

Exploitation or a mutually beneficial business?



By Per Vinther

A presentation about an African soccer school supported by one of Scandinavia's biggest football clubs led to one of Play the Game's most vigorous debates. Detractors described the project as exploitative, a means of acquiring cheap talent and only benefiting a few. However, the project's supporters saw the school not only as providing a decent education, but also as providing a chance for some boys and their families to break out of a cycle of poverty.

It was a predominantly white audience that heard FC Copenhagen's Administrative Director, Niels Christian Holmstrøm describe his club's involvement in a soccer school in the South African city of Port Elizabeth. The ensuing debate questioned whether any positive benefits can emerge from white Euro-peans getting involved in black African sport.

A former international soccer player himself, Holmstrøm portrayed his club's football school as a joint venture involving Danish and South African business interests. He told the conference that the school's first team consists of 19 youths aged between 14-18, who live, study and play football together. He claimed that the school provides them with a chance to break away from the

What happens when white Europeans want to get involved in the development of African sport - but have their own business agenda?

poverty that surrounds them. »This project is a prime example of good business bringing benefits to the community,« he said. »We believe that some African youths have a future in football. We would also like to make a profit through investment in the development of talent.«

He stressed that all those involved in the project are aware of their social responsibility and pointed out that the school also provides a full education. The idea for the project originated in South African, and currently receives sponsorship from the Danish government through its overseas aid programme.

»But this is still a business, not a charity,« he continued. »The school has the backing of local South Africans, many of whom are involved in its day-to-day running. The local university is also involved in the project. From personal experience I can only recommend it as a good model.«

After his presentation, Niels Christian Holmstrøm joined a panel that included the former Kenyan Olympic medallist Mike Boit, Fekrou Kidane of the IOC and professor John Hoberman of the University of Texas. The football school was discussed in depth, with both praise and criticism coming from the floor.

»I see the project as providing positive benefits to the young people of Port Elizabeth - not as exploitation,« said Mike Boit, whose view was echoed by most of the African delegates in the hall.

»It is a positive project, and certainly not comparable with colonialism,« said Fékrou Kidané. »The important point is that it is better to have a sport-based education than fall into a life of poverty or crime.« ♦



Women demand their place in sport

The media has a duty to help make women play a more meaningful role in sport, says Carole Garoës, General Secretary of "African Women in Sport"

She was one of the few female speakers at the Play the Game conference - a fact she used as an example: »We are underrepresented everywhere in sport - just look around this hall,« said Carole Garoës. »We are finding it very difficult to take an active role in sport. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, it is very tough to find money - especially for African women. We lack decent sports facilities and opportunities.« In a plea for male journalists to devote more time and column width to women, she added: »The biggest hurdle is the fact that women are traditionally tied to their roles in the kitchen and as child minders. Journalists can help by highlighting the problems we face.«

In her role as General Secretary of AWISA - African Women in Sport - Carole Garoës was one of three African women who were given the title "Chef de Mission" at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. However, she still sees herself as a rare exception in a male-dominated world.

»If we, as women, hope to develop and better ourselves, we must give up some of our traditional habits and culture,« she continued. »For example, women should not be forced to wear long skirts - they ought to be always allowed the option of playing in shorts.«

»Is there a limit to what sports women can physically take part in?« asked one male journalist. »What about hammer throwing and weight lifting, for example?«

»We would like to see women involved in all sports,« she replied. »Boxing, weightlifting, whatever. It is all about being given the opportunity.« ♦

pv.

