

Football Without Fans: Are Matches Just for Gambling?

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INTRODUCTION

On 31 May 2025, French club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) demolished their Italian counterparts Inter Milan with a 5-0 scoreline in the 2024/25 Champions League final. With over 400 million estimated viewers, the Champions League final is arguably the biggest and most prestigious game in club football, making it also one of the most popular betting events of the year. At the same time as the PSG team was celebrating their first Champions League title, much less glamorous games of football were played in warehouses somewhere in Eastern Europe. Low-resolution streams from small-scale recreational facilities include no multi-camera setups, slow motion replays, or visible enthusiasm from the players. Although we still recognize both matches as football, these examples paint two quite different pictures of the global sports-entertainment complex. Somewhat paradoxically, they still have interesting connections that help us see games in a new and interesting way, which is exactly why we are interested in exploring both kinds of football in more detail.

Those small-scale streamed amateur matches can seem inexplicable from the outside. These games seldom have any live, in-person audience, and it seems that the result of the game is unimportant even for the players on the pitch. There are even cases when players swap from one team to another or play game after game for different teams, seemingly just to keep the stream going. As the investigative journalism collective Bellingcat (2024) has recently revealed, the controversial Cyprus-based bookmaker 1xBet takes bets on various obscure amateur sports, including “short football” (mostly 3-aside or 5-aside games). In practice, the main objective of these games, live-streamed only via the 1xBet website, is to attract punters to the site between high-profile matches and to promote the idea of online betting opportunities being omnipresent. Although gambling ads and marketing currently suffuse traditional sports, these streamed amateur matches are distinct because they seem to be played solely for the purposes of industrialized gambling.

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At the top of the professional football hierarchy is PSG, owned by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), an offshoot of Qatar's sovereign wealth fund Qatar Investment Authority. In less than a decade and a half of ownership, the Qatari-owners have spent over €2 billion on player transfer fees (Transfermarkt 2025), building a brand with a worldwide following, and making PSG one of the most valuable clubs in the world. With this process, they have successfully industrialized football for the purposes of preserving geostrategic interests and strengthening national, regional and international reputation (Bianco & Sons 2023). Notably, in September 2025, PSG renewed its deal with 1xBET, making it the club's official betting partner until 2028, connecting industrialized gambling to instrumentalized football and selling its worldwide fanbase to a round-the-clock gambling machine.

We believe the study of 1xBet is inherently interesting as it is 'sport' pushed to its breaking point. The connections with and contrasts to PSG offer additional perspective on what games can be. Our contextualized reading will provide the DiGRA audience a chance to reflect on what makes a sport compelling and how games and sports can serve different, more mechanical and industrial, purposes than we often consider in our case studies.

WHY SHOULD GAME SCHOLARS PAY ATTENTION?

As pointed out by Sicart & Walther (2026), it is rather odd that football, the most popular sport on the planet, remains a marginal topic in game studies. We argue that football, especially when studied through the complex case of 1xBet, provides a different window into thinking about and reflecting on games. Our study shows how football operates as a continuum, building on changing dynamics of privilege and exploitation. During the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, major sporting events were often organized almost entirely without live audiences. When consumed primarily from that distance, sport became less defined by passionate local fanbases and more exposed to instrumental purposes. High-profile competitive football leagues played in empty stadiums made increasingly prominent the role of sports events as a required enabler for sports economics (clubs, leagues, sponsors etc.) and secondary industries (betting, fantasy sports etc.) that are built on the data produced by football matches to function. Effectively, games played in empty wind-beaten arenas require us to consider how different Champions League matches are from many of those streamed amateur matches? What do any of these games actually mean?

We argue that 1xBet and Qatari investment in PSG are topical examples of the ongoing (re)colonization operations conducted in the worldwide gaming and political ecosystems, crash sites where many contemporary cultural, political and economic developments collide. Both the deaths of migrant workers erecting infrastructure for Qatar's World Cup 2022 (Syed 2022) and the marginalized gig economy workers that make 1xBet streams possible remind us of the uneasy work that takes place behind current-day games and the inequalities associated with contemporary platformized cultural production. Looking closely enough at the highs and lows of contemporary football offers a perspective to see the ulterior motives that are often at stake in sports and games. We believe the lessons learned in these case studies can change how we see the contemporary gaming landscape.

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