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The Boys in the Back Room: The Management of a Professional Soccer Club

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The West Ham United Football Club, the most important professional football (soccer) team in the traditionally working class area of East London, was founded in 1900 as the successor to an industrial team sponsored by a local ship building firm. The vast majority of the crowd and virtually every player were drawn from the working class. The direction of the Club has always been in the hands of a small group of middle class business and professional men who had never played the game professionally. They provided business skills and, sometimes money, to keep the club in operation.

The striking feature to bear in mind about the managerial structure of professional football in England is that the men who run the clubs cannot profit directly from their position. The clubs have to remain solvent but individual entrepreneurs do not share in the profits. The stockholders receive a maximum 7 1/2% dividend on the incorporation capital of the club (West Ham's was £2000) and the Directors can not receive a salary or gratuity other than expenses directly connected with their duties.

Membership on the Board was a sign of local social status and was a form of public service, especially in an area like East London where football was so much a part of the local folk culture. The men who served on the West Ham board continued the nineteenth century ideas that football provided a useful method of inculcating their social and moral values in the population. The background of the Directors (since 1915 every man chosen to the Board owned his own business, with the exception of one physician) helped them to make the administrative decisions that were necessary to keep the club going. The Directors had the status in the local community to enable them to borrow money from the banks to support West Ham United through difficult times and to provide funds for capital improvements thought necessary to attract a larger paying crowd to matches.

Two distinctive features about the West Ham Board of Directors are the closed atmosphere in which it operated and the desire of the Board to minimize outside influences on their decisions. West Ham is described by members of the Board and outsiders as a “family club.” This term refers to its history of keeping players, managers, and administrators with the club and promoting from within the ranks. The other definition of family deals directly with the make-up of the Board. Two families have dominated it for close to fifty years and have provided the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen since 1935.

The closed nature of the Board reinforced the sense of security amongst the Directors and led to a cautious approach towards public relations and changes of any significant nature. The Club has had fewer managers than any other in the first division and has done almost everything possible to avoid thrusting the Directors into the limelight of publicity.

The management of West Ham United reflected the English tradition of class distinctions and roles - a solidly middle class Board operating as a self-perpetuating oligarchy. The actions of the Board showed the impact of commercialization and professionalization on the structure of football. At no time could they afford to forget that West Ham United was not only a team and a club, it was also a “Company.”