



A letter to the Editor-in-Chief

Robby Houben¹

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Dear Editor,

In your maiden editorial for the International Sports Law Journal in 2016,¹ you stressed that you and your new Editorial Board “will work hard to maintain the journal’s relevance to a broad audience and invite academics and practitioners to submit contributions on all subjects that relate to law and sports. We also welcome organisers of sports law conferences, seminars and workshops to submit proposals for special issues or sections of the ISLJ.”

We write you this letter for two reasons.

Firstly, along with many other sports law enthusiasts, we want to thank you sincerely for your invaluable efforts to contribute to the academic debate about international sports law.

Secondly, we found your call inspiring and would like to bring to your—and the readers of the International Sports Law Journal’s—attention the Club Brugge Chair.

The Club Brugge Chair exists within the Faculty of Law of the University of Antwerp in Belgium. It was founded in December 2019. The Chair provides a forum for independent academic research into good governance of professional football. We focus on external legislation and regulation and on internal governance of professional football clubs. The Chair is fully funded by Club Brugge, one of Belgium’s top professional football clubs. The cooperation between a football club and a university is thrilling: it assures first-hand access to the world of football, whilst independence of the research is assured through sufficient safeguards.

Pursuing its mission, on 14 October 2020 the Club Brugge Chair organized a first international congress on the contemporary legal and economic challenges for football enterprises. The speakers² discussed a number of current challenges in the professional football industry, varying from fundamental issues in the organizational structure of

the football governing bodies to more specific matters in relation to financial fair play and the unique characteristics of sports arbitration proceedings.

One of the key takeaways of the congress was that whereas football clubs take center stage in modern day professional football, they are represented in football’s governing bodies only through a stakeholder-inclusive approach. This is of course not a new observation, but it is striking to see that football governing bodies governance models have evolved very little since the distant past wherein football between nations was more important than football between clubs. This anachronism leads to various conflicts of interests between clubs and football’s governing bodies, such as overcrowded match calendars.

From a more fundamental perspective, and supported amongst others by a cry out for level playing fields in the domain of football licensing and football intermediaries regulation, the question arises whether football governing bodies and the football pyramid’s position as a whole should not be revisited entirely, with a view to enhancing overall good governance of professional football. On the margins of this, a push towards further optimization of governance of professional football is probably inevitable taking into account the increased attention of North American sports investment funds and private equity finding its way to the European sports market, lured among others by lucrative, but capital-intensive media rights deals.

All presentations held at the October 2020 conference of the Club Brugge Chair can be found online via the following link: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/chairs/club-brugge-chair/conferences/>. They can be accessed free of charge and are intended to stimulate further thinking about enhancing football club related governance.

¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40318-017-0109-4>.

² David Frommer (Advisor to ECA SLT covering External Relations and Strategic Matters), Vincent Mannaert (CEO of Club Brugge), François Godard (Senior Media & Telecoms Analyst of Enders Analysis), Hannes D’Hoop (legal counsel of Club Brugge), Wouter Lambrecht (legal counsel of FC Barcelona), Nick De Marco QC (Barrister at Blackstone Chambers), AJ Swoboda (Managing Director Americas of 21st Club).

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We are planning to organize similar congresses soon and we will make sure to keep you and your readers informed. If there are readers who wish to contribute to one of our congresses, please drop us an e-mail.

If we read your maiden editorial correctly, we are travelling in the same direction—and, therefore, we look forward to embarking on a journey towards further professionalization of sports and football clubs, in the same vein as the International Sports Law Journal is committed to further developing critical thinking on international sports law in general.

Yours sincerely,
Robby Houben,³ Carl Clottens⁴ and Steve Nuyts⁵

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