

Sports

Manchester City's brilliance comes at a cost

On Soccer

BY RORY SMITH

MANCHESTER, ENGLAND The problem with Manchester City, as Arsène Wenger saw it, was not simply that it possessed an apparently bottomless well of wealth. It was that City was smart, too. “Petrol and ideas,” as Wenger, the former Arsenal manager, put it. “Money and quality.”

Wenger spent much of his career railing against soccer's drift into the grasp of oligarchs and plutocrats, vainly espousing the virtues of sustainability as the game swooned before leveraged billionaires and sovereign investment funds. It was Wenger who first introduced the idea of “financial doping” to the sport, preaching parsimony during a gold rush.

By the end, though, even he did not believe City's success could be explained solely by its balance sheet. Its pre-eminence could not have been achieved without the billion-plus pounds provided by its backer, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan, but it would not have been so complete, had that money not been spent so wisely.

The most obvious manifestation of that has been on the field: Pep Guardiola's team won the Premier League last season with more points and more goals than any team in the modern era.

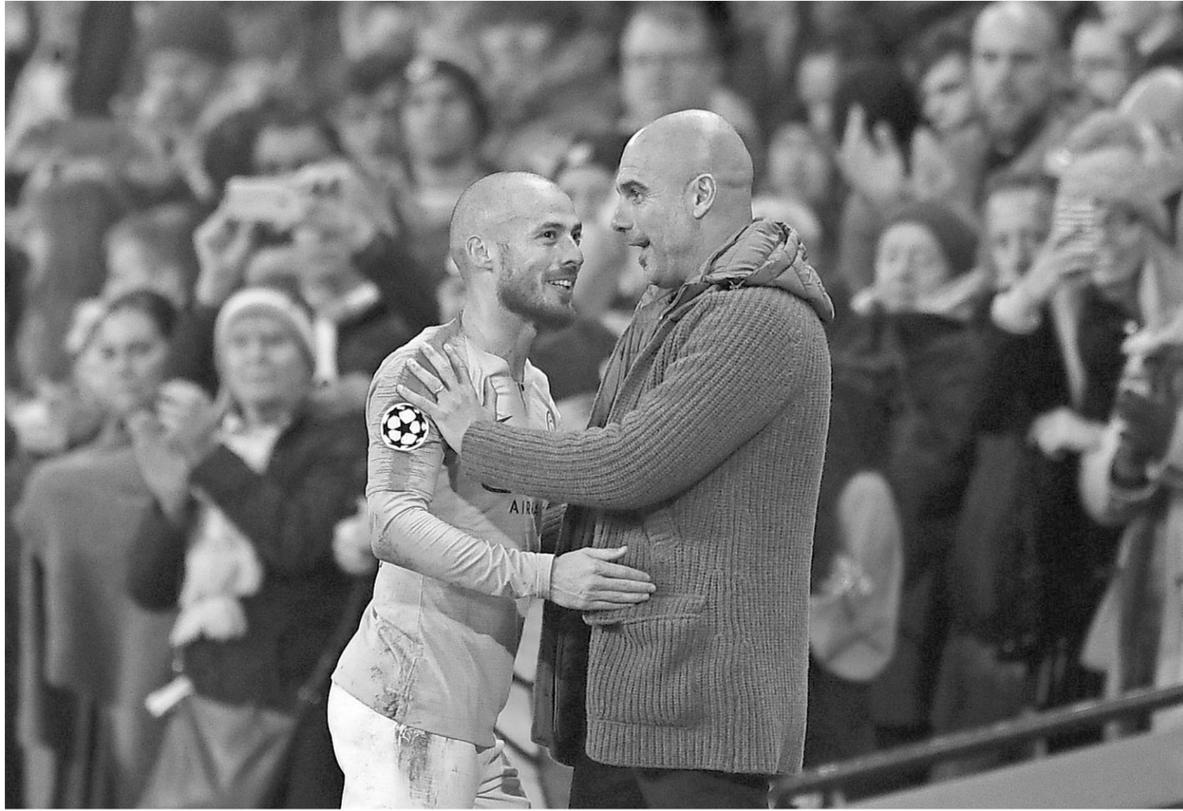
Off the field, though, the modern City has also become a point of reference to many. City Football Group, the umbrella organization that owns City and its interlinked network of sister clubs, has been consulted by the Chinese Super League on how to run its teams more sustainably. In the United States, in particular, Major League Soccer has made use of the vast database of information held by City's recruitment department when assessing potential signings from minor European leagues.

Even Real Madrid, a club more accustomed to leading than following, was impressed by City's model. Real executives told City's chief executive, Ferran Soriano, that it was not something they could copy — Real's prestige would be diluted by franchising, they felt — but they admired the concept. Like everyone else in soccer, they accepted that City was about more than just oil: it had ideas, too.

Increasingly, it seems as though that combination is simply too much for the rest of the Premier League. Guardiola's team has dropped only four points this season; it remains on course to equal, or beat, its points total from last year. On Tuesday, Guardiola was asked if the league as a whole would eventually suffer for City's unimpeachable excellence. “I don't know,” he said, “if it's a problem.”

Similar success in the Champions League, the competition its executives — if not its fans — cherish more than any other, has proved more elusive. City does not need the trophy, though, to know that it has already joined Europe's front rank of teams. In the documents released by the whistleblowing platform Football Leaks to the German magazine Der Spiegel, five Premier League clubs were named as party to a plan to start a breakaway European Super League — replacing the Champions League — starting in 2021. City was among them.

Those documents, though, have painted an entirely different picture of City from the one that had convinced so many of its opponents to follow its example.



Manager Pep Guardiola with David Silva in Manchester City's win over Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League. City's success has yet to carry over into that competition.

In a weeklong exposé of the methods the club has used to circumvent UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations — to, in a comment attributed to Simon Pearce, one of the club's most influential executives, “do what we want” — Der Spiegel and Football Leaks have depicted a club that has, for almost a decade, worked tirelessly to deceive and co-opt the game's authorities, to make sure the rules do not apply to City; and whenever it has not gotten its way, it has reacted with petulant anger.

There are details of inflated sponsor-

ship deals designed to mask covert cash injections from the club's owners; of closed payment loops with spurious third-party companies for players' image rights; of a former manager's salary that seems, at least in part, to have been bolstered by an “advisory” role with another club owned by Sheikh Mansour; of a secret partnership with a Danish team that may have breached rules on a club's influence; of legal threats toward not only UEFA but to the accounting firm sent in to examine the club's accounts; and of back-room deals with Gianni Infantino,

at the time the general secretary of UEFA and now the most powerful man at FIFA.

Nobody comes out of the revelations well: not Infantino, craven and crawling; not UEFA, willing to prosecute the minnows while the sharks swim free; not the clubs, led by Bayern Munich, which talked of leaving not only UEFA but FIFA itself in search of more money; not Javier Tebas, the president of La Liga in Spain, who has called for those guilty of “dirty tricks” to be punished, which would coincidentally help several of the teams in his compe-

tion; not the clubs or organizations who should be righteously angry at flagrant rule breaches but who have maintained the silence of the complicit; and certainly not City — or, for that matter, Paris Saint-Germain — which signed up to a set of rules and promptly searched for ways to break them.

The New York Times has not seen the source documents Der Spiegel has obtained, and cannot verify them. But City has not declared any of the information reported so far to be false. It has simply dismissed the documents

P.S.G. admits racial profiling of recruits

PARIS

BY ELIAN PELTIER
AND TARIQ PANJA

The French soccer powerhouse Paris St.-Germain acknowledged Thursday that for the past five years some of its scouts had used racial profiling in the recruitment of young players, hours after a news media report that it was part of an effort to limit the number of black players signed by the club.

The charges of discrimination were outlined in a report by Mediapart, which is part of a European investigative journalism collective that has used hacked documents to produce a series of articles on the internal workings of several top European soccer clubs. On Thursday, Mediapart published scouting reports it said were used by P.S.G. recruiters from 2013 until earlier this year to evaluate young players; along with

evaluating a player's physical and technical skills, scouts were asked to check a box noting each player's “origin.”

The club, which has been transformed into a global force by its Qatari owners, claimed senior officials had no knowledge of the racial profiling program. P.S.G. attributed the form, and the system, to an ex-employee responsible for leading a team that recruited players from outside of the Paris region.

P.S.G. said it began an internal investigation into the profiling last month — “as soon as it was informed” about the tracking of players' ethnicities — even as it acknowledged the form had been in use for years.

“The Club General Directorate had never been aware of an ethnic registration system within a recruitment department nor had it in its possession,” P.S.G. said in a statement. “In view of the information mentioned therein, these forms betray the spirit and values of Paris Saint-Germain.”

P.S.G. already faces questions about its financial affairs after earlier revelations publicized in the so-called Football Leaks scandal. Many of the articles are the result of information obtained in an apparent hack that has exposed internal documents and private emails of top soccer officials.

The P.S.G. recruiting affair comes seven years after an ugly episode in which senior officials of France's soccer federation, including the national team coach at the time, Laurent Blanc, discussed setting up secret quotas limiting the number of players of North African and sub-Saharan origin at its youth training academies. Blanc was cleared of wrongdoing after an inquiry.

The revelations quickly became a national scandal, drawing condemnation and reigniting debates about race and integration in France. The current storm at P.S.G. comes only months after a much-celebrated victory at the World Cup last summer by a France team com-

posed of players from a mix of ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds.

Only months earlier, though, scouts working for P.S.G. were still being asked to identify young players as French, North African, West Indian or Black African, according to a copy of a form that was published by Mediapart and whose original version was reviewed by The New York Times.

Mediapart reported that Marc Westerlo, P.S.G.'s former head of player scouting outside of the Paris area, suggested in 2014 that the club needed more “balance” because “there are too many West Indian and Africans around Paris.”

Jean-Claude Blanc, P.S.G.'s director general, said in a telephone interview with The New York Times that the comments had sparked turmoil inside the club at the time and that the forms stopped circulating this spring, shortly after Westerlo left the club.

Tariq Panja reported from London.

‘Players are not the game’? Analytics guru clarifies

On Baseball

BY TYLER KEPNER

If you gathered every player in major league history — from Old Hoss Radbourn to Justus Sheffield, more or less — and seated them at Yankee Stadium, you could not even fill half the ballpark. Fewer than 20,000 people have ever played baseball at the highest level. The ability to do so is rare and precious.

Bill James understands this better than most. James has been a groundbreaking, thought-provoking writer and researcher for more than 40 years, relentlessly challenging conventional wisdom. An outsider for decades, he has advised the Boston Red Sox through their run of four championships in this century. His influence on the modern game is profound.

Now, though, James has rankled his team and the players' union with Twitter posts questioning the relative worth of players and suggesting that they are replaceable.

In a Wednesday tweet that has since been deleted, James wrote: “If the players all retired tomorrow, we would replace them, the game would go on;

in three years it would make no difference whatsoever. The players are NOT the game, any more than the beer vendors are.”

In a telephone interview on Thursday, James clarified what he meant.

“I don't speak for the Red Sox, and I try to make that clear as often as I can,” he said. “But from the Red Sox standpoint, we have a responsibility not to offend the players, and it's unfortunate that I did offend the players. I didn't mean to do that. I don't know that the idea that the game endures and we're all just passing through it is inherently an offensive idea. But if I phrased it in an offensive way, that was not my intention.”

The idea of replacing all the players is not as far-fetched as it sounds. At spring training in 1995, after a strike had canceled the previous year's World Series, owners attempted to break the union by using replacement players for exhibition games. That shameful farce nearly bled into the regular season, and players have never forgotten.

Tony Clark, the executive director of the players' association who made his major league debut in 1995, issued a blistering statement on Thursday condemning James's stance.

“The comments Bill James made yesterday are both reckless and insulting considering our game's history



Bill James, the writer and researcher who is a consultant to the Boston Red Sox, caused a stir with comments he made about how easily baseball players could be replaced.

regarding the use of replacement players,” Clark wrote. “The Players ARE the game. And our fans have an opportunity to enjoy the most talented baseball Players in the world every season. If these sentiments resonate beyond this one individual, then any challenges that lie ahead will be more difficult to overcome than initially anticipated.”

Current and former players, like Justin Verlander, Jameson Taillon, Torii Hunter and Al Leiter, also criticized James's comments. The Red Sox moved quickly to distance themselves from him with their own statement:

“Bill James is a consultant to the Red Sox. He is not an employee, nor does he speak for the club. His comments on Twitter were inappropriate

and do not reflect the opinions of the Red Sox front office or its ownership group. Our Championships would not have been possible without our incredibly talented players — they are the backbone of our franchise and our industry. To insinuate otherwise is absurd.”

By wading into the topic of player value, with a new off-season just underway, James may have thrown himself into the kind of Twitter lava that has caused others — in entertainment, media and elsewhere — to lose their jobs. James hopes not.

“I enjoy working for the Red Sox,” he said, “and I would like to continue that as much as I can.”

In the baseball industry, few things are as politically poisonous as floating the notion that players are replaceable. Players were furious last winter about teams' sluggish approach to free agency, and many suspected the owners of colluding against them, as they had in the 1980s. Brodie Van Wagenen — at the time a star player agent, but now the New York Mets' general manager, of all things — even threatened a boycott of spring training.

The owners' reluctance to spend on free agents was often tied to analytics, and the movement James spawned by highlighting the objective reasoning behind the metrics. Front offices in-

creasingly strive to be efficient in finding value, and rewarding free agents for past performance can be wasteful, compared with using young-er and cheaper talent.

Many free agents who signed late last winter did turn out to be overvalued. Could a replacement-level starter have matched the production of, say, Baltimore's Alex Cobb, who was 5-15 with a 4.90 earned run average after signing a four-year, \$57 million contract in March? Or Lance Lynn, who signed with Minnesota for one year and \$12 million, then was 10-10, 4.77, for the Twins and the Yankees?

On Twitter, James cited no specific examples of players being overpaid. But he said it was “asinine to say that players making only a few million a year are underpaid,” as fans and reporters often say when comparing players' salaries.

“It's a question of which perspective you choose,” James said on Thursday, adding later: “I got in trouble by trying to tell people you don't have to choose the players' perspective. That is what I was trying to say: You can choose the perspective of broader society. It makes equal sense to do so. But the sabermetric perspective of it — the view from the marketplace — has become so dominant that it squashes its opposition.”

There is a broader issue here, one that stretches beyond whether City has been punished enough, or whether the fair play rules were well-conceived in the first place. To zoom in on those issues is to get lost in the weeds.

Even as City — like P.S.G. — reportedly poured considerable time, effort and expense into breaking UEFA's regulations, it was simultaneously meeting any threat of a punishment with ire and anger, contemplating whether any potential fine might be better spent on a legal team to take on, and crush, the organization levying it. When the sum it would be forced to pay was eventually decided, City could afford to declare that tens of millions of euros did not “materially affect” its business.

That is the true image cast by the revelations of the last week, one that has ramifications far beyond tribal self-interest: of not just one club, but of a whole host of them that believe the rules should be altered to fit their needs; of teams so inflated by success that they can now casually disregard the dictates of their governing bodies; of teams too big to fail, beyond control.

That is what led City both to deceive and then disdain UEFA. It is what led to the endless changes to the Champions League and the tweaks to domestic cup competitions and a series of bans for illegally approaching, or signing, young players: an essential arrogance, a disregard for consequence, a belief that might makes right.

It is what threatens the fundamental rupture in the fabric of the game best reflected in that Bayern-concocted plot for a breakaway super league that would involve pulling players out of all international soccer, including the World Cup.

Perhaps it is understandable that City tried to circumvent a set of rules designed, to a large extent, specifically to protect the teams it was trying to usurp. Perhaps it was justified in fighting, tooth and nail, the idea that it might be punished by what it considers a rigged system. Perhaps UEFA got lucky that it did not go to court. Perhaps, too, it would be evidence of a skewed morality to condemn City's owners for all of that but not for the allegations of human rights abuses and oppression they have overseen in the United Arab Emirates.

But to turn a blind eye to that, as the game's authorities seem likely to do, is to help yet again usher in a game with one rule for the rich and another for the poor.