model, club officials enjoy broad latitude for managing production according to the club's interests – and, not rarely, their own, since they often engage in partnerships with players' agents. This training logic is no doubt the most common in Brazil, especially at traditional clubs. Their supporters, like those of Bilbao Athletic, demand that the clubs train athletes affectively identified with the club, who play not only for money. In other words, supporters demand from professionals an attachment characteristic of amateurism (in the positive sense of the term), one which is attributed to those who give themselves body and soul to a cause.

However, these same supporters seem to have resigned themselves to the idea that their idols have to be sold to secure the club's financial health. In this context, the most respected club directors are not those who refuse to sell a star, but those who do so to the club's greater advantage. It has become common to commercialize athletes, as shown by the example of one successful Brazilian director. His club invests boldly in its training center, in perfect consonance with the hybrid perspective. When asked by a journalist about the club's financial situation, the director replied that it was not something to worry about, even with the recurrent deficits. “[Our] situation [is] comfortable because we still have part of Nilmar's funds to receive, we have Mahicon Librelato's [killed in a car accident] life insurance of 6 million reais, besides the petition to sell Lúcio, for one million dollars [...]. The deficit will persist [...] and we'll have to keep selling one player per year. Farther ahead, we'll have to sell Chiquinho, Rodrigo Paulista, Sobis, Diego, Granja, Edinho, Tinga, Alex. All of them are part of our assets.” (*Zero Hora* newspaper, Jan. 30, 2005, p. 56).

As previously remarked, each of the three strategies seek to organize the diversity of football's logics. Nevertheless, training centers are situated in time and space, and are therefore affected by economic crises, government legislation and even moral principles. After all, it is worth remembering that

---

<sup>16</sup> According to the company Pelé Sport e Marketing (Rebello and Torres, 2001:21), the selling of players accounts today for around 20% of the revenue of Brazil's premier league clubs.

the training process is targeted at children and adolescents, about whom there is great concern in Western societies. I have repeatedly argued that part of the success of Brazilian footballer output stems from the dovetailing of an abundant supply of talented kids with the state's neglect of school training, which is ranked as a second or third priority at most training centers.<sup>17</sup> If all those who are recruited to these centers eventually became professionals, it would not be so dramatic. However, only a minority becomes effectively successful, while most are discarded during the process as a kind of residue. The Brazilian production of football players is indeed impressive in terms of both quantity and quality, as the first part of this paper shows, but this success is not without contradictions.

In order to understand the drama of boys who are dropped halfway through the professionalization process – those whose dreams seem to come true when they join a training center, and are then caught by surprise when they are turned down – I will compare the training models of Brazil and France. I will show how the latter provides a security net much better adapted to the fact that the football player profession does not allow for reconversion.

It is difficult to understand the differences between “Brazilian” and “French” style training, without analyzing the details of the respective federal government control (or lack thereof) over FIFA's subsidiaries. The “système de formation à la française” (French training system), the concrete outcomes of which were made visible when France won the football gold medal at the Los Angeles Olympics (1984), European Cups (1984 and 2000) and the 1998 World Cup, among others, can be summed up as the product of changes dating back to the 1970s. The extensive bibliography on the topic takes *la Charte du football* (The Football Charter), signed in 1973, as the symbolic landmark of this process. “La Charte” dealt basically with the status of the professional football player – something comparable, at the time, to Brazilian Law number 6.354, of 1976.<sup>18</sup> It also legitimated the strategic role of INF, *L'Institut national du football* (National Football Institute), and outlined the functions of the FFF, *Fédération Française de Football* (French Football Federation) as national administrator of the sport, in a kind of partnership with the *Ministère de la*

---

17 It should be recalled that Brazil is the most populous country in which football is not only the most popular, but indeed the hegemonic, sport among males.

18 Law n° 6.354, about the labor relations of professional athletes, provided the basis for the “Zico Law” and the “Pelé Law.” See Melo Filho (2000: 364-72).

*Jeunesse* (Ministry of Youth). According to Slimani (2002), changes triggered in the 1970s spoke to two different, but complementary, kinds of interests: a) to enhance the national football team's performance and; b) to restore federal authority within the football sector.

The INF, established in 1972 and effectively placed in operation two years later, was a technology incubator strategically overseen by the *Secrétariat d'Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports* (State Secretariat of Youth and Sports), financially supported by FFF and the *Groupement du Football Professionnel* (The Professional Football Association, in charge of managing professional football). According to Tournier and Rethacker, "the INF should respond to three basic missions: to train young professionals; to prepare future professionals for an eventual reconversion; and to contribute, by means of its research and experience, to the technical enhancement of French football" (1999, p. 27). INF, based in Vichy and later transferred to Clairefontaine where it would be closer to FFF's training center, could not keep up with the training demand from all professional clubs. As a result, it began to invest in the training of instructors and in a type of textbook for standardizing the basic elements of training (number of hours, activity cycles, methodology, teaching ethics, etc). Concrete results did not emerge immediately.

"La Chart," and particularly the INF, shaped a model which is, if not completely homogeneous, at least well integrated. In all training centers – and currently, in pre-training centers too – within France, the same kind of degree is required from all instructors. Likewise, norms regulating the center are, from the standpoint of club rights and duties, provided by "general provisions regarding relations between clubs and the league."<sup>19</sup> These are directly overseen by the *Ligue de Football Professionnel* (Professional Football League) – a club association whose power is delegated by FFF for organizing the premier and second league tournaments – and, from a distance, by FFF and the French state itself. The term "système de formation à la française" can therefore be reasonably employed, even though practice, as anywhere else, is not always consistent with legislation (Slimani, 2000; 2002).

Even after having visited several centers, it is not easy to assess whether the centralization of training within departments and, in the case of more

---

19 The complete set of rules for the training centers, including the administrative statute of players and instructors can be found on <<http://www.footpro.fr/reglements>> Accessed: Aug 20th, 2004.

coveted diplomas, in Clairefontaine (the FFF training center), makes it more standardized than in Brazil, where training is noticeably heterogeneous. In Brazil, there are no regulations for professionals working in training centers. There is, in fact, sharp competition between those holding a university degree in physical education and former players who bear practical knowledge derived from experience accumulated during their own careers. Each has won a round so far.

Technically, each Brazilian coach follows his own routine. This is even an element of status, for instance, when one says “to train/to play Felipão’s way” (Toledo, 2002: 149-57). Those who do not have a unique pedagogy are continuously ridiculed, like a witch who copies others’ tricks lacking originality and prestige. A contrast is therefore clear between the practices of those who are academically trained and those who are not. More than a habitus incorporated during higher education, the pedagogy of the graduates is the object of permanent debate with former professional players, from whom they have usurped a share of the labor market. This is not the case in France – establishing another major difference. There, given a training system concerned since the 70’s with the reconversion of athletes, exclusivity in this market was guaranteed to former professionals. In France, therefore, they are not bothered by STAPS – professionals with a university degree equivalent to that of physical education teachers.

But it is particularly with regards to the importance of school training that the Brazilian and French style differ. In the “système de formation à la française,” the axis that the *Charte* previously referred to as “restoring federal authority within the football sector,” explains the link between formal education and sport training. It would not be fair to say that Brazilian clubs have no concern with complementary training; but it tends to be thought of as a way of optimizing the benefits to the institution itself. I had the opportunity to attend, together with a group of informants (athletes aged around sixteen and their instructors), a class on sexuality sponsored by the Brazilian branch of Scherring. The directors explained that sexually transmitted diseases could keep the boys away from training, and that a premature pregnancy could destabilize them. Either situation would bring losses to the club. In another event, a mini-conference, the executive director of another club with an established tradition in training, highlighted in the opening lines of his speech that training athletes would receive private English classes. This

would make future transfers easier, perhaps with consequences even on the price to be paid for the player.

However, there is no doubt that Brazilian training's chief deficiencies reside in schooling. The boys' aversion to school classrooms is remarkable. This could hark back to either their origin in the lower social classes (for whom school is far from a privileged institution) and or to the fact that the focus on practical activities undermines and sometimes obliterates the bodily discipline demanded in school. During 2001 and 2002, Porto Alegre's Internacional, a club at which I carried out a great deal of my ethnography in Brazil, established a partnership with a private school located directly in front of their stadium (Beira-Rio), 100 meters from the hostel where the boys were lodged. According to the school administration, the result was disastrous. Except for two youngsters, all of them (about one hundred) failed. Foreseeing the tragedy, Internacional's social worker relocated them to more lenient public schools. The strategy followed by all of them, however, was to abandon the regular courses and later attend a kind of high school equivalency course known as a *supletivo*. Even so, many still faced problems. Diego, a former athlete discharged during the first junior year, complained: "there is no way I could study! I would leave home at 8am to start training by 9am. I trained until noon, and sometimes until the afternoon – at least three shifts per week. At the end of the day, I was worn out. Adult school was in the evening, and I had to catch the train and then ride a bus. I would be home by 11pm. There was no way I could handle it, so I only made it until the eighth grade and then I quit."

Without complementary training, formally in school or otherwise, there is little opportunity for preparing athletes to amass non-football-related capital. Professionals travel a lot, and this helps them broaden their intellectual horizon. But this is the privilege of a select group, for whom school training might not really make a difference. My impression of the younger boys among whom I conducted my ethnography is that they had greater emotional maturity than other adolescents their age. This might relate to the experiences they engage in while facing team supporters or even in intra-group competition. However, as far as general knowledge is concerned, it was the boys themselves who made fun of each others' ignorance. Not by chance, cases are frequent of players who deliver the entire management of their lives to their agents, as occurred years ago with club officials.

The main advantage of the freedom provided by the “Brazilian style” of training is to the clubs and agents/*empresários* themselves. Without the need to reconcile the football agenda with schooling, junior athletes (ages 15 to 17) are available virtually full time for training. What difference does it make? The statement by Luiz Fradua Uriondo, Bilbao’s Athletic technical director, is exemplary: “it is hard to train players here [...]. You cannot demand much [...] because football is not their sole option. Fortunately, our society provides other chances. [...] They are not willing to just do anything, and if what we offer does not please them, they’ll quit football. Perhaps in Brazil it’s not like that.” (Bilbao, Jan, 2004).

Indeed, it is not – although one should not romanticize the training system in France or anywhere else in Europe. It should never be forgotten that the successful “Brazilian style” of production, with its systematic turnover of exceptional talents, is based on premises that do not include any reparation for those who are discarded by the system itself. Faced with the drama of many youth victimized by competition or, worse, by injuries that prevent them from continuing with their professional training, all my informants – from the youngsters themselves to their instructors, including club officials and even agents –resigned themselves to shrugging off that this is how the football world is, period. To survive in it is a heroic act constantly affirmed and reaffirmed. The burden is a little lighter for those endowed with exceptional talent, and particularly for those with economic and emotional support from relatives. Nevertheless, the awareness that football is a “life opportunity” pervades the experiences of almost all of them, especially those whose possibilities for social mobility are knowingly remote in Brazil. Within this context, an integral engagement with the rules of the game – the social game – accompanied by continuous flirting with alienation and subjugation, is not surprising.

## Conclusion

The professionalization of footballers has paralleled footballs rise as a media and entertainment spectacle throughout the twentieth century and, accordingly, the constitution of an engaged public. The steady rise in the frequency of matches has pushed for the establishment of a routine with exclusive fulltime dedication by athletes, who in return earn compatible pay.

In Brazil, the playing schedule has gradually expanded. Originally limited to municipal competitions (until the 1920s), they became progressively regional and then national (during the 1970s). Football competition is now continental in scope for the top Brazilian clubs. Demands on professional players have changed, and so have their profiles. Attachment to clubs has changed from merely affective to contractual, legal, and remunerative. Time management has come to be guided by efficiency and performance criteria, as in any business. The peculiarity is that football performances are seen in Brazil as symbolic goods.

Demands from the public have also changed, pushing for further physical, technical and emotional qualification of athletes. Specialized centers where new footballers can be trained have been created to meet these demands. The changes have been triggered in part by football itself, but it is vital to see them within the overall context of the strong influence of the media and profits on almost all social spheres throughout the twentieth century. The globalization of innumerable kinds of goods – including of people who, like the football players, are continuously treated as commodities – challenges national borders and cultural values. It is hard to escape this process, but it is possible to define a strategic stance. The way that training footballers in Brazil is organized is no exception; rather, it makes explicit the various facets and endless contradictions in the way we collectively think of ourselves.

The technical reputation of Brazilian players makes them coveted by foreigners. However, besides being good and skillful athletes, they are also cheap, and that is why they are drained abroad in such a large-scale exodus. A set of elements explains the low cost of footballers produced in Brazil. It is not just a matter of currency rates – euros and dollars versus reais – or of the greater purchasing power of European consumers, which resonates in a higher paying capacity of clubs from the Old Continent, or even from other places in the world. It is about the *laissez faire* attitude or simple negligence of national entities – from clubs to federations, including the Brazilian State itself – in relation to production and training, which grants freedom of action to institutions and agents narrowly focused on immediate profits. Considerable investments are made in young men for a profession which is no longer expanding, and which does not take into account social and economic adaptation and does not provide any parallel complementary training.

In this overall context, Brazilian boys can be de-territorialized according

to the strategies of clubs and agents/*empresários*; submitted to extenuated training which makes other activities unfeasible (in contrast to the French production, which combines schooling and sport training); recruited and discharged from training/production centers according to the interests of these and so many other, more or less naturalized procedures. With an extraordinary supply of exceptionally talented players and virtually no legal, ethical, or cultural constraints to their manipulation, Brazil could not but become a breeding-ground or “storehouse of stars.” I do not believe that athletes in training should be treated as victims of this process, much less as culprits. They are part of the process, and make their moves according to the strategies made available to them.

### **Bibliographical References**

- BENSAHEL, Liliane & FONTANEL, Jacques. 2001. *Réflexions sur l'économie du sport*. Saint-Martin-d'Hères: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- CALDAS, Waldenir. 1990. *O Pontapé Inicial: memória do futebol brasileiro*. São Paulo: Ibrasa.
- DAMO, Arlei. 2005. *Do dom à profissão: uma etnografia do futebol de espetáculo a partir da formação de jogadores no Brasil e na França*. Tese de doutorado, Porto Alegre, UFRGS/PPGAS (Disponível no site <http://www.biblioteca.ufrgs.br/Bibliotecadigital>).
- DAMO, Arlei. 2005. *Do dom à profissão: a formação de futebolistas no Brasil e na França*. São Paulo: Hucitec.
- DAMO, Arlei. 2005. “Dom, amor e dinheiro no futebol de espetáculo”. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 66(23): 139-150.
- GUEDES, Simoni. 2006. “Os europeus do futebol brasileiro ou como a ‘pátria de chuteiras’ enfrenta a ameaça do mercado”. In: E. Gastaldo and S. Guedes (orgs.), *Nações em Campo: Copa do Mundo e Identidade nacional*. Niterói-RJ: Intertexto. pp. 73-86.
- PEREIRA, Leonardo. 2000. *Footballmania: uma história social do futebol*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova.
- PRONI, Marcelo. 2000. *A Metamorfose do Futebol*. Campinas: Editora UNICAMP.
- REBELO, Aldo & TORRES, Silvio. 2001. *CBF-NIKE*. São Paulo: Casa Amarela.
- RIAL, Carmen. 2008. “Rodar: A circulação dos jogadores de futebol

- brasileiros no exterior”. *Horizontes Antropológicos*, 30: 21-66.
- SLIMANI, Hassen. 2000. *La professionnalisation du football français: un modèle de dénégation*. Thèse de doctorat, Nantes, Droit et Sociologie.
- SLIMANI, Hassen. 2002. “Le système de formation à la française”. *Panoramiques*, 61: 78-84.
- TOLEDO, Luiz Henrique de. 2002. *Lógicas no Futebol*. São Paulo: Hucitec/FAPESP.