



Sports management companies in tennis clubs: A growing trend

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to present some aspects related to the relationship between sports management companies and tennis clubs in the specific case of Spain. Specifically, a typology of tennis clubs is presented and based on this typology, four problematic scenarios arising from the author's experience as a manager of a private company that provides services to tennis clubs are discussed. Two of these scenarios concern aspects of relations between the managers of the company providing the services and different persons representing the club (the members of the Board of Directors, the general manager, the owner, etc.) and the relations between the managers and the members and/or users. The other two scenarios are related to the economic and sporting management of the organisation that must be carried out by the company. These situations are presented as examples of cases in which situations may arise that will require the efficient collaboration of all parties involved to solve the challenges involved in managing tennis clubs in an uncertain, changing and highly competitive context such as the current and future ones.

Key words: administration, management, racket sports, sport management.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years now, a considerable number of tennis clubs in Spain have handed over sports management to private companies that take charge of everything related to the sporting activity carried out in these clubs. In many cases, this management is not limited to the tennis operations but extends to the other sports played at their facilities (Blanco, 2016; Méndez, 2014).

In Spain, padel tennis is booming lately, and it is difficult to find tennis clubs that have not built padel courts taking advantage of available spaces that were not used on a regular basis (Courel et al., 2017). There have even been cases in which padel courts have been built by replacing tennis courts, mini-tennis courts, fronton courts, playgrounds, etc. (Villena et al., 2017).

There are also multi-sport clubs in Spain in which individual disciplines such as tennis and paddle tennis coexist with other team disciplines such as football, futsal, basketball, hockey, etc. (Pujadas & Santacana, 2003). In many of these clubs, sports management is carried out by a private company that normally depends on the Board of Directors or a General Manager chosen by the club's own Board (Valiño, 2019).

In this context, speaking in general terms about the relationship between these companies and the clubs is very risky, as each agreement tends to be very different, depending on the characteristics of each party (Beotas, 2006). For example, a club in which many sports are played in large facilities does not have the same problems as a small tennis club with a few paddle courts (Peiró, et al., 1995).



In the last twelve years I have been collaborating with Barcelona Total Tennis in the sports management of clubs with very different characteristics: Club Tennis Mollet, Club Tennis Vilafranca, Club Tennis d'Aro, Club Tennis Premià de Dalt, Club Golf Terramar and Club Esportiu Valldoreix. Each one of them has its own particularities, its own traditions, and a way of working that is always marked by its leaders. For an overview of some of the characteristics of these clubs, see the works of Morejón (2011; 2014) and Amer (2020).

My experience in these and other clubs has shown me that most of them fall into one of the following categories (Vamplew, 2013):

- Non-profit clubs with member-owners
- For-profit clubs with owner-members and users
- Subscriber-only for-profit clubs
- Private clubs without members or users renting their facilities
- Municipal clubs that depend on a public institution

I believe that we can focus the problematic of the company-club relationship on the following aspects (Molina, 2019):

1. Relationship of the managers with the Board of Directors, CEO, Owner, Institution, etc.
2. Relationship of managers with members and/or users
3. Economic management
4. Sports management

In the following section I will elaborate on each of the above-mentioned aspects by providing a personal view of these situations in the context of the management of a tennis club by a private company.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Relationship of the managers with the Board of Directors, CEO, Owner, Institution

The Boards of Directors of most clubs are made up of amateurs who have been democratically elected by the members and who work selflessly to ensure that the different areas (social, sporting, economic, communication, etc.) function properly (Moragas & Puig, 2013). But these people usually have their own work obligations and do not have the necessary time or are not willing to carry out the day-to-day management that the club needs. Therefore, some hire a General Manager who in turn hires a company to carry out the sports management. Other times, there is no General Manager, and it is the Board itself that hires and controls the company (Talavera et al., 2014).

And it is in this contracting process that the first problems often arise, as the interests of the club and those of the company can be quite different. It is necessary for the agreement to be worked out, thought through and agreed beforehand, but unfortunately on too many occasions the agreement is established very quickly and without specifying many of the aspects that, once the relationship has begun, can be conflictive (Valiño, 2017).

For example, the functioning of the sports programmes, whether for tennis or other sports, is something basic for a good understanding between the parties, as many of the members and their children are involved (Carreras, 2010). Logically, the club wants its members or users to have the best possible service. The management company also sets itself this objective, but there are other aspects that normally influence the quality of the service offered and that the company cannot ignore. The fundamental aspect is the economic aspect since the company must obtain a return on this agreement with the club and is therefore highly conditioned when structuring its schools.

Clubs that do not have members or users, and that depend on a single owner or institution, have a different problem than typical tennis clubs. The owner or management of the institution already has its own financial performance targets, and the agreement with the management company will be driven by these targets, having to find the right balance so that all parties can benefit (Simozima et al., 2021).

Normally, the management company pays a fee to the club for the use of the facilities to be able to carry out the different activities in them. The amount of this fee and its successive modifications over the years is usually a point of discussion between the parties, especially if at the time of signing the agreement it has not been adequately specified.

Relationship of the managers with members and/or users.

The members and/or season ticket holders are (or believe themselves to be) the owners of the club. And as such, they want to take part in the decision-making process in many aspects that do not correspond to them, and which have been previously agreed upon by the Board of Directors and the management company.

The managers' skills in dealing with the partners will be essential to achieve the harmony necessary for the daily coexistence and continuity of the relationship.

In all clubs there are groups of members who are not members of the board and who question the management of the directors and the management companies. It is obviously easier to criticise from the outside than to manage from the inside, but these groups must be considered, their leaders must be known and, as far as possible, they must be given prominence and their demands must be addressed (Rossi et al., 2020). These demands can be very varied, but those that are aimed at sporting activities must be assessed by the company to determine whether they can be addressed without distorting the normal functioning of these activities.

It must be taken into account that sometimes the activities carried out by the management companies clash with the specific interests of some members. A clear example is the lack of courts available for members at peak times, due to scheduled sports activities. It should be understood that these activities are also designed for members, but not all members are happy to have to change their long-standing habits in the club.

Economic management

Financial issues are often contentious in general, and tennis clubs are no exception. Clubs with members and/or users depend on a Board of Directors, which in turn is accountable to an Assembly of members. When the club hands over the management to a private company, the latter must report to the Board of Directors or, if necessary, to the General Manager (Martínez & Tordera, 1999).

The pricing policy for the different activities is normally set by the company, with the consent of the Board, and the income from these activities should cover its structural costs, the fee payable to the club and make a sufficient profit.

This economic balance is essential for the continuity of the agreements.

Sports management

Providing a good service to members and users should be the main objective of the management companies, as user satisfaction will be the key to the continuity of the agreement.

The Board will receive inputs from members and users about the sporting management. Most of them will be negative, as the members who do not have any complaints, do not express themselves in a positive way either.

The Board will communicate these negative inputs to the company, and the company should take appropriate action in those cases where it considers them acceptable, thus giving the Board the option to respond appropriately to the complaints received.

This collaboration between the Board and the company is essential for a good coexistence, as it will allow the problems that will undoubtedly arise in this type of relationship to be solved (Romero et al., 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

From my experience in different clubs, acting sometimes as a member of a board of directors and sometimes as a management company, I believe that these collaborations are absolutely necessary in today's tennis world.

Professionalising sports management is, in my opinion, essential to obtain positive results in the face of increasingly demanding users who want to receive good value for money.

The world of tennis has changed a lot in recent years and will continue to change in the future. Gone are the clubs of the past where large numbers of members paid their dues with virtually no use of the facilities. Nowadays, members who pay a fee want to receive a proper service in return, and the clubs and the companies that manage their sporting activities must be able to give them that service.

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