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The Economics of a Sports Industry: Scottish Gate-Money Football, 1890-1914¹

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The Economics of a Sports Industry: Scottish Gate-Money Football, 1890-1914¹

By WRAY VAMPLEW

In 1708 the “common people of Scotland” were described as being “addicted” to the game of football.² Two centuries did little to change their attitude, and a knowledgeable commentator, writing in 1906, maintained that “the enthusiasm of the Scot for the Association game is without parallel in any race for any particular sport or pastime”.³ Football itself, however, had changed. The earlier game had been unorganized, violent, wide-ranging in time and space, and held irregularly. By the late nineteenth century two authorities, the Scottish Football Association (S.F.A.) and the Scottish Football League (S.F.L.), were organizing the game and setting rules as to its conduct, and matches were being played regularly on defined pitches with a prescribed time limit. The main difference, though, was that the earlier folk-football had been essentially for the participants whereas the new football was, at its highest level, geared towards the paying spectator: only 22 were allowed to play, but there could be thousands watching them. Football had become part of the mass-entertainment industry. As one sports journal put it: “Scottish football cannot be described as anything else than a big business”.⁴

A study of Scottish football in this later period can contribute to two major debates. One is the controversy over the standard of entrepreneurship in late nineteenth-century Britain. Although British entrepreneurs have been criticized for failing to develop new industries sufficiently, the critical literature rarely mentions the emergence of the leisure industries.⁵ Yet the post-1870 years witnessed a significant increase in sports spectatorship. A substantial rise in working-class spending power, growing urbanization, and a concentration of free-time into Saturday afternoons all encouraged the marketing of gate-money sport. Indeed commercialized sport for the masses was one of the

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