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Relational Networks, Information Asymmetries, and Recruitment in Ivorian Soccer: The Case of Espérance FC Bouaké

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the social mechanisms shaping recruitment and the negotiation of sporting engagements at Espérance Football Club de Bouaké, a club competing in Côte d'Ivoire's Ligue 2. The qualitative investigation draws on fifteen semi-structured interviews with players whose trajectories differ, along with observations conducted in the club's training and social spaces. Players' accounts show that access to tryouts and to the roster does not depend on performance alone: it frequently requires a recommendation from a coach, former player, or intermediary. Such mediation reduces uncertainty for recruiters but distributes visibility and opportunities unevenly. players with limited schooling or weak support networks have less access to information regarding compensation, the duration of contracts, and prospects for mobility. On this basis, the article proposes the concept of an "asymmetrical relational market" to describe a configuration in which unequal control over relationships and information is converted into bargaining power. The case reveals a sports labor market embedded in relationships of trust yet marked by dependency and urban professional inequalities.

Keywords: Ivorian soccer; sports recruitment; social capital; information asymmetry; intermediation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Bouaké, becoming a soccer player does not always begin in front of a recruitment committee. For several players interviewed at Espérance FC, the first hurdle was cleared elsewhere: during a neighborhood tournament, following a call from a former player, or thanks to a coach's recommendation. Talent matters, of course, but it must still be seen, showcased, and deemed worthy of a tryout. This observation invites us to shift our perspective: rather than merely a competition of performance, recruitment is also a socially organized circulation of names, reputations, and endorsements. Thus, the transition from the neighborhood to the club emerges as a social and spatially situated process, in which athletic performance must be made visible, recognized, and brought to the attention of those capable of opening the door to professional opportunities.

For young people often from low-income families, joining a national club opens the door to an income, local recognition, and, at times, international opportunities. As a result, Ivorian soccer today serves as a space for work and social hope. Yet access to this world remains uncertain. Open tryouts coexist with less visible procedures involving coaches, former players, club officials, individuals close to the coaching staff, and unlicensed intermediaries. This coexistence of formal and informal channels is particularly evident in clubs with limited financial and administrative resources.

The study conducted at Espérance FC Bouaké shows that athletic performance is never evaluated in isolation. It reaches decision makers through trusted relationships that raise the player's profile and reduce the risk associated with his recruitment. This situation aligns with Granovetter's (1985) embeddedness hypothesis: economic action unfolds within concrete social relationships. It also relates to Bourdieu's (1980a) concept of social capital, since not all players have access to the same network or the same ability to secure a credible recommendation. From this perspective, neighborhoods, local soccer fields, and social spaces cannot be viewed merely as backdrops to soccer careers. They play a role in the formation of relationships, the circulation of resources, and the creation of opportunities for access to professional soccer. Urban spaces can thus function as sites to produce relational capital.

A second challenge emerged during the interviews. Even when they join a club, players do not have the same information regarding compensation, contract lengths, bonuses, or opportunities to leave. Some know whom to ask for advice; others sign contracts or agree verbally without any real discussion. Information asymmetry is therefore not external to these networks: it follows their paths. Those who know a club official, a former professional player, or an experienced intermediary gain access to information sooner and are better equipped to negotiate.

Research on African soccer has shed considerable light on player development, migration, and transnational networks (Darby, Akindes, and Kirwin, 2007; Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2001). It provides less insight into the day-to-day processes through which a player joins an Ivorian club, secures a spot on the team, and attempts to solidify his contract. It is at this local level that of everyday interactions and arrangements that this study is situated.

The article poses the following question: How do social relationships and the unequal distribution of information shape player recruitment and bargaining power at Espérance FC Bouaké? We argue that this market cannot be reduced to the meeting of talent supply and sports demand. It functions as an asymmetric relational market: networks make transactions possible, but their unequal distribution creates a hierarchy of access to opportunities, information, and negotiation.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE ASYMMETRIC RELATIONAL MARKET AS A MODEL FOR ANALYZING SOCCER RECRUITMENT

Initially, we believed that the disparity in career trajectories was primarily explained by athletic ability. Fieldwork quickly dispelled this initial interpretation. Players whom respondents considered to be on par technically did not have the same opportunities to be scouted nor the same access to decision makers. Some arrived for tryouts with a recommendation from a coach or a former player; others remained on the outside looking in. The question, therefore, is no longer simply a matter of who performs well, but how a performance becomes visible and credible.

This shift leads us to view recruitment as a series of mediations. The talent market is not an abstract space where supply spontaneously meets demand. At Espérance FC Bouaké, actors located at different points within the soccer community pass on names, provide endorsements, and open or close access to tryouts. Professional opportunities are thus created and distributed through concrete relationships.

The seminal works of economic sociology shed light on several dimensions of this reality. Polanyi (1944) shows that all economic activity remains embedded in social institutions

that organize exchanges. Granovetter (1985) extends this perspective by demonstrating that markets are embedded in networks of relationships that reduce uncertainty and make transactions possible. Bourdieu (1980a) further emphasizes that these networks constitute a form of capital whose distribution is profoundly unequal. Zelizer (2005) points out that economic exchanges rely on ongoing relational work in which trust, recognition, and reciprocal obligations are simultaneously built. Finally, Le Velly (2017) shows that markets function only through mechanisms that concretely organize interactions between actors.

These studies shed light on the role of relationships in exchange. One difficulty remains, however: the very networks that create trust do not give all participants an equal ability to access opportunities, obtain information, or negotiate. It is this tension, which recurred from one interview to the next, that our framework seeks to capture.

We have therefore gradually adopted the term “asymmetric relational market.”

By “asymmetric relational market,” we mean a configuration in which exchanges occur largely through social relationships, while the unequal distribution of these relationships creates disparities in access to opportunities, information, and negotiation. Networks form the practical infrastructure of the market here: they bring actors together, but they also establish a hierarchy among their positions.

When applied to professional soccer in Côte d’Ivoire, this conceptual framework leads us to view recruitment not merely as a process of athletic selection, but as a process of relational regulation of the labor market. Coaches, former players, team executives, and intermediaries are not merely peripheral actors; they participate directly in the formation of the market by controlling the flow of information, recommendations, and opportunities for professional integration.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Fieldwork and Study Population

In this study, a qualitative approach was prioritized because official procedures were insufficient to capture what the players were saying. It was necessary to trace their career paths, revisit the initial point of contact, identify those who had spoken on their behalf, and understand what they knew at the time they signed on. The study therefore does not measure the frequency of these practices; rather, it reconstructs the social mechanisms as they appear within specific career trajectories.

The study was conducted at Espérance Football Club in Bouaké, a club competing in the Ivorian Ligue 2 at the time of the study. The choice of this club was not intended to present it as representative of the entire national soccer scene. Rather, it allows us to observe, on a limited scale, the interplay between ambitions for professionalization, limited organizational resources, and intense competition among players. Gradual access to the field facilitated discussions about practices rarely addressed in official discourse: recommendations, verbal commitments, selective sharing of information, and the involvement of intermediaries.

Fifteen (15) players were selected using a reasoned sampling method. Their profiles differ in terms of age, length of time playing competitive soccer, educational background, how they joined the club, and negotiation experience. Some had already played for several teams; others were experiencing their first season in a national league. This variation is not intended to be statistically representative. Rather, it allows for a comparison of positions that are unequally endowed in terms of connections, information, and contractual experience.

The profiles were not selected to form a statistically representative sample. We sought out contrasting experiences: arrival through a coach, a recommendation from a former player, use of an intermediary, a first experience in the national league, or prior stints with multiple teams. This diversity allowed us to compare how length of time in the sport, educational background, and social circle shape players’ understanding of their contractual commitments.

Access to the field did not occur all at once. An initial contact introduced us to a few players; these players then facilitated further meetings. This chain of access resembled, on a smaller scale, the phenomenon under study. Thus, data was collected through network sampling.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data consists of semi-structured interviews with the fifteen players. The interview guide covered the initial contact with the club, the tryout process, the individuals involved in recruitment, the commitments made, the understanding of the proposed terms, and experiences with mobility. The interviews were supplemented by observations of training facilities and at a few social venues frequented by the players.

The interviews, conducted primarily in French, lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and thirty minutes. When certain administrative or contractual terms caused hesitation, the question was rephrased without suggesting an answer.

Informal conversations, noted after the interviews, helped reconstruct the context of certain accounts without being treated as equivalent interviews.

The fieldwork took place in two phases during the first half of 2022: an initial phase from January 23 to March 15, followed by a resumption beginning on April 17. This time allowed us to revisit certain career trajectories and compare the initial accounts with subsequent observations. It also coincided with a period when prospects for recruitment, transfers, and continental competitions were major topics of conversation among the players.

Issues of money and commitment were rarely brought up in the opening minutes. Several players feared that a reported statement might jeopardize their position at the club. At times, it was necessary to resume the conversation on another day, away from the busiest areas. Anonymity, confidentiality, and repeated explanations of the research objective gradually encouraged openness, though not without some lingering reservations.

The data therefore remains context specific. It provides insight into what the players experienced, understood, or interpreted; it does not allow for a reconstruction of every decision made by management. We have maintained this limitation in the analysis: the accounts are not treated as an audit of the club, but as experience of recruitment and negotiation.

3.3 Data Processing and Analysis

The analysis began as soon as the first interviews took place. Certain phrases recurred “someone mentioned me,” “I was introduced,” “I didn’t quite understand” and led us to reexamine the trajectories through the lens of three key processes: making a player visible, conveying information, and negotiating a spot on the team. The full transcripts were then coded thematically.

We hesitated for a long time about whether to treat relationships and information separately. The interviews, however, showed that they circulated together: those who knew a well-connected actor knew sooner where to go, whom to speak with, and what terms to discuss. The categories were therefore constructed through back-and-forth exchanges between the data and the concepts of embeddedness, social capital, intermediation, and informational asymmetry.

The data were anonymized at the individual level. The names of players and individuals mentioned were replaced or omitted, and verbatim quotes were stripped of details that would allow for direct identification. The club is identified to precisely situate the case study, without attributing the practices reported by the respondents to any identifiable official.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Recruitment as a Relational Process

4.1.1 Intermediation in Access to the Club

None of the players interviewed denied the importance of athletic ability. But when they recounted their arrival at the club, performance was almost never the sole factor. A phone call, an introduction, or a word of recommendation to the right person often preceded the tryout. Recruitment thus emerged as a series of mediations in which coaches, former players, and intermediaries brought certain candidates to the club’s attention.

The coach’s role stood out with particular prominence. His position allows him not only to evaluate but also to decide who deserves to be observed. One player summed up his arrival in a single sentence: “It was the coach who called me to come to the club because he’d known me for a long time.” ” There is no reason to conclude that skill becomes secondary. Rather, the account shows that prior knowledge creates the space within which that skill can be assessed.

In some cases, former players become true relational brokers capable of guiding the athletic trajectories of younger players. They act as trusted intermediaries whose word carries a certain credibility with the clubs. One respondent explained: “It was a former player from the club who introduced me to the coach because he’d been following me since the neighborhood tournaments.” This type of mediation shows that informal spaces in local soccer such as neighborhood tournaments, school competitions, or community centers are important venues for building the relational networks that lead to professional soccer.

Unlicensed intermediaries were harder to identify. Players spoke of a “big brother,” a veteran of the scene, or “someone who knows the people in charge.” These individuals arrange a meeting or a tryout without always holding an official position. Their presence underscores that the lines between advice, support, and brokerage remain blurred in the career paths observed.

This help comes at a price. Some respondents explained that once they were introduced, they felt indebted to the person who made that access possible. One of them put it this way: “When someone gets you into the club, they expect something in return.” ” These expectations are not always explicit and do

not necessarily take the same form. Nevertheless, they are enough to create a dependency.

4.1.2 The Recommendation as an Entry Filter

The recommendation comes into play even before the player is evaluated. This is what emerges most clearly from the accounts. It catches the staff's attention, lends initial credibility, and paves the way for a tryout. It does not guarantee recruitment, but it makes it possible to meet with the decision makers.

Few players describe a completely open selection process. Most mention a coach, a former player, a staff member, or an agent. "Even before you play, someone has to tell the coach about you," explains one of them. The statement is blunt, perhaps too general; yet it expresses the shared sentiment that talent does not reveal itself on its own.

Throughout the interviews, one idea kept coming up: some good players remained out of the club's sight. "There are a lot of good players in the neighborhoods, but without connections, no one sees them." This statement does not allow us to gauge how many players are overlooked. It does, however, shed light on an experience of invisibility: possessing a skill but lacking the channel that makes it observable.

The recommendation seems to have lasting effects even after a player joins the team. Several players believe that a player brought in by an influential figure is given more time when his performance dips. "When the coach himself brought you in, they give you more time to show what you can do," observes one respondent. This protection remains fragile, but it creates a difference in the conditions under which players are judged.

4.1.3 The Economic Logic of Intermediation

Intermediation is not merely a matter of mutual support. The accounts also reveal a discreet economy of access: the person who facilitates the connection may expect a share of the salary, a commission, or a say in the player's future career. We cannot determine the frequency of these arrangements. Their recurring mention in the interviews, however, compels us to consider them as a dimension of recruitment.

Players describe figures with uncertain statuses: coaches, unlicensed agents, informal recruiters, or individuals close to management. The relationship may be long-lasting, almost familial, or limited to a single transaction. In either case, a debt is formed. "I gave you an opportunity, so I have to benefit too," says one player, summarizing the logic that was presented to him.

These informal levies appear to be a form of compensation for relational intermediation. Actors with privileged access to sports decision makers convert their social capital into an economic resource by monetizing their ability to open access to the soccer market. In this context, a recommendation is not merely a symbolic resource; it also becomes an instrument for the economic valorization of relational networks.

Mark Granovetter's work on the social embeddedness of economic activities sheds light on these dynamics. In his 1985 article, the author demonstrates that economic exchanges are deeply structured by social relationships and networks of trust. However, these relationships are not free from power dynamics or economic interests. In professional soccer, mechanisms of trust and recommendation can thus become tools for control and the capture of economic resources by certain actors occupying central positions within recruitment networks.

5. INFORMATION ASYMMETRIES AND CONTRACTUAL NEGOCIATION

5.1 Young Players' Lack of Understanding of Contracts

When discussing their contracts, several players begin by acknowledging that they did not fully understand everything. Clauses, contract duration, bonuses, or exit options sometimes remain vague. One respondent described his first contract as follows: "I didn't study it very closely. When they give me the papers, I just look to see where I need to sign." While this statement does not apply to everyone's experience, it highlights a vulnerability that is frequently mentioned.

A lack of understanding of contracts appears to be closely linked to the limited educational background of some of the players interviewed. Several respondents left school early to focus on their athletic careers, often in the hope of rapid social mobility through soccer. Their incomplete educational paths limit their ability to understand the administrative and legal documents that govern their professional activity. As one player interviewed explained: "I didn't study much. When they give me the papers, I just look to see where I need to sign."

This lack of knowledge shifts the negotiation to those who can read the documents or are familiar with industry practices. Managers, coaches, and agents then become de facto interpreters. One player recounted signing "without really reading" because he feared the opportunity would slip away.

In a world where spots are scarce, asking for time can be perceived as a risk.

Young players' dependence can also be explained by their precarious position in the sports labor market. Faced with the scarcity of professional opportunities and the intense competition that characterizes professional soccer, several respondents view signing a contract first and foremost as a chance for social and economic integration. This situation limits their ability to challenge the terms proposed by the clubs. The fear of missing out often leads players to accept terms they do not fully understand.

Difficulties in understanding legal matters also extend to transfer mechanisms and rights related to professional mobility. Several players interviewed stated that they did not have a precise understanding of the terms governing transfers to other clubs or the commissions charged by certain intermediaries. This lack of knowledge contributes to situations in which players partially lose control of their career paths to the benefit of actors who are better informed and more deeply embedded in soccer networks.

Furthermore, the lack of independent legal support exacerbates the vulnerability of young players. Unlike soccer players who have established agents or specialized advisors, the majority of those surveyed negotiate their contracts without professional assistance. Contract negotiations thus take place within highly asymmetrical relationships, where club executives and intermediaries hold a significant information advantage. This situation contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities within the soccer labor market.

5.2 Information, Power, and Occupational Inequalities

Information is not merely a complement to recruitment; it shapes several stages of the process. Knowing that a position is opening, that a tryout is scheduled, or that a manager has agreed to meet with a player provides a concrete advantage. However, this information does not circulate publicly in the same way for everyone. It is shared through existing networks.

Players with the strongest support networks can compare offers, seek advice, or plan ahead for a move. Others learn belatedly that a tryout has taken place or discover the implications of a contract only after accepting it. This disparity is therefore not solely a matter of educational attainment; it also depends on the ability to consult an experienced person without fear of losing the opportunity.

This information asymmetry contributes to the reproduction of professional inequalities within Ivorian soccer. Players who already possess significant relational and informational capital gradually reinforce their advantage by gaining access to better athletic opportunities and more favorable contractual terms. Conversely, those who remain on the margins of influential networks remain more exposed to forms of precariousness and professional instability.

Mark Granovetter's analyses of social networks also help us understand the mechanisms of differentiated information flow in the labor market. In his work published beginning in the 1970s, Granovetter demonstrates that relational networks play a central role in the dissemination of economic and professional opportunities. In professional soccer, information regarding recruitment, tryouts, or transfer opportunities circulates primarily through interpersonal relationships rather than through open and transparent institutional channels. The most well-connected players thus enjoy a structural advantage in accessing market resources.

Conversely, players with limited access to information experience more precarious and unstable career trajectories. Several respondents mentioned periods of prolonged uncertainty linked to a lack of information about recruitment opportunities or difficulties in contract negotiations. Career instability thus appears to be closely linked to the position actors occupy within information-sharing networks.

DISCUSSION

Our examination of the career trajectories at Espérance FC Bouaké led us to abandon an overly simplistic dichotomy between merit and connections. Networks do not necessarily replace athletic evaluation; rather, they first determine who will be evaluated. They make a player visible, provisionally guarantee his reliability, and transmit useful information. But this same relational work excludes those who lack a recognized recommendation.

Embedding has an ambivalent meaning here. Relationships generate the trust that recruitment requires, as Granovetter (1985) noted. At the same time, they function as barriers to entry. A recommendation is therefore neither an accident external to the market nor a favor without consequences: it is part of the market's ordinary functioning and contributes to the unequal distribution of opportunities.

The concept of social capital allows us to go further. Players do not merely possess networks of varying sizes; their relationships do not carry the same weight as decisionmakers. The endorsement of a well-known coach or a renowned former player conveys a transfer of credibility that not just any connection can provide. Sports capital must therefore be presented through a relationship capable of lending it

credibility. This conversion of a connection into visibility aligns with Bourdieu (1980a), while also illustrating its concrete manifestation in a loosely formalized professional setting.

The weak ties described by Granovetter (1973) appear in networks connecting neighborhood tournaments, former players, coaches, and clubs. They circulate information that a player would not find within his immediate circle. However, the accounts show that the usefulness of these ties depends on their position within the soccer field. A distant but close connection to a decision maker is more valuable than strong solidarity without access to selection processes.

The findings of this research also build upon existing work on the sociology of sports intermediaries and the globalization of soccer. Richard Giulianotti (1999) demonstrates that contemporary soccer is shaped by processes of commodification, transnational mobility, and increasing intermediation. Similarly, John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson (1998) emphasize that networks of agents, recruiters, and managers play a decisive role in shaping athletic careers on an international scale. The data collected in the Ivorian context, however, show that this intermediation takes specific forms linked to African economic realities. Officially recognized agents coexist with informal intermediaries (former players, local coaches, and individuals close to the technical staff) whose activities often fall outside formal regulatory frameworks.

The work of Darby, Akindes, and Kirwin (2007) has shown that the academies and migration networks in African soccer often place young players in relationships of dependency. The case of Espérance FC Bouaké indicates that this dependency does not arise solely at the time of international transfer. It begins to take shape during the initial moves to the national league, when the intermediary controls access to tryouts, information about contracts, and sometimes the prospect of a transfer.

Information asymmetry becomes particularly evident during negotiations. Akerlof (1970) demonstrates how an unequal distribution of information creates an imbalance in the exchange. In our field, this disparity concerns knowledge of compensation, industry practices, contract durations, and key contacts. Those who can compare options or seek advice have an advantage; others often make decisions under time pressure.

The concept of an asymmetric relational market ultimately brings together the two sides of the field. Relationships coordinate recruitment and reduce uncertainty, but their unequal distribution creates a hierarchy in access, information, and negotiation. There is no way to assert that all hiring processes follow this model with the same intensity. The trajectories studied nevertheless show that it constitutes a recurring pattern in the observed cases.

CONCLUSION

We ought to understand how relationships and information play a role in recruitment at Espérance FC Bouaké. The fifteen trajectories studied shifted the focus from talent alone to the conditions under which it is recognized. A performance must be seen, presented, and attested to; yet not all players have the same opportunities to publicize it.

This recommendation acts as a threshold. It opens the door to a tryout, reduces the recruiter's uncertainty, and can temporarily protect the player. It can also keep those without the right connections out of sight. Similarly, information provides bargaining power when it allows for comparison, seeking advice, or postponing a decision.

These findings lead us to characterize the recruitment process under study as an asymmetric relational market. Networks support coordination in this context, but they distribute visibility, information, and bargaining power unequally. Professional inequality therefore does not arise solely at the end of the selection process; it is formed upstream, within the social conditions governing access to evaluation.

On a theoretical level, the study contributes to the fields of economic sociology and the sociology of sport by demonstrating the relevance of approaches focusing on the social embeddedness of markets, social capital, and information asymmetries for the analysis of sports careers in Africa. It also contributes to the renewal of research on African sports by emphasizing the relational and informal dimensions of player recruitment, which have been relatively understudied in the Ivorian context.

At Espérance FC Bouaké, therefore, skill alone does not lead to recognition. It must circulate within a network of relationships, be backed by a credible narrative, and be accompanied by information that allows the player to advocate for his career path. It is in this gap between talent, visibility, and negotiating power that the observed inequalities take shape.

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