

A Sociological Standpoint of Sicily and its Professional Football

This paper will examine a phenomenon existing among professional football players in the Italian “Serie A”¹. In this league there are many footballers whose origins are from southern regions of Italy, but that are paradoxically formed in the northern teams of the country. In particular, this research will deal with the case of Sicily. A question will be put forward: Is there an issue of social class which forces many talents from this island to go elsewhere in order to pursue the dream of a professional career?

The starting point is a research on the current players in twenty of the Italian first league clubs, from the 2007/08 season². In this context it has been found that only eight Sicilian players made their first professional appearance in a Sicilian team. It also has to be noted that the total number of players with a Sicilian origin is twenty two (excluding three players as they are yet to make their professional league debut).

From the research, it emerges that there is no related issue explaining this unrepresented proportion of players coming from the island.

In fact, on examination of all of the league’s football players’ origins (375), it can be noticed that Sicily comes in sixth place. At the same time, the proportion of the population of Sicily (5,017,522)³ to that of Italy as a whole (58,751,711)⁴ is more or less 8.5%. This is almost the same proportion that can be observed by comparing the total number of football players in Serie A (375), and the ones of Sicilian origin (22). The proportion here is 6%.

There is a similar result if one looks at the proportion between Italy as a whole and its southern part, or the “Mezzogiorno”. Effectively, the Southern population comprises around 35% of Italy (20,760,051/58,751,711)⁵, and the footballers who come from the Mezzogiorno make up 30% of the total professionals of Serie A 2007/08 (115/375).

What has then been concluded is that the Sicilians, as well as people from the other regions of Mezzogiorno, are *not* under represented in the Italian Serie A.

The formation of these athletes being carried out in places other than where they were born may instead imply an issue of social class.

The focus in this research is solely on the Sicilian case, looking at it through a lens and with the help of literature on social class. However, these findings could probably be extended to the entire Southern part of the country, where social conditions are similar.

According to the definition made by Coakley (92)⁶, social class is a social stratification, a group with certain characteristics in common that shares “structured forms of economic inequalities”. To go more into detail, Coakley again (92), states that “social class refers to categories of people who share an economic position in society based on a combination of their income, wealth, education, occupation, and social connections”.

What this paper will show is that in Sicily this patterned structure exists, explained by the dimension of inequality expressed previously. The comparison will be made with the central-northern part of Italy. To do so, the aforementioned dimensions will be examined, as well as the access to facilities (training availability), and lifestyle. Furthermore, the opinion of two experts - the president of the Sicilian branch of the Italian Olympic Committee, Massimo Costa, and the Public Relation Manager of Palermo Football Club, Fabrizio Giaconia - will deliver an inside overview on this matter.

¹ Serie A is the top Italian football league.

² The research has been conducted through “La Gazzetta dello Sport” web site data base between the 10th and 15th July 2007

³ Sicilian Statistical Yearbook 2006 – Website checked on 15th July 2007

(http://www.regione.sicilia.it/bilancio/statistica/annuario2006/popolazione_famiglie/popolazione_famiglie.htm).

⁴ Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) – Comprehensive research 2007 on Italy – Website (http://www.istat.it/dati/catalogo/20070517_00/01popolazione.pdf) checked on 15th July 2007.

⁵ See footnote 3.

⁶ Coakley, Jay. Sports in Society. Boston: Mc Graw Hill Higher Education, 2007.

The average income per person⁷ is the most used statistic to identify the economic differences among social classes. In Sicily it has a value of €15,870 *per capita*, while the Italian average is of €23,114.

The labour market is another important factor in depicting the financial situation of an area, and to define the outlines of a social class more clearly. In Sicily the occupational rate is on average 44.25%, compared to the national 57.5%. In particular, the gap regarding the female occupational rate is dramatic: 28% vs. 45.3%.

To complete the economic framework, the insurance rate, the bank credit system, and the average family expenses have been taken into account.

Regarding the first of these, a rate of 30% of people with insurance can be observed in Sicily, against 42% in Italy as a whole. For the number of bank counters, at the end of 2005 there were 3.4 per 10,000 inhabitants in Sicily, while in the rest of the country, the average was 5.4.

To conclude the economic part, the family expenses indicator is useful because it gives an insight about the material well-being of people. Here, if the monthly expenses related to necessary goods, like food, are just a little lower than the national average (€118 vs. 145), the expenses related to “non alimentary” goods mark an evident difference (€1,263 vs. 1,941).

The financial situation just outlined is one of the key characteristics of a social class. It is also related to the lifestyle. As in Coakley 92 “lifestyles of low-income people and those living in poverty seldom involve regular forms of sport participation [...]. When people spend much of their time and energy coping with the challenges of everyday life, they have few resources left to develop sport participation”.

The data from educational involvement is in line with the other parameters already observed. In Sicily, almost a third of youngsters stop studying before high school, whereas the national average is of one-fifth. Furthermore, the number of graduates from the island’s three most important universities is only half that of those coming from the city of Milan alone (10,350 vs. 20,601)⁸.

The importance of education is also related to another important factor explaining the differences among social classes: the social connections. In fact, some schools carry high status and access to a network of people, and even if this first attribute perhaps does not apply to football - not generally perceived as an elitist sport, the second characteristic is important to gain possibilities of stepping up the ladder of social mobility.

The significance of facilities’ availability is again highlighted by Coakley (92): “Games played by people of all ages depend on the availability of facilities, equipment, and safe play spaces”. In Sicily there is a need for 3,200 additional facilities to reach the level of the national average⁹. This is also evident travelling in the northern part of Italy where long rows of football fields, one beside the other, may be easily found. Here, another issue emerges, that of the development of the enterprises’ system. In Sicily it is “modest”, as defined by the same regional government. In 2004, Sicily had only 56 manufacturing enterprises per 10,000 inhabitants, compared to the national average of 91¹⁰. The same view is shared by the president of Sicilian Coni, Massimo Costa: “The investments made by the private sector into sport facilities are far below the national average. The sponsorship system here is not developed as in the rest of the country, or at least in its northern part”.

The same standpoint is supported by Fabrizio Giaconia, PR manager of Palermo football club, which represents the capital city of the region. He also thinks that the disadvantageous financial situation of Sicily is another reason why local talents need to emigrate to find success: “We know that in Lombardia (the richest Italian region)¹¹, in an area of 300 km, there are many football

⁷ All the following comparisons are in the Sicilian Statistical Yearbook 2006 (see footnote 4), except where otherwise reported.

⁸ Istat Research on “Study and Graduates”, data 2001 – check website on http://www.istat.it/dati/catalogo/20070227_00/inf_07_03_laureati_e_studio_inserimento_professionale_laureati_2004.pdf.

⁹ Research conducted by the Sicilian Coni.

¹⁰ See footnote 4.

¹¹ Study of Studi Unioncamere and Istituto Tagliacarne quoted by “La Repubblica” on line on June 9, 2007 .

academies where young talents can develop their skills. In Sicily there are have only 3 professional football teams, coping with budgets sometimes not really appropriate to this business”.

What the spokesman of the most successful team of the region in the last few years stated is confirmed by this research: Lombardia has the highest rate of presence in “Serie A” 2007/08 (68 players). Even the urban area of Brescia can display 21 players, almost the total number of Sicilians, with a population that is ten times smaller.

To conclude with a couple of examples regarding other sporting disciplines, it is possible to cite a recent research carried out by the Italian government body for sport. The Coni studied sport practised in Italy in 2005, and Sicily showed the lowest rate alongside other southern regions. The same outcome is there as regard to the level of sedentariness: the same regions show the highest rate. It has to be noted that the southern regions are less rich compared to the northern ones¹².

These findings bring the same conclusion as Coakley 92, answering the original question. The evidence put forward shows an issue of social class in Sicily forcing young talents to emigrate to the northern part of Italy in order to fulfil their dreams of a professional career. As stated by Coakley 92, the world of sport is not at all independent from the social reality. Social classes in sport are affected by the same inequalities that influence them in other aspects of social life. In conclusion, to use another successful definition from Coakley 92, it might be said that: “[In sports] money and economic power do matter, and they matter in ways that reproduce economic inequalities in society”.

¹² See footnote 11