

# Chapter 12

## Football in Singapore: A Global, Historical, and Social Phenomenon

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the development of association football as a national phenomenon in Singapore with respect to its wider social and historical background. Asia's and Singapore's contact with Western sport has to be understood in relation to a process of both appreciation for and cultural resistance to it. The discussion looks at football's development and associated problems in the country at a historical and social angle, and from the three perspectives of "globalization," "individual level," and "national society level," with the hope of providing a concise but inclusive analysis of the de facto "national sport" in Singapore. From the perspective of sport management, this chapter intends to make readers appreciate the notion that over more than 100 years of historical process football has developed into a popular cultural phenomenon in the country: an icon that is worthy of protection and promotion for its potential social and commercial benefits.*

### INTRODUCTION

This article aimed at discussing the development of association football as a social and national phenomenon in Singapore from both a historical and social perspective, in relation to a larger international setting. In view of its rationale related to both sport management and heritage, the article attempted to impress readers of the fact that football is culturally embedded in Singapore and therefore possesses a unique symbolic status, which warrants the sport to be promoted and better managed so

as to maintain its position as a traditional emblem in the country. The article also endeavoured to rationalize the fact that football is a worldwide phenomenon as well, and this global element of football and sport in general arguably offers a basis upon which its development takes place in Singapore. In relation to sport management, this will impress upon readers that Singaporeans' favourite sport is also shared by people in Asia and the world, which therefore makes football a critical part of the sport industry in the region. This would imply that promoting and managing

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the sport should consider its vast potential in terms of both commerce and the forging of solidarity among Asians due to its huge popularity.

In order to meet these objectives, the article will begin with illustrating the origin of sport in Asia, which serves as a foundational platform for the development of football in Singapore. Following that, the development of football in Singapore shall be discussed from a historical and social angle using various perspectives.

## **1. THE ORIGIN OF SPORT IN ASIA AND SINGAPORE**

The development in the sport of football entails an evolutionary process which can be understood within a universal historical framework involving the world, Asia and the West. In order to provide a holistic understanding of its development processes, it is therefore important to begin with appreciating the macro-level background related to the sporting world.

The world of humanity is characterized by constant flux and change. Human civilization is primarily driven by the dynamic processes of movement, engagement and evolution- a powerful process which involves resistance, conflict, and adaptation of cultural values, norms and conduct. The process very much depends upon the workings in the minds and actions of people who ultimately decide the developmental direction and outcome of any human cultural phenomenon.

Human culture cannot be easily defined in one or two expressions as it encompasses a broad range of elements including religion, belief, politics, economics, arts, and even sport. Indeed human beings have experienced conflict, war and peace over some of these cultural elements in the course of civilisational processes. Interestingly, the element of sport is often given a unique identity as far as its role in humanity is concerned. Arguably its uniqueness lies in its 'playful' nature as opposed to the more 'serious' character possessed

by other cultural elements. The notion of 'play' in sport connotes the idea of 'fun' and 'enjoyment', which therefore makes sport a naturally pleasurable activity. In view of this, it seems that sporting activity is potentially capable of functioning as a convenient tool of communication between peoples. To elaborate, though two persons of different cultural and language background may not be able to communicate with each other with ease initially but through using simple body gestures to start a ball game (such as throwing or kicking a ball to one another), they can get acquainted naturally. Throughout history, the beauty of sport therefore lies in its ability in providing amusement, pleasure and building human relationships. In the words of Atkinson (1980), play in sport is a creative energy and a form of synergy that brings people together. Fink (1988) also looks at it from a social perspective by espousing that play in games and sport offers a 'bonding effect' through which human beings are no longer imprisoned and isolated in their own individuality but seek for social contact of particular intensity, which enables self-transcendence where one enters a communion with others and merges with cosmic reality and hence experiences great joy. From the historical perspective, one can find that playing games and sport, with its great potential for spontaneity and creativity, has been an essential factor in the development of human history and culture through spicing up life and facilitating communal get together (Hoffman, 1992). As in the words of Greek philosopher Plato, "*Life must be lived as play, playing certain games...*" (Nugent, 1982: 37). Ancient Greek mythological deities were often projected as figures actively involved in the world of play; such as Zeus portrayed as one playing with a ball. In England between 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, people of all classes enjoyed a variety of ancient type sporting games related to cricket, handball, hurling and football (Nugent, 1982). In the east, 2000 years ago, the Chinese were already juggling balls with their feet and the ancient Greeks competed in athletic games

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