PART 1

Marketing football in Europe

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The general state of football marketing in Europe
CHAPTER 1

Building global sports brands: key success factors in marketing the UEFA Champions League

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Overview

In 1992 the European Cup was transformed into the UEFA Champions League (UCL), around which a new marketing strategy and brand identity were developed and implemented by UEFA, in partnership with TEAM Marketing. This chapter begins by examining the relationship between these two organizations and then considers the context within which the new strategy and identity were developed. Thereafter, each of the components used to create the Champions League brand are examined: the emphasis on European football history and heritage, the creation of a brand identity, the composition of a UEFA Champions League anthem, the use of imagery and symbols, and the creation of a new trophy. In the concluding section, issues pertaining to brand implementation, event management identity and the presentation of a television/media identity are addressed.

Keywords
branding, Champions League, sport product, strategic sport marketing, television and new media

European football: the emergence of the UEFA Champions League

Competition between the elite clubs of Europe can be tracked back to the 1950s. Following a series of friendly matches between Wolverhampton Wanderers of England and Honved of Hungary to decide Europe’s premier club, the French newspaper L’Équipe proposed the formation of a competition consisting of the league champions of each European nation, which was then constituted under the Union of European Football Association’s (UEFA) auspices. Thus the European Champion Clubs’ Cup, more commonly known at the European Cup, was born. The competition generated huge interest and popularity from the outset, and became a suitable platform for Europe’s greatest talents.

The competition remained unchanged for almost forty years, with entry limited to the holders and the national champions of each country. The knock-out format consisted of two-legged ties in which each club played one game at home and one away. By the early 1990s, however, the growth of television as a key medium of football consumption and the development of satellite and pay-television digital technologies led to an exponential growth in the revenues available to clubs. The composition of the competition thus became ripe for review. The knock-out format in particular, and the risk that popular clubs could be eliminated after
one tie, was unacceptable to both clubs and broadcasters, who required a greater number of guaranteed games. Proposals aimed at transforming the competition had been raised at various points, most notably by the owner of AC Milan, Silvio Berlusconi, in the 1980s. In this context, UEFA took action to reconsider both the commercial and sporting aspects of its main club competition. In 1992, the European Cup was transformed into the UEFA Champions League (UCL), a hybrid competition comprising league and knock-out. The impetus behind this was a desire amongst both clubs and broadcasters for a greater number of guaranteed games, as a means to exploit new revenues.

In the political network of European football a constant state of tension exists between the elite clubs, looking for opportunities to increase revenues and greater autonomy, and the governing bodies, which look to control the wider interests of the game. UEFA’s control of the competition enables the organization to retain revenues for its own purposes, including the development of the European game. This is a source of grievance for the elite clubs. Gathered together in the G14 organization – a pressure group now consisting of eighteen of Europe’s major clubs – they lobby for greater influence. Clubs such as Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus generate enormous leverage from the size and loyalty of their consumer bases. Thus the control, format and marketing of the competition are subject to ongoing debate.

In this complex and unstable position, UEFA has had to rely on two separate strategies as a means of retaining control of its flagship competition. First, it relies on its position within the global framework of football governance and its historical role as the organizer of European club competition to buttress its legitimacy. Secondly, the ever-increasing demands of the clubs means that UEFA has been forced to produce a competition of quality and a reward to satisfy the competing clubs. UEFA has therefore taken responsibility for developing the competition both in sporting and commercial terms in order to adapt to the transformed commercial environment, and as a means to address the demands of the economically powerful clubs. In doing so, UEFA has formed a hugely successful commercial partnership.

**UEFA and TEAM**

The commercial growth of football, initiated and controlled by football’s governing bodies, has been facilitated by a small number of event and media management companies – most notably ISL (International Sport and Leisure) – long-term partners of both the world governing body FIFA and UEFA. The significance of these companies is such that they have been referred to as the
‘cement of network football: the go-betweens who line up corporate and media sponsors and stage manage the spectacle’ (Sugden, 2002: 67). In transforming European club competition, UEFA formed what has turned out to be a hugely successful alliance with two former executives of ISL. Recognizing the opportunities for growth, Klaus Hempel and Jürgen Lenz formed Television Event and Media Marketing (TEAM), based in Lucerne, Switzerland, as the vehicle through which the UEFA Champions League would be transformed. According to UEFA Chief Executive, Lars Christer Olsson (personal interview, 16 November 2004):

‘The development of the Champions League was, in my opinion, not so much driven by wishes from the bigger clubs, as the needs of the television companies … Hempel and Lenz were early in this process and they created with Johansson and Aigner (then UEFA President and General Secretary) the concept for the Champions League, based on the needs of television which means that the major markets had to be better represented.

On instruction from UEFA, TEAM sought to apply a blueprint for sports marketing success by marrying the synergetic qualities of football, sponsorship and television, as illustrated in Figure 1.1. As Hempel explains (Ahlström, 2002: 18):

We spent three weeks at the Villa Sassa fitness clinic in Lugano and it was there that we worked for three hours per day on a new concept of creating a ‘branded’ club
competition ... We came up with a triangle formed by football, sponsors and broadcasters with UEFA and TEAM in the middle, harmonizing the interests and making sure that the concept was mutually beneficial for all the components.

Whilst this concept was not new, through its marketing of the UEFA Champions League (UCL) TEAM has exploited the commercial opportunities in a global marketplace and, with UEFA, has created an integrated sporting and commercial platform for Europe’s elite clubs. In this chapter we focus on the key success factors in transforming the UEFA Champions League into a benchmark global sports brand.

The product: the UEFA Champions League

The fundamental factor in the successful transformation of the UCL into a benchmark global brand is the sporting product itself. This consists of a number of crucial interacting elements which blend together to produce a competition with consistently high levels of interest. These elements are illustrated in Figure 1.2.

![Figure 1.2](image_url)  
Figure 1.2  
Facets of the UEFA Champions League product
It is impossible to grade the importance of the various elements of the sporting product individually, as they work together and coalesce to form an effective whole. The roots of the success of the UCL are, of course, grounded in the worldwide popularity of football. Europe is football’s economic centre, and as such attracts star players from across the world. Those star players are employed by the most famous elite clubs, which in turn enjoy remarkable loyalty from their supporters. The clubs are the brands that operate within the UCL brand. As noted above, the UCL is the successor of the European Cup, first played in 1955. It is within that historical context that the UCL exists as the legitimate tournament played to decide Europe’s greatest football teams.

The historical context and the heritage of the competition are at the heart of the UCL branding. As sociologist Anthony King (2004: 331) has argued, ‘tradition is extremely important for the viability of the Champions League. Sports matches have meaning where there is a historical connection which fans and players recognize.’ That meaning therefore exists as a vitally important aspect of the UCL product. Victory in the competition does not exist as a solitary moment of success, but rather as the latest achievement in an ongoing process. This was notable in the recent success of Liverpool in 2005. It was the club’s fifth victory in the competition, the previous of which had been over twenty years previously and to which there was frequent media reference. Similarly, the importance of the players is not confined to the years in which they compete. They are part of a wider historical trajectory, in which the UCL provides the platform and recognition for game’s greatest talents.

The UCL, then, is subject to the contradictory demands of amalgamating the need for modernization whilst consistently relating the tournament to past events. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the changing format of the competition, which has also helped to facilitate the creation of the global brand. The two key developments were the introduction of a group stage in 1992–93, facilitating a greater number of guaranteed games for clubs, and the opening up of the competition to more than one club from each country in 1997–98. These changes marked a radical departure from a knock-out competition designed purely for national champions. These changes were the subject of much heated debate, and in some quarters were depicted as a betrayal of the European Cup. What the changes achieved, however, was to allow for a greater number of participants and a greater number of games between Europe’s elite clubs. This generated significant extra interest in the major football nations with the largest markets, which in turn has formed the basis of the strategic commercial development of the UCL. Whilst the changes in format have created something of a virtuous circle for the top clubs (participation generates substantial
revenue, enabling clubs to consolidate their success in the national leagues), another success factor is that the competition continues to be organized around important sporting and organizational principles:

All the sporting elements, all the competition criteria, have been driven by UEFA without influence from TEAM at all. In the early days the concept was developed by TEAM. It was adapted, and adopted by UEFA to fit their needs, and I think what has happened in the last three or four years, is that it is finishing everything that we do … Both sides would take their credit for having an influence over the parts of the competition that they had the responsibility for. But it's driven by UEFA and it is supported and implemented by TEAM.

(Richard Worth, Chief Executive, TEAM, personal interview, 1 March 2005.)

At the end of the day we are a sporting governing body. We are not a private entity. Our duty is to the fans, to the European kids, to everybody's development of football. We've got to make sure that we develop it in a way which is appropriate, which is durable for European football … at one point sport should always prevail.

(Philippe Le Floc'h, Director, Marketing and Media Rights, UEFA, personal interview, 19 November 2004.)

UEFA’s control of the sporting format is important. It allows the organization to balance the commercial requirements of the competition with important sporting principles. These include allowing access to the tournament and its rewards to all UEFA’s fifty-two national members, as opposed to just the main markets which generate the vast majority of revenue. This provides an incentive for development amongst smaller or less developed European nations, and also helps generate geographically-spread interest for the tournament. Moreover, entry to the tournament is based on merit, and no club is guaranteed entry. This enhances the legitimacy of the competition in a sporting culture based on promotion and relegation between leagues. Additionally, the format is driven by sporting as well as commercial imperatives. This means that whilst a group stage has been included (two group stages between 2000 and 2003), knock-out remains an important facet of the competition, producing games with greater excitement and unpredictability. The second group stage was removed against the wishes of the bigger clubs.

At the same time, however, the UCL is an enormous logistical operation, and UEFA has employed TEAM to implement the
competition. The breakdown of responsibilities was the cause of some disagreement early in the history of the competition, with concerns raised within UEFA regarding the large degree of control TEAM was exerting. The division of responsibility is now, however, much clearer, with UEFA retaining control over the overall strategy and the sporting elements and format of the competition. This marks an important development in that football’s governing bodies, UEFA in this instance, have regained a greater degree of control over their commercial properties – namely the competitions. The overall control of UEFA and the logistical and commercial expertise of TEAM have coalesced to form an effective working partnership, adding value, as Philippe Le Floc’h explains (personal interview, 19 November 2004):

I am a strong believer that the ISL model was gone and that it was up to the federations with real properties to take control – and when you are lucky enough to sit on two of the four biggest world properties in sport, you should control your assets … The idea is that we don’t want to do everything in-house … we have an agency, which has 100

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**Figure 1.3**
Facets of the UEFA Champions League format

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**Meritocratic entry**

**Multiple national entrants**

**Access to all 52 UEFA members**

**UCL format**

**Group stage and knock-out**

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people working for us, and we have got 125 games involving 32 teams in 18 countries, and that’s a lot of logistics. We’re not sure we want to do it ourselves. But we want to really control the strategy of the whole thing. And as long as we’re with an agency that is bringing added value, then we’ve got no problems to pay that price.

The format of the competition (see Figure 1.3) combined with the other crucial ingredients illustrated in Figure 1.2 are the fundamental factors in the success of the UCL. Without them, there would be no tournament to market and brand.

**The strategy: central marketing**

The critical commercial transition from the European Cup to the UCL was the decision to centralize commercial, marketing and branding control of the tournament. The concept of central marketing operated by TEAM and UEFA has allowed UEFA itself to both ‘optimize’ and control revenues generated by the competition. Previously, clubs participating in the European Cup had been responsible for selling their own television and commercial rights. These rights have now been transferred from the clubs to UEFA in return for fixed payments from a central fund generated by the central sale of television, sponsorship and other commercial rights by TEAM on behalf of UEFA. Payments to clubs are then distributed according to both sporting achievement and the market in which the clubs are based. Those clubs participating in the larger markets therefore receive higher payments on the basis that their television rights are more valuable. Whilst the market payments have been the subject of some criticism (Morrow, 2003), Umberto Gandini, Organizing Director of AC Milan, has correctly referred to them as a ‘reality of the business’ (personal interview, 14 February 2005). In order for the rights to be transferred by clubs to UEFA, the clubs operating in the largest markets would expect to receive a fee commensurate or greater than that which they would receive if they marketed the rights individually. By marketing the television and sponsorship rights centrally, UEFA has been able to generate greater levels of revenue than the total revenues generated by the clubs selling the rights individually.

**Television**

The ‘sporting product’ of the UCL provides the basis for the ‘television spectacle’. Football is a key driver of television audiences in Europe, and television is consequently the key provider of
revenues in European football – and specifically the UCL. In the 2004–05 competition, it was estimated that 320 million supporters watch the UCL every week (UEFA and TEAM, 2005: 12). In the 2003–04 season, 79 per cent of a total revenue of 883 million Swiss francs was generated through television sales (UEFA, 2005: 32). According to TEAM executives Craig Thompson and Ems Magnus, the initial intention was to create ‘a UEFA Champions League Television Network’ with nationally exclusive television stations, as a means to guarantee premium rates from free-to-air broadcasters (Thompson and Magnus, 2003: 50). This constituted an important aspect of the UEFA/TEAM policy to ‘optimize’ revenue rather than ‘maximize’ revenue (see www.team.ch), demonstrating the desire to ensure wider access to the tournament across Europe as a means to develop the UCL brand, and also as a means of maximizing sponsorship revenue. Whilst it could be argued that the UCL is now sufficiently entrenched in the consciousness of the European football supporter to migrate effectively to pay-TV, the decision to utilize exclusively free-to-air television until 2003 has clearly paid substantial dividends in generating maximum awareness of the competition.

The new league format provided a more enticing product for broadcasters, with a guaranteed number of fixtures consistently scheduled as part of an overall package of live games. The increase in the number of teams from the major nations further enhanced the attractiveness of the tournament in the largest markets. Following the intervention of the Competition Commission of the European Union, UEFA was forced to open the sale of TV rights to other broadcasters, but the free-to-air element remains an important aspect of the development of the UCL brand. In addition to rights fees, TV companies have also been required to provide programme sponsorship for official sponsors, and to give ‘best prices and placement for commercial airtime spots’ (Thompson and Magnus, 2003: 50). Central marketing therefore afforded this critical cooperation between two sides of the golden triangle.

The central marketing of the UCL has enabled UEFA to generate vast revenues for the clubs. Since 1992 UEFA has distributed a total of 5122 million Swiss francs to clubs, the vast majority of which has been generated by television income (UEFA and TEAM, 2005: 27). Of total revenues raised in 2003–04, 633 million Swiss francs were awarded to the participating clubs, and 250 million Swiss francs were retained by UEFA for running costs and distribution within European football (UEFA, 2005: 32). It has been argued, however, that UEFA fails to maximize revenue from the competition. The Media Partners proposal for a breakaway competition in 1998 exploited this view and initiated a restructuring of the competition, arguing that European revenues were artificially low.
Similarly, the decision to maintain UCL coverage on free-to-air television also means that the pay-TV market is not being fully exploited. According to the Media Partners President, Rodolfo Hecht (personal interview, 15 February 2005), ‘In a €4.5 billion market, 85 per cent is generated by domestic leagues. That is a joke.’ However, Richard Worth explains the rationale behind the decision to retain free-to-air broadcasting sponsors (personal interview, 1 March 2005):

We could sell the whole of the Champions League on television to pay-TV stations around Europe and probably make a lot more money than by making it available in the proportion that we do to free television and pay television … The original concept was this should be a Wednesday night, free-to-air, European football-for-all product. Because of the volume of clubs and certain markets, that has changed a little bit now. But there is another way to look at. Okay, we go for good money, not maybe the very, very best money because the advantages of not taking the very best money are much more beneficial for the development of football, the competition, UEFA, than going for the maximum and disregard the consequences. That’s really not the way we think is the right way to work.

Rodolfo Hecht is also critical of the structure of the competition which limits the number of games elite clubs play against each other (personal interview, 15 February 2005). In reference to the UCL tie between AC Milan and Manchester United in 2005, Hecht argued:

You should really stop and think and consider you are talking probably brand number one and brand number three in world football, they played once in forty years … that really makes you understand the magnitude of the problem.

The decision to retain free-to-air partners, and constrain the size of the league stage, means that European competition revenues are to some extent like a coiled spring waiting to be released. However, UEFA chooses not to maximize European revenues. This is due to the organization’s statutory obligation to protect national as well as European football, and to help govern a competitive arena that is sustainable and in which there is mobility amongst clubs. This would be difficult to achieve should the top clubs gain even more revenue from European competition. Within
the available framework, however, TEAM seeks to maximize revenues, as Richard Worth explains:

We know where the value comes from. Yes, there’s always going to be a little bit more you could make here and there, but can it be doubled, trebled? The market pays what the market can stand and a lot of it is driven by natural competition in those markets … my contention is and my understanding is that the Champions League achieves what it can pretty near full value with what we have to play with inventory-wise.

Vic Wakeling, Managing Director of Sky Sports of British Sky Broadcasting, also recognizes from a first-hand position how TEAM’s expertise and knowledge of the European broadcasting market has enabled UEFA to maximize the financial potential of the competition (personal interview, 23 March 2005):

TEAM is a very good set up and the people they have recruited over the years – and there’s a lot of good agencies out there, TEAM have to bid for the business every time round – what they’ve got is a team of people who know marketing, who know television, and they certainly know this market place {the UK} … TEAM, when they were setting off last time around to do the rights, and everyone was saying the rights are going to drop this time around, they targeted this market. Why? Because they knew they had three people bidding, they knew that the competitive bidding would push the value up, because they had BBC, ITV and Sky. They knew they were going to get an increased price … They were shrewd commercially.

Sponsorship

The centralization of sponsorship by UEFA/TEAM also constitutes another factor in the successful marketing of the UCL. With each club previously in control of its own stadium sponsorship, there was no coordination of sponsorship across clubs. This was changed in favour of centralized sponsorship by UEFA/TEAM. According to TEAM founder Klaus Hempel (Ahlström, 2002):

the package was unique and the less equals more concept was very attractive to commercial partners who
wanted greater exclusivity. The market place had become very cluttered with commercial messages … our idea was to invite eight partners to deliver messages with a much clearer voice – and this was later reduced to four.

This concept was ‘innovative and commercially adapted to changing market conditions’ (Thompson and Magnus, 2003: 50), consisting of ‘a select group of sponsors with an integrated communications platform’ (UEFA and TEAM, 1999: 40).

Initially UEFA/TEAM opted for eight sponsors; this was reduced to four in 2000–01 (current UCL sponsors are Mastercard, since 1994; Playstation, since 1997; Heineken, since 2005; and Ford, since 1992), and will be increased to six for 2006–09. With elite football as a core driver of consistently large audiences amongst a key young, male and affluent demographic, UEFA has been able to extract maximum sponsorship value. The key to this has been offering comprehensive coverage in the areas of event and media rights, maximizing value to the sponsors through a carefully controlled synergy, as illustrated in Figure 1.4.

Sponsors receive coverage in stadiums on advertising boards, on interview backdrops, on tickets and match programmes, in hospitality areas, and with other promotional rights. The blanket event rights coverage becomes all the more valuable when connected to media rights across a global network. Sponsors receive exposure not only via the broadcast of the event, but also by receiving exclusivity for their products in commercial airtime and through broadcast sponsorship (which now includes a ‘match bumper’ played directly before each half and after the final whistle). This has

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**Figure 1.4**
UEFA Champions League sponsorship rights (source: UEFA/TEAM, 1999: 40)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event rights</th>
<th>Media rights</th>
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<tr>
<td>Advertising boards</td>
<td>Broadcast sponsorship</td>
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<td>Tickets and hospitality</td>
<td>Commercial airtime</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stadium and branding</td>
<td>Use of logo and designation</td>
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made it almost impossible for rival companies to engage in ‘ambush marketing’ by attempting to associate with the UCL. Indeed, in the first season of the UCL, shirt sponsorship was not allowed in the competition, although this caused problems for clubs with their own sponsors and the decision was reversed. Overall, however, TEAM has created a ‘multiplying media effect’ that offers new levels of recognition for sponsors (Thompson and Magnus, 2003: 50).

The value of the UCL is clearly recognized by sponsors, who invested a total of 177 million Swiss francs in 2003–04. Sponsors have consistently reflected on the global product that UEFA is able to deliver:

Football is the most popular sport in Mastercard’s key markets. With that in mind, our continuing partnership with UEFA is a powerful platform to build the Mastercard brand among the existing 350 million Mastercard holders in Europe, whilst also creating potential with existing customers.

(Jeremy Nichols, Commercial Director, Mastercard Europe, in ‘Mastercard extends commitment with UEFA as official UEFA Champions League sponsor and UEFA Eurotop partner’, UEFA Media Release 144, 7 December 2005.)

The significant global audience that the UEFA Champions League delivers will provide Sony Electronics with an unrivalled media platform to further build brand image and increase product awareness.

(David Patton, Senior Vice President, Sony Electronics Europe, in ‘Sony Electronics to join as official partner of the UEFA Champions League’, UEFA Media Release 106, 13 September 2005.)

This new and exclusive partnership with the UEFA Champions League, allows us to build on and consolidate our successful association with football. The UEFA Champions League offers Vodafone two new benefits: firstly it extends Vodafone's football relevance to supporters around the world and secondly it offers fans access to unique and compelling content through the Vodafone network, both of which will increase our brand awareness and drive revenue.

(Peter Bamford, Chief Marketing Officer, Vodafone, in ‘Vodafone announces new football sponsorship’, www.vodafone.com , 23 November 2005.)
We are delighted to have extended our sponsorship of the UEFA Champions League. With over 4 billion viewers per season in 227 nations around the world, this premier sporting event has become truly global and fits perfectly with the Heineken brand.

(Jean Francois van Boxmeer, Heineken N.V., in ‘Heineken brand to sponsor UEFA Champions League’, www.heinekeninternational.com, 25 May 2005.)

Vodafone’s partnership in particular points to the synergies between football as popular premium content, new technologies, and global television audiences. The success of centralized marketing for sponsors can also be positively measured in terms of the sponsorship longevity. By the twelfth season of the UCL, the average length of sponsorship tenure was ten years (UEFA and TEAM, 2004: 21). Product recall amongst consumers is high. At the end of the 2003–04 group stage, 20.75 per cent of sampled consumers were able to recall all four sponsors unprompted (UEFA and TEAM, 2004: 23). Additionally, sponsors have specifically linked the launch of new products to the UCL. For example, Ford utilized the knock-out stages of the 2004–05 tournament to launch the new Focus model. In the run-up to Christmas 2004, Playstation used all six matchdays to promote its product intensively. In addition to the sponsorship programme, UEFA also has accredited suppliers (currently adidas, Sharp and Canon) which enjoy similar privileges to sponsors, providing the goods and technology required to manage a tournament of the scale of the UCL. This integrated sponsorship platform has allowed UEFA and TEAM to maximize these revenues for the clubs.

New media and licensing

Whilst television and sponsorship revenues account for the vast majority of Champions League income, the commercial optimization of the competition is further enhanced through the sale of new media and licensing rights. The official adidas ball, for example, is the best selling licensed product. According to UEFA, this ‘performs a valuable brand building function’ and ‘acts as a permanent reminder of the UEFA Champions League’ (UEFA and TEAM, 2004: 24). Other licensed products include Champions (the official UCL magazine) and table football. Whilst the sums generated for UEFA by licensed goods are relatively small, such products add to the brand awareness.
New media are also providing a growing revenue stream to be exploited. In 2003–04, new media rights generated over 5 million Swiss francs (UEFA, 2005: 32). New media have become increasingly important since the intervention of the Competition Directorate of the European Commission objected to the joint selling of rights. One of the reasons for the intervention of the Commission was that ‘internet and phone operators were simply denied access to the rights’ and that ‘by barring access to key sport content it also stifled the development of sport services on the internet and of the new generation of mobile phones’ (see also ‘Commission clears UEFA’s new policy regarding the sale of media rights to the Champions League’, Press Release OP/03/1105, Brussels, 24 July 2003). In an agreement with the Commission, UEFA opened up the sale of rights to new media outlets, sharing the rights with clubs. UCL footage is broadcast on the UEFA website (www.uefa.com) and is sold through monthly and annual subscriptions in nine languages. Footage is also available through club websites, for the clubs themselves to exploit. In order to protect the rights of broadcasters, this content is not available until after midnight on the evening of the games (UEFA and TEAM, 2005: 13). Third-generation mobile phone technology has also been exploited. Wireless content which includes video highlights, text commentary, and still pictures is available in thirty-five countries through operators such as Vodafone, Orange and T-Mobile (UEFA and TEAM, 2005: 13). Whilst new media revenues constitute just a fraction of overall revenues (6 per cent), they are likely to become increasingly important. Interestingly, new media content is one area where there is a departure from the central marketing concept, and clubs are able to deal individually, within constraints. Both the clubs and UEFA were happy with the outcome of the Commission’s intervention as it allowed UEFA to continue to control the most valuable television rights but in terms of new media, according to Thomas Kurth, General Secretary of the G14 organization of clubs, ‘it leaves to the individual club something valuable which can be better exploited by the clubs themselves’ (personal interview, 18 January 2005). The regulatory intervention of the European Commission, alongside technological developments, made the marketing an increasingly complex task, as Richard Worth explains:

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\text{in the early days, it was only a free-to-air Wednesday night TV product with sponsorship as well. Now it is a multilayered free-to-air, pay-TV, internet, mobile phone, sponsorship property which is a very sophisticated thing. In a sense the challenge is bringing all those components together, and making it work.}\]

The brand

The brand theme: ‘Prestige’ and ‘Heritage’

The sporting product and the central marketing strategy constitute the most significant factors in the successful development of the UCL. The effectiveness of the central marketing strategy is, however, enhanced and maximized through the effective branding of the competition. This constitutes one of the most fascinating elements in the development of the UCL both as a competition and as a commercial vehicle.

The transformation of the European Cup into the UCL sparked concerns amongst supporters and the media about the devaluation of the competition and the triumph of commercial interests over sporting considerations. In that context, UEFA has been acutely aware of the need to associate the UCL with the traditions and heritage of the revered European Cup. This is evident in the creation of customs with regard to the competition itself. For example, clubs which win the tournament three consecutive times, or five times in total, are entitled to keep the trophy itself. Similarly, such clubs are also entitled to wear a special badge on the sleeves of the club shirt identifying this achievement. Such customs help to entrench the longevity and legitimacy of the competition, and increase the meaning of the competition’s history. In marketing terms, the result has been a concoction of contemporary, cutting-edge marketing techniques aligned with half a century of European Cup history. UEFA itself recognizes the importance of blending these two facets. Its literature on the UCL focuses heavily on the heritage of the competition, and there is an explicit recognition of the need to relate that heritage to the modernization of the competition. It is the brand that allows this to be achieved visually. For example, the UEFA publication UEFA Champions League: Giving the Fans the Best Club Football Competition in the World (UEFA, 2003), which is aimed at ‘everyone who has a professional interest in the UEFA Champions League’ and is a guide to the branding of the competition for the 2003–06 cycle, focuses immediately on the history of the competition since 1956:

The UEFA Champions League has consistently set new standards since its launch, whilst always respecting the rich heritage of the European Champion Clubs’ Cup. Irrespective of whether one considers the history of the competition to have started in 1955 or 1992, the competition to establish the Champion Club of Europe has always represented the very pinnacle of club football. The likes of Alfredo di Stefano, Bobby Charlton, Johan Cruyff,
Franz Beckenbauer and Marco van Basten are among the countless legends who have caught the imagination over the years as well as the current stars that grace the UEFA Champions League, including Zinedine Zidane, David Beckham and Oliver Kahn. 

(UEFA, 2003: 2)

Thus the competition is intrinsically tied to the great players and past contests of the European Cup. The branding operation constitutes a deliberate and explicit attempt to marry the twin requirements of modernization and fostering continuity which underpin what UEFA refers to as the brand platform. This includes the vision (‘to create the ultimate stage for Europe’s club championship’); the mission (‘giving fans the best competition in the world’) and the brand values (‘proud, special, in touch, passionate’). According to UEFA: ‘It is the brand that helps deliver the values of the event and provides the strategic direction for all activities connected with the event’ (UEFA, 2003: 6).

Brand identity

UEFA itself (UEFA, 2003: 8) has stated:

The UEFA Champions League, like any other global brand, is complex in character. Whilst it is perceived in slightly different ways by the various audiences across Europe, prestige is at the heart of the UEFA Champions League brand image.

It is through the brand that UEFA has attempted to deliver the image of prestige to supporters and the wider European football industry, and this brand consists of three key elements: the UEFA Champions League anthem, the house colours and the starball symbol. These constitute the ‘long term foundations of the brand’ (UEFA, 2003: 28). To this we would add the symbolic importance of the trophy itself.

The UEFA Champions League anthem

At 8.45 pm Central European Time on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, the same piece of classical music can be heard at stadiums and television screens across Europe. The choice of Handel’s Zadok the Priest as the theme of the UEFA Champions League epitomizes the aim to associate the competition with very specific implications. The piece reflects a classical approach, again associating the
competition with historical and prestigious connotations. In choosing *Zadok the Priest*, not only have UEFA and TEAM sought to convey connotations of exclusivity, they have also succeeded in differentiating the competition from other club competitions. As TEAM Chief Executive Richard Worth has previously noted, sporting contests have often been brashly branded with popular music denoting youthfulness (King, 2004: 327–328). In England, music associated with the Premier League has included that by Elton John and U2. Interestingly, BBC Television has also utilized classical pieces when broadcasting the FIFA World Cup, this time reflecting the elite game in national team, as opposed to club, football.

The anthem was adapted by the English composer Tony Britten and has become synonymous with the competition. The lyrics, created and translated into a variety of languages, end with the words ‘The Champions!’ at the finale of a rising chorus. The consistency with which the anthem is used also consolidates its distinctiveness. This culminates in the playing of the anthem at the stadium at the moment the winning captain lifts the trophy. UEFA has clearly been pleased with the impact that the anthem has had regarding the recognition of the anthem in association with the competition. By utilizing the anthem in all UEFA Champions League television broadcasts, and at match venues prior to kick off, UEFA has succeeded in utilizing a classical piece to popularize a transformed competition. This is what UEFA has referred to as the ‘ability to marry a prestige position with mass appeal’ (UEFA, 2003: 8).

Research has shown this to be true, as the anthem is more readily identified with the competition than the logo or even the name. The impact has been dryly noted by Rangers FC executive Campbell Ogilvie: ‘the worst thing is to be out of it and hear the Champions League music on TV!’ (Ahlström, 2002: 21)

Visual representations of the UEFA Champions League

The clearest visual symbols of the UEFA Champions League are again a combination of old and new. The trophy, used since 1967 following the award of the first trophy to Real Madrid after their sixth victory, is the ultimate visual emblem of European football’s greatest clubs, players, and competition. The ‘starball’, by comparison, was created as a central aspect of the re-branding exercise following the transition from European Cup to Champions League. The starball symbol has again been created and used to drive the brand values of the competition.

A number of agencies were approached to propose a new visual identity for the competition, and the London-based agency ‘Design Bridge’ was charged with the brief of creating an ‘identity and branding to match the very best of European football’
The starball was designed to reflect the eight 'star' teams that remained in the two group stages following the initial reformulation of the competition. It has been argued that the starball is invested with political meaning. Each star within the ball represents an elite club of European football, therefore entrenching the elite clubs within competition under UEFA control (King, 2004: 332–333). Whilst this overstates the importance of this single visual image, there is little doubt that the symbol has become a crucial signifier of the UEFA property. According to sports branding consultant Richard Markell:

The UEFA Champions League logo is a modern classic that captures in its 'starball' symbol the elite world of Europe's top club competition and classic matches between top clubs. It has a subliminal aura of glamour about it.

(UEFA, 2003: 28)

TEAM executives Craig Thompson and Ems Magnus have confirmed the impetus behind the new visual creation. Additionally, they note how the musical theme and the starball work together as part of a common theme of prestige and tradition: 'The simple yet striking new logo, combined with the classical musical theme, gave the new competition an elevated image and prestigious feel' (Thompson and Magnus, 2000: 50). Whilst more than a decade has passed since the starball emerged, to the point that it is recognized in isolation as a symbol of the Champions League, it is rare that the starball is employed without being juxtaposed to the brand of UEFA (Figure 1.5). UEFA has not sought to hide the importance or meaning of this:

The UEFA arch in the Champions League logo is the brand behind the brand, and acknowledges within the competition logo the organization which is responsible for staging the event. The UEFA presence is measured, it does not confuse or detract from the competition logo, but provides a subtle yet very powerful endorsement.

(UEFA, 2003)

In the context of the politics of European football, UEFA has cleverly used the opportunity to re-brand as an opportunity to consolidate its own presence as the legitimate organizer of European club competition by offering 'subtle endorsement'. TEAM Chief Executive Richard Worth also confirmed UEFA's wish that the starball and the UEFA arch should never be 'split up' (quoted in King, 2004: 325).
It is within the utilization of the starball that the house colours of the UEFA Champions League brand are most evident. The house colours of black, white and silver were chosen specifically to generate connotations of history, prestige, and preciousness – according to Richard Worth: ‘Let’s be different. Let’s go for a classical style. Let’s go for simple colours. Let’s go for precious silvery colours, black and white’ (quoted in King, 2004: 327–328). King claims, for example, that the black and white engenders memories of the old television footage of the early days of the European Cup, again specifically relating the modernized tournament and marketing concept with old European Cup and thus legitimizing the transformed competition. Similarly, he suggests that the silver reflects the history of a tournament under floodlights and famous European nights. More plausibly, the silver reflects the preciousness and history represented in the trophy. The use of black, white and silver has been consistently employed, and is emphasized by the deep midnight blue used as a background colour to much of UCL in particular television sequences, and various other backdrops. When the silver is superimposed onto the midnight blue, there is a clear evocation of the history and glamour of European Cup. In the same way that other sporting competitions...
have used popular music, the colours employed in UCL branding also set it apart from other competitions in visual appearance.

The trophy

Whilst the starball, anthem and house colours were the audio-visual creations that emerged from the European Cup, it is the trophy that remains, predictably, the most identifiable and prestigious symbol of the competition. Interestingly, through the bulk of the competition the trophy is conspicuous by its absence in the branding of the UCL, apart from in the opening sequences of broadcasts. Prior to the final in Munich in 1997 the image of the cup could not be used for legal reasons; however, since 1997 there has been a departure from the UCL brand concept for the final tie, and it is in this special unique branding exercise that UEFA and TEAM utilize the symbolism of the famous trophy, one of football’s most iconic symbols.

By restricting the use of the trophy until the final itself, its lustre and value is enhanced. The more rarely the silverware appears, the more special and precious it becomes. Craig Thompson, an executive, explains the development of his own understanding of this special symbol:

As an American the cup hadn’t meant that much to me. But when I saw how much of an icon it was to people in Europe, I felt that we should be making better use of it to promote the final and the competition. So we began the tradition of offering the trophy to the host city a month or so before the final and the Handover Ceremony has become an established part of the fixture list.


The branding of the final tie has become distinctive, and has been designed to amalgamate the image of the competition and the cup, with cultural references to the host country and city. For the Paris final in 2000 the art nouveau typeface used for the final branding mirrored that used on the Paris metro, and in Glasgow a Celtic font was employed. In Istanbul in 2005, the image and the lines of the cup were cleverly adapted and incorporated with the symbolism and colours of Turkey and the architecture of the host stadium – the moon and star, and deep scarlet reds (Figure 1.6). In the design of backdrops, a subtle and understated starball was also included. According to English and Pockett (www.english-pocket.com), the design agency responsible for the final branding:

Our event branding combined the Champions League identity with the host country’s national flag by echoing
its key graphic elements – the moon and star. Traditional designs from a Turkish mosque were combined with the red of the flag to create a distinctive graphic style.

The final branding received blanket coverage in Istanbul. From the airport to city centre to stadium, lampposts were adorned with UCL final imagery, with of course ample space offered to exclusive UCL sponsors and suppliers. So whilst the overall branding of the UCL conveys history and prestige, the unique branding of the final itself develops this concept even further by integrating the trophy and heightening the sense of occasion and significance of the final tie.

Branding implementation

The UCL brand theme is encapsulated within the brand identity – the symbols of the UCL. But perhaps the most impressive of all the success factors in marketing the UCL is how the concept of centralized branding and commercial control is implemented. The successful creation of the brand is accompanied by a strategy that involves the comprehensive utilization of the brand and control of event management, both in stadiums and through the media. The comprehensive implementation of the brand identity consistently both reinforces the identity of the competition and serves to entrench the competition in the consciousness of
European football fans, and this reinforces the competition as the legitimate means by which to decide Europe's best club. This consequently reinforces UEFA's role in the organization of the contest. To complete the virtuous circle, sponsors and broadcasters accrue financial benefit from association with the competition.

Event management and identity

Implementation of the centralized marketing concept can be most strongly identified in the sporting arena. Initially, this was one of the more controversial aspects of the development of the UCL. European football clubs traditionally have a high degree of commercial and organizational autonomy. For the UCL, stadiums become the property of UEFA/TEAM and have a dedicated 'specially trained venue team' (UEFA and TEAM, 1999: 42) and each UCL venue is dressed in exactly the same fashion. Initially this caused a degree of friction with the competing clubs, as Campbell Ogilvie of Rangers FC explains: 'In the early days there were also situations where clubs resented a group of outsiders turning up at the ground and telling them how to organize a match at their own stadium. The clubs were at loggerheads with UEFA and TEAM.' However, the value of the transformation was soon recognized by the clubs as Ogilvie notes: 'Fortunately, the package was absolutely top class and the partnership concept in the UEFA Champions League has to be considered one of football's great success stories' (Ahlström, 2002: 21).

Not all analysis of the central marketing concept and the growing influence of the event managers has been complimentary. Football sociologists John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson of the University of Brighton, for example, see the transformation as evidence of a growth in commoditization and the increasing influence of the commercial deal-brokers:

Watching UEFA's hugely influential partners ... police the commercial and company icons of the fully commodified modern football stadium, checking every detail of their constructed world like bodyguards protecting an American president, is to catch a glimpse of who controls international football's golden triangle in an expansionist phase of the people's game.

(Sugden and Tomlinson, 1998: 99)

There is certainly some truth in this. Whilst, the centralized marketing concept has generated greater financial value, sporting arenas have become increasingly sanitized and less unique. The supporter experience, it has been argued, has become less authentic,
which is alienating for some fans. This has been referred to as a process of ‘McDonaldization’ (Duke, 2002; Sandvoss, 2003). Similarly, the rows of empty seats at the front of some stadiums due to the requirements of sponsors and the size of hoardings identifies shifting priorities away from ordinary match-going supporters and in favour of commercial partners. However, there is little doubt that the standardization of the competition enhances its commercial value, with sponsors and broadcasters attracted to an integrated and homogenized product. Similarly, it is worth remembering that by optimizing the commercial potential of the competition UEFA is able to increase investment in the development of European football.

The stadiums are thus dressed identically, architectural differences notwithstanding. At each venue the words ‘UEFA Champions League’ can be seen at the halfway line facing the cameras, flanked all the way around the pitch with the advertising hoardings of sponsors and suppliers. All existing stadium advertising is removed or covered, and each tier of the stadium is wrapped by a dynamic version of the starball symbol in simple black and white colours. Before the commencement of each game, a large starball covers the whole centre circle. As the teams emerge onto the pitch, the starball is lifted and shaken to generate a simple but stirring effect. According to Keith Young of Design Bridge, the agency responsible for creating the starball, this constitutes ‘a perfect way of establishing and asserting the competition’s identity and we’ve seen this copied at other events’ (Ahlström, 2002: 103). Simultaneously, the UCL anthem Zadok the Priest is played over the stadium sound system. Not only are these pre-match routines replicated across venues, they are also choreographed so assiduously as to be almost simultaneous. As Vic Wakeling, Managing Director of British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB), states (personal interview, 23 March 2005):

There is a branding there that football fans now recognize. They say ‘it’s Champions League; it’s on Sky; it’s great’. It’s the detail they go into. At 7.45 on the first Tuesday, and then the first Wednesday, you are looking at our six screens on a Tuesday and eight screens on a Wednesday night and all the teams are in the tunnels, and they are all coming out in sync. And you are looking at that and you are thinking this is absolutely wonderful. Who else has made this happen? This is TEAM in liaison with UEFA officials. Just to make that happen is marvellous. For someone like ourselves, who wants to put those 8 screens up there, and you see them all coming out, you see them all lining up, they kick off … they make our life easy.
Few stones are left unturned in the venue branding exercise. Stewards sport the starball logo on jackets, the players on the arms of their shirts. All match tickets and accreditation passes are branded and include the various logos of sponsors and suppliers. Away from the immediate vicinity of play, the brand identity is also ubiquitous. A special corporate hospitality area is branded as the ‘Champions’ Club’. The professionalism with which implementation of the UCL marketing concept is delivered is widely recognized inside UEFA and by the competing clubs:

At the end of the day, the players like it, they like the ambience, they like the dressing, they like the atmosphere. It's different from any league game. It's higher class. It's the best competition of the world, club-wise, by far. They are all thrilled at the big games, and the crowd, and it's much better organized with all due respect, than any domestic league. And for the clubs, which are now businesses, they are getting a lot of money … and if they were then to have to go to the hassle of organizing it themselves, and to go and get an agency, why should they do that, for the time being, as long as we deliver? Which is for us an incentive to deliver, as we know that the day that we don’t deliver, somebody else may do.

(Philippe Le Floc’h, Director, Marketing and Media Rights, UEFA, personal interview, 19 November 2004.)

I’ve worked closely with them (UEFA), on Champions League games and hosting the Champions League final at Old Trafford, I think it's a very well organized body. They’ve got a lot of very good professionals in there, they’ve got a mixture of people who understand football and have been in it for a long time, and I think that to my mind it’s an efficient structure as evidenced by the excellent Champions League.

(David Gill, Chief Executive, Manchester United, personal interview, 28 January 2005.)

UEFA, they do it well. The Champions League is perfectly well managed: the presentation, the commercialization, the dressing of the stadiums, it feels like a special competition, and it’s done very, very well.

(Rick Parry, Chief Executive, Liverpool FC, personal interview, 17 February 2005.)

I think they are perceived by the clubs as an organization that has delivered a very high quality job; they are performing very well. They have corrected certain things the
clubs didn’t like at the beginning. I think they are doing a very good job. Somebody will always have to do this job. And they, right now, are delivering it at a very high level.  
(Thomas Kurth, General Secretary, G14, personal interview, 18 January 2004.)

Television identity

Of course the impact of stadium branding is transmitted most effectively and lucratively through television, through which 99 per cent of fans access the competition (UEFA and TEAM, 2004: 16). Stadium branding, however, is only one aspect of UCL event branding. The television production itself is also a vital means through which the competition is marketed to fans and wider to consumers. This is achieved through uniformity of coverage packaged around live games.

We have already touched upon the global impact of the UCL and the worldwide television audience. Of course, it is ultimately the product that makes the UCL the global sporting success that it is, but the manner in which the competition is packaged clearly adds commercial value, through the development of a recognizable and respected brand. The television title sequence plays an important role – ‘a unique and valuable promotional platform’ and a ‘branding tool … to differentiate the Champions League broadcasts from any other television programme’ (UEFA, 2003: 30). By controlling this aspect of presentation, the UCL is removed from the control of broadcasters who might wish to portray a different image. The sequences have developed over the life of the UCL, but the key symbols of starball, colours and anthem have remained. The 2003–06 brand, developed by design company English and Pockett, is based on the theme of connection – between star players, club and fans. This is particularly effective on television, as the movement and connection of the stars in the opening sequences consist depicts the clash of clubs and players in the context of a prestigious sporting contest. Again, the silver stars housing the images appear on a midnight blue background, accentuating the distinctive night-time aura and the value of the tournament. The brand is also heavily concentrated in the overall television coverage. The on-screen graphics showing match results, group tables, fixtures, the score-line during play, the team line-ups and formations, are all branded with the starball on the midnight blue backdrop. Studios have UCL-branded furnishings, and post-match interviews are conducted in front of branded backdrops featuring the logos of sponsors and suppliers.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of how successful the branding of the UCL has been is the exemption given to UEFA by the
Competition directorate of the European Commission. Competition authorities across Europe have taken a close interest in how the rights to football competitions have been sold by the respective authorities. In Italy, for example, central selling was ruled illegal, and the European Commission has investigated central selling deals in England, Germany and France. The Commission objected to the central sale of UCL television rights due to the fact that UEFA sold to a single broadcaster on an exclusive basis in each country and the consequences of that for broadcasting markets in Europe. Although UEFA was forced to re-evaluate the manner in which rights were sold, it was allowed to continue selling the rights centrally on the basis that ‘UEFA’s joint selling arrangement leads to the improvement of production and distribution by creating a single branded league focused product sold via a single point of sale’ (Commission decision of 23 July 2003 (COMP/C.2-37.398 – Joint selling of the commercial rights of the UEFA Champions League. See also ‘Commission clears UEFA’s new policy regarding the sale of media rights to the Champions League’, Press Release IP/03/1105, Brussels, 24 July 2003). The Commission recognized that the central selling was important for the brand, which is:

associated with a uniform and high quality TV coverage underpinned by homogeneous presentation which increases attractiveness for the viewer. These are also factors which attract the best football clubs who want to participate in the competition. Indeed, the quality with which the tournament is marketed is an intrinsic factor in the inclination of clubs to work within the existing framework of competition.

Conclusions

UEFA and TEAM have created a benchmark in the marketing of football’s premier club competition. We have analysed the key success factors in building the UEFA Champions League into a global sports brand. At the heart of its success is the sporting product itself. The competition provides the platform for Europe’s most famous and best-supported clubs and the best players, whilst offering opportunities to lesser clubs and nations. In marketing the product, the central marketing strategy allows UEFA, in association with TEAM, to control and address every aspect of the branding and organization of the competition. Only by exercising this degree of control can each important aspect of the competition be delivered to the highest possible standards, and optimize the potential of the golden triangle of football, TV and sponsorship.
Whilst the UCL constitutes a slick and effective commercial machine, UEFA’s control of the competition ensures that sporting considerations remain a high priority. The removal of the second group stage, for example, has generated a greater degree of interest, excitement and unpredictability, and was achieved despite concerns from the clubs that there would be a decline in revenues. Equally, the decision to ensure that the competition remains on free-to-air television ensures that the competition is accessible, reaching the widest audience. The competition is widely consolidated in the public consciousness, whilst simultaneously delivering messages of history and continuity and thus strengthening the longevity and legitimacy of the contest. The symbolic branding of the competition has been the key means through which this has been achieved.

Whilst each individual factor plays a vital role in construction of the global brand, ultimately it is the holistic approach to the marketing of the competition that sets it apart. Each success factor is important in so far it exists as a part of an integrated whole. By attending to every last detail in the branding and organization of the UCL, the competition, like a good football team, becomes more than the sum of its individual components. The importance and value (sporting and commercial) of the competition is therefore enhanced and magnified for all participants – clubs, spectators and commercial partners. In the complex environment of European football’s political network, UEFA consolidates its own position as the legitimate controller of club competition by fostering a contest of consistently high interest and standard and by marketing that contest to the highest professional standards, and to the satisfaction of football’s most influential stakeholders.

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