

# The Royal League. Beliefs and doubts regarding Scandinavia, 2003–2007

By Martin Johansson

## Abstract

The Royal league tournament constituted a Scandinavian equivalent to the UEFA Champions League, consisting of the highest ranked teams from Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The aim of the tournament was to enhance the competitiveness of the Scandinavian teams by offering them high-quality opposition during winter months, when football was otherwise a scarcity. However, the tournament received criticism in the press, and was discontinued after merely three seasons. By analysing Swedish press representations of views on the Royal league, this article explores possible explanations for why the tournament was launched, and why it eventually failed. Especially, the article examines representations relating to the question of why and how Scandinavia was seen as a fertile framework for the tournament, and why this framework eventually proved insufficient for keeping the tournament alive. Through this analysis, the dynamic and volatile nature of the imagined Scandinavian category, especially in relation to audience interest and behaviour, emerges as a viable explanation for both the perceived possibilities of the tournament and for its eventual demise. Thus, the article provides important insights into the functions of Scandinavia as an imagined geography in the world of early 21<sup>st</sup> century sports.

Keywords: football, Scandinavian identity, integration, marketing, media, contemporary history.

Author: Martin Johansson, FD, Södertörns högskola, martin.johansson@sh.se

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## Introduction

The turn of the current century saw an unprecedented boom in the births of transnational football tournaments. Launched in an era marked by belief in globalisation and commercialisation, many of these tournaments grew to become success stories, and tournaments such as the UEFA Champion's League, the FIFA Women's World Cup and the English Premier League are today considered essential elements of the football calendar. It is not without cause therefore that the 1990s and early 2000s have been labelled the dawn-age of modern football's political economy.<sup>1</sup>

It is also no surprise, therefore, that 2004 was the year that the Royal league football tournament was launched amid expressions of great expectations. The tournament included the four highest ranked teams in the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish men's football leagues, and was founded and promoted by interest organisations of elite clubs in the three countries. The tournament was supposed to offer professional football to the whole of Scandinavia during a winter that was otherwise void of elite football, thus enhancing Scandinavian teams' chances of doing well in the big European leagues. However, after only three seasons, the tournament was abandoned as the organisers failed to sell the TV rights.

Against this background, this article explores the Royal league's potential to shed light on possibilities and limits of transnational Scandinavian footballing as a cultural and economic practice in the early 2000s. Methodologically, I will analyse Swedish newspaper texts representing views on the tournament to point out potential explanations for the tournament's eventual demise, but also reasons for its perceived potential. While press coverage of the tournament would have been present in both Denmark, and Norway, the Swedish case constitute a suitable departure point due to the stated tendency of Swedish clubs and agencies to have been somewhat more positive towards the tournament than their Norwegian counterpart, but still not as positive as the Danes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Wilson, *Inverting the pyramid: a history of football tactics* (London 2008); John Horne, "Sports Mega-Events: Mass media and symbolic contestation", in Lawrence A. Wenner & Andrew C. Billings (eds.), *Sport, media and mega events* (Abingdon, Oxon 2017); Stefan Szymanski, *The Comparative Economics of Sport* (London 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Kristoffer Bergström, "Nordisk dragkamp om tv-avtal hotar Royal League", *Aftonbladet*, 21/10–2007, s. 64; Robert Laul, "Klart i dag: Royal League läggs ned", *Aftonbladet*, 29/10–2007, s. 64.

As such, this article serves as an exploratory pilot study aiming to point out plausible directions for future research on the Royal league both within and without Sweden. On a broader level, the analysis of the Royal league will also provide understandings of the functions of the Scandinavian category in the world of sports, and on Scandinavian discourses surrounding elite sports at the turn of the last millennium.

## Overview

Unlike most of Europe's major football leagues, the top divisions in Sweden, Norway and Denmark pauses for prolonged periods during the winter. During this time little or no competitive football is played, and it was within the temporal emptiness created by this shortage that the three installations of the Royal league primarily took place between 2004 and 2007. The tournament featured only men's teams, and the bulk of the games consisted of games played entirely within the winter break. The tournament was won two times by FC Copenhagen and one time by Brøndby IF, meaning that all titles were claimed by Danish teams.

The tournament was then discontinued in 2007, with the failure to sell broadcasting rights being cited as the main cause for the cancellation. While there were plans to resurrect the tournament in 2008, none of these plans came to fruition.<sup>3</sup> The Royal league thus failed to become a standard feature of the Scandinavian footballing calendar, and is today only vaguely remembered, if remembered at all. As an example, the website of 2007 champions Brøndby fails entirely to mention the honour in its overall account for the club's history, while FC Copenhagen's website lists the club's two Royal league trophies below mere group stage qualifications to tournaments such as the Cup winner's cup and the Europa conference league.<sup>4</sup> The Royal league does therefore not immediately qualify as an historical object of interest through its revered place in Scandinavian memory cultures. Rather, it is through its role as a perceived failure that the tournament may shed light on assumptions, norms and regimes governing historical agents that the tournament is of value as a focal point for historians.

Given the recency and alleged irrelevance of the Royal league, it is unsurprising to find out that the tournament has garnered very little interest from previous historical research. Instead, the most thorough attempt to contextualise and make sense of the project as a social and cultural phenomenon consist of Italian sociologist Pippo Russo's analysis of the Royal league as an example of the decline of national categories in the wake of the Cold war. Russo analyses

3 Mikael Wagner, "Royal League – kanske i februari: 'Vi vill ha besked'", *Aftonbladet*, 3/11-2007, s. 59.

4 "Historie", *brondby.com*, <https://brondby.com/klubben/historie> (5/5-2023); "Meritter", *fck.dk*, <https://www.fck.dk/meritter> (5/5-2023)

how the league was created as an attempt to create a competitive environment that the nation state alone could not provide, and links the project to the transnational G-14 conglomerate of rich and powerful clubs such as Manchester United and Real Madrid.<sup>5</sup> Russo does not discuss why the Royal league (unlike the still thriving G-14) eventually failed, nor does he conclude what the tournament reveals about attitudes towards Scandinavia as a region category. Nonetheless, his temporal contextualisation still forms a relevant background to this article. His research also ties into other depictions of the 90's and 00's as a time of rapid commercialisation and globalisation of the men's game, which will bring deeper understanding to many of the texts I analyse.<sup>6</sup>

While acknowledging the transnational flows that commercialisation and globalisation enabled and enhanced around the turn of the last century, this article however also maintains that national categories continued to form an essential framework for the idea of sports throughout the period. Not least, the idea of national rivalry has formed a cornerstone to various modern media narratives, and rivalries have in the Nordic context been shown to have been prominently and often humorously constructed by the media well into the post-cold war era.<sup>7</sup> Research on such matters have however mainly focused on national teams and Olympic games, which means that this articles' focus on club competitions constitute a welcome addition to the field of knowledge.

## Representations of agency

The agents represented in the media that this study analyses may roughly be placed on a scale ranging from organisers and initiators on the one hand, to recipients and evaluators on the other. Among the first group we find the national FA's of the three concerned countries, as well as so called "league corporations", where Sweden's *Svensk elitfotboll* will feature most prominently here due to this exploratory study's focus on Swedish football. These corporations functioned as interest organisations for clubs in the top tiers of the domestic league systems, and will be shown to have been integral to the conception of the tournament. Together with the FA's they constituted the owners of the Royal league, and as such held decision-making powers at board meetings.

5 Pippo Russo, "Local sports in an era of post-territoriality", in Dieter H. Jütting, Bernd Schulze & Ulrike Müller (eds.), *Local sport in Europe. Proceedings of the 4th eass conference 31.05.–03.06.2007 in Münster* (Waxmann Verlag, 2009).

6 David Rowe, *Critical readings: Sport, culture and the media* (Maidenhead 2004); John Horne, "Sports Mega-Events: mass media and symbolic contestation"

7 Raymond Boyle & Richard Haynes, *Power play: sport, the media and popular culture* (Harlow 2000); Martin Johansson, *De nordiska lekarna: grannländer i pressen under olympiska vinterspel* (Huddinge 2023).

In a position in between initiators and evaluators we find the businesses and corporations who functioned as sponsors for the tournament. These were pivotal for funding reasons, and needed to be convinced of the project's viability in order to for it to be successful. Having come on board, however, the interest of these actors became aligned with those of the owners, prompting them to promote the tournament as a product to potential consumers.

Such promotional activity was also carried out by agents closely aligned with actors towards the "recipient" end of the scale, not least in the media. For example, the broadcasting companies, whose eventual disinterest allegedly caused the tournament's demise, did nonetheless broadcast the games, and would have promoted them throughout the history of the tournament, short as it would be. This article will thus examine traces of stances among such agents towards the tournament as expressed both through scepticism and optimism. In the more clear-cut analysis of the indented recipients, the article will focus on reactions and receptions among players, coaches and writers.

## Method and material

Given the article's focus on organisations, it would have been natural and even desirable for archival material from the organisers from the Royal league tournament to be featured as its central source material. However, preliminary studies of the archives of the Swedish Football Association contains little material relating to the tournament, and when it appears it is usually in the form of references to *Svensk Elitfotboll*. Unfortunately, however, this league corporation does not keep records in archives, and have through correspondence informed that they have no unofficial documents left within their premises relating to the competition.

Therefore, this study uses Swedish press coverage of the Royal league as its main source material. More specifically, the sources consist of digitised versions of Sweden's four largest newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, and the study treats press representations within these in two intertwined but nonetheless different ways. On the one hand, newspaper representations are seen as signs of what various agents connected to the project did, said and thought about the Royal league, which will enable a discussion on the forces behind both the tournament and its eventual demise. Such representations may consist of reports, interviews or promotions, and by analysing how and why the papers featured these representations, the article will be able to provide information on the actions of those involved. On the other hand, newspapers are also treated as a sense-makers and recipients of the project in their own independent right, whose voice would have both reflected and impacted attitudes towards the Royal league project. Such functions are often performed by op-ed pieces with a clearly defined authorial

voice, but also by more anonymous framings, promotions, or reactions to the covered events. In all cases, however, the press would have ascribed meaning to the tournament in a way that was relatable to its readers, hence making it able to reveal important assumptions circulating the Royal league as a cultural and economic phenomenon.

## Organisers presenting opportunities

If we are to trust the OCR-scans, the phrase "Royal league" appears for the first time in the analysed Swedish newspapers on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003. On this day, *Expressen* reports that *Svensk Elitfotboll* will present the idea to the clubs of the Swedish top division, and chairman Tommy Theorin expresses optimism regarding the presentation.<sup>8</sup> In a lengthier feature in *Dagens Nyheter* the same day, Theorin says he and the organisers "assume that everyone's positive" towards the new league, since it constitutes an "amazing opportunity", which will benefit the clubs involved and Swedish football as a whole on various levels. Mainly, Theorin argues that the new league will improve the quality of Scandinavian elite football, and make clubs more competitive in pan-European competitions. The winter break in its current form hampers the chances for clubs to remain in form during the dark months of the year, he argues, and he also states that he wants to put an end to the condition where entrance to the UEFA Champions League have become a mere "utopia" for Swedish clubs, far removed from the grim realities of Swedish football.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Theorin points towards the possible financial benefits of the league's installation. The winner of the league is promised three million Swedish crowns, and partaking teams will be able to "prolong the season" and "make revenue during a time of the year when there's [usually] only expenses". Theorin also argues that the league will accelerate the building of new stadia, which he views as a necessary prerequisite for the thriving of Swedish football. He again reiterates the fiscal arguments in an interview in *Expressen*.<sup>10</sup>

Theorin does not explicitly mention Scandinavia or Norden in the article, but focuses instead on professional and financial benefits of Swedish football in particular. Scandinavian cooperation is therefore not presented as an end in itself, but rather as a means to achieve Swedish sporting and financial success. That these goals are prioritised is not surprising given that *Svensk elitfotboll* as an organisation explicitly served to enhance the quality of top-level Swedish football, and as an independent organisation it answered to no decree from states or regions to fulfil ideological aims. Nonetheless, Theorin's statements compare interestingly to Russo's research, since it shows that the national

8 Mathias Lühr, "Kunglig fotbollsliga", *Expressen*, 22/10-2003, s. 44.

9 Wayne Seretis, "Nordisk liga med miljoner till bästa laget", *Dagens Nyheter*, 22/10-2003, s. 69.

10 Seretis *DN* 22/10-2003.

category was perceived as central, albeit threatened, by the instigators of the tournament.

Scandinavian cooperation and commonality are instead highlighted in another *Dagens Nyheter* article the next week, which reports on difficulties involved in reaching an agreement with potential broadcasters. The article features an interview with the chairman of the Swedish FA, Lars-Åke Lagrell, who states that he remains confident that the league will go ahead, and that "our friends in Norway and Denmark" feel the same way. Lagrell appears to perceive Scandinavian friendship and unity as one of the projects' foundational strengths, and even though the comment is far from an explicit policy document, it reveals the underlying assumptions that the project was built upon.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth here also to note the difference between the Swedish FA and *Svensk elitfotboll*, especially since the head of the latter, Tommy Theorin, feature far more prominently than the head of the former in the press as a proponent of the league.<sup>12</sup> While *Svensk elitfotboll* solely looked after the interests of elite club, the Swedish FA aims to monitor and promote football on all levels.<sup>13</sup>

## Launching the league

Negotiations regarding broadcasting and sponsorship deals dragged on through the winter and early spring of 2004, but in April the organisers felt confident enough that the league would go ahead to launch press conferences proclaiming league as a reality. These press-conferences appear to have been organised simultaneously in Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen, with organisation leaders and ex-pro's present at the events.<sup>14</sup> The simultaneous launch would have clearly signalled that no country was above the others in the Royal league hierarchy, and that the tournament was an international rather than a supra-national event.

One main press conference would arguably have constituted a more powerful signal of intent on behalf of the cooperators, but such a launch would have run counter to principles which have governed Scandinavian integration during a large part of its history, namely the ideas of equality between Nordic countries, and that of national sovereignty as a superior goal to transnational integration.<sup>15</sup> Transnationality was instead presented horizontally by

11 Wayne Seretis, "Royal league hotas av tv-avtal", *Dagens Nyheter*, 25/10-2003, s. 2.

12 se för instance Lasse Bexbo, "Tv-miljoner sätter fart på superligan", *Expressen*, 26/11-2003, s. 12; Wayne Seretis, "Skandinavisk liga är nära", *Dagens Nyheter*, 16/11-2003, s. 77.

13 See e.g. newspaper *Svensk fotbollstidning* för årgång 2000-2003.

14 Gert-Owe Gärder, "Klappat och klart för nordisk fotbollsliga", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 30/10-2003, s. 21.

15 Henrik Stenius & Heidi Haggrén, "Det nordiska samarbetets vardagspraktiker: vad vet vi om dessa förutom att de har varit/är viktiga?", in Larserik Häggman (ed.), *Suomi pohjoismaana = Finland i Norden: Suomi 50 vuotta Pohjoismaiden neuvostossa = Finland 50 år i Nordiska rådet* (Pohjola-Norden, 2005).

representatives of neighbouring countries being present at each launch.<sup>16</sup> In the context of the Royal league, this line of thought is echoed by Danish ex-professional Michael Laudrup and the head of Norway's FA being present at the launch in Stockholm.<sup>17</sup>

## Players and coaches

When reporting on the tournament's installation, the press continuously also presented thoughts and quotes from players and coaches on the matter. When Theorin got to present his vision in the spring of 2003 in *Dagens Nyheter*, the newspapers also for instance interviewed Magnus Erlingmark, the club captain of IFK Göteborg, and Anders Linderöth, the coach of Hammarby IF. Both these clubs were competing for top positions in the Swedish *Allsvenskan* at the time, and their perspective was clearly assumed to be relevant.

Both Erlingmark and Linderöth there expressed support for the league, and like Theorin they stressed the importance of playing against competent opponents during the winter months. Linderöth explicitly compares the Swedish footballing calendar to the situation in "Europe", and hopes that the new league will diminish the gap between the two.<sup>18</sup> While principally thus describing the league as the means to an end, Linderöth's quote differentiates in an interesting way between "Europe" and the three Scandinavian countries, in a way that has been described as pivotal to the understanding of Scandinavian identities throughout modernity.<sup>19</sup>

There are undoubtedly voices present in this segment of the coverage who express scepticism from the very beginning. The players union, while admitting that the tournament constitutes an intriguing opportunity, for instance express concern about the opportunities for rest and holidays for the players.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore Bo Johansson, the head coach of the aforementioned IFK Gothenburg, discards the tournament already in an *Expressen* article from October 2003 as a product too focused on the "economy". Johansson deplores that no one has "asked us coaches", and thus clearly connects the project to negative images of commercialisation.<sup>21</sup>

16 Monika Janfelt, *Att leva i den bästa av världar: Föreningarna Nordens syn på Norden 1919–1933* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2005); Peter Stadius, "Hundra år av nordism: Föreningarna Norden i går, i dag, i morgon", in Henrik Wilén (ed.), *Meningen med föreningen: Föreningarna Norden 100 år* (Föreningarna Nordens Förbund, 2019).

17 Berndt Rosquist, "Start för nordisk liga i höst", *Dagens Nyheter*, 6/4–2004, s. 67.

18 Seretis *DN* 22/10–2003.

19 Bo Stråth & Øystein Sørensen, "Introduction", in Bo Stråth & Øystein Sørensen (eds.), *The cultural construction of Norden* (Oslo 1997); Henrik Meinander, "Prologue: Nordic History, Society and Sport", in Henrik Meinander & J.A. Mangan, *The Nordic World: Sport in Society* (London 1998).

20 Seretis *DN* 22/10–2003.

21 Rune Smith, "Royal League blir verklighet redan 2004", *Expressen*, 29/10 2003, s. 47.



Still, Johansson's statements are indirectly countered in the *Expressen* article by the CEO of Hammarby IF, Henrik Appelqvist. Appelqvist, who has also served as a regional politician for the right-wing Moderate party in Sweden,<sup>22</sup> claims that the project is not about the money, but rather about enhancing the competitiveness of Scandinavian football. While Johansson disregards the project as unrealistic, Appelqvist thus lauds the audacity and vision of the organisers.<sup>23</sup>

This discrepancy is highlighted in the press narrative by Johansson and Appelqvist representing two different levels of the footballing organisation, and while Appelqvist was not employed by *Svensk elitfotboll*, he would have had a much closer relationship with the interest organisation than Johansson had. While the opinions of coaches evidently differed from person to person, the juxtaposition of the entrepreneurial character of the Appelqvist as a member of football management, and the "realistic" world view of the Gothenburg coach would not have been lost on the reader. This argument might have been a one-off on Johansson's account, but as we shall see it would return later on in the discourse surrounding the tournament in utterances from other actors. Nonetheless, Appelqvist's denial of economic gain as an end in itself diverges somewhat from Theorin's overt attempts to legitimise the tournament by way of financial arguments.

Sponsors and broadcasters featured in much of the analysed coverage, sometimes as proponents of the league,<sup>24</sup> but also as obstacles to its realisation. For instance, during the first week of the news about the tournament having broken, the *ISSR* company, who held the rights to elite football in Sweden, are presented as the main threat to the plans of *Svensk elitfotboll*. The chairman of the company expresses concern about the operationalisation of the event, and *Expressen* later reports that companies are undecided on whether to buy broadcasting rights.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, newspapers also report that sponsors doubt the tournament's potential as a sellable product, and that some agents express concern about the risk for player injuries and other disruptions.<sup>26</sup>

While organisers and sponsors seem to have been largely uninterested in discussing Royal league as a Scandinavian or identity-related endeavour, the overall impression changes if we turn towards attitudes expressed through the papers' direct framing of the tournament. The words "Nordic" and "Scandinavian" feature frequently in texts that are not produced by quotes from agents attached to the projects, but rather by the journalists themselves, and the tournaments role as a "Scandinavian" championship seem to make it attractive.

22 "Moderaterna i Stockholms stad och län", *moderaterna.se*, <https://moderaterna.se/stockholm/foreningar/skarpnack> (5/5-2023)

23 Smith *Exp* 29/10-2003.

24 Bexbo *Exp* 26/11-2003.

25 Seretis *DN* 16/11-2003.

26 Smith *Exp* 29/10-2003.

For instance, many newspapers stress that the champions of the tournaments will not only receive money, but also the right to call themselves "Champions of Scandinavia".<sup>27</sup> Geography here plays an important part in the representations of the Royal league vision, and *Expressen* presents a possible version of the tournament by showing where the top clubs of each country are situated on a map. On this map, Scandinavia has a light blue colour while bordering countries such as Germany and Finland are dulled in grey. Still, the borders between the three participating nations are also highlighted, meaning that both region and nation forms a part of the narrative of the tournament that the paper intends to sell.<sup>28</sup>

Even during hiatuses in the league's planning and communications, the press continued to refer to the league as a symbol of Scandinavian unity in various contexts, and for instance uses it as an example of friendship between Sweden and Denmark before the two countries meet in the Euros of 2004.<sup>29</sup> Such uses indicate that the newspapers, as coherent actors, were continuously interested in promoting the league as an attractive product to its readers. However, the aforementioned coverage of hesitation and scepticism among broadcasting companies positions the reader in an wholly different relation to the product, and rather constructs an image of the tournament as something boring. The Swedish press can therefore not be said to have wholeheartedly promoted in the project, and while some representations undoubtedly were aimed to create a "hype" around the tournament, others appear to appeal to the reader through captivating stories of potentially spectacular failure.

## Op-eds: praise and initial criticism

As have been the case with most newspapers throughout the history of modern sport,<sup>30</sup> the Swedish press frequently featured op-ed pieces written by a clearly defined author, who debated and defined current events from a personal viewpoint. These writers discussed the Royal league project through various angles, and featured both negative and positive views on the project.

*Aftonbladet* writer Stefan Alfelt, for instance, expressed a positive attitude towards the tournament, and welcomes it in December 2003 as an opportunity for Swedish teams to face competent opponents such as Rosenborg and FC Copenhagen. Once again, the tournament is presented as a path towards bigger things, and Rosenborg and FC Copenhagen are presented as attractive because of their recent European success rather than their domestic ascendancy.

27 Jan Majlard, "Dags för kampen om Skandinavien", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 11/11-2004, s. 27; Johan Rikner, "I Potten – en superstjärna", *Aftonbladet*, 11/11-2004, s. 68.

28 Smith *Exp* 29/10-2003; see also Det här handlar bara om att få in en massa pengar, *Aftonbladet*, 2/12-2003, s. 3.

29 "Här är alla 'släktskapen' mellan fotbollsgrannarna", *Aftonbladet*, 20/6-2004, s. 61.

30 See e.g. Rod Brookes, *Representing sport* (London, 2002).

The idea of the tournament, and by extension Scandinavian cooperation being a "road to Europe" is thus present also in Alfelt's reception of the organisers' promotional activity.<sup>31</sup>

However, Alfelt's position is challenged by many of his colleagues. In both *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, writers disregard the tournament vehemently, and Sune Sylvén of *Svenska Dagbladet* even at one point describes it as a "folly". In his article, Sylvén doubts that anyone "wants to see the Nordic league", and claims that the project is an "economic endeavour" devoid of "meaning, sports-wise". The project is therefore doomed to fail, since such attempts are "luckily seldom successful on Nordic latitudes".<sup>32</sup> Sylvén's argument thus debunks the project from an anti-capitalist viewpoint. However, he also legitimises his scepticism by pointing towards the perceived lack of interest for the "Nordic" category. Popular interest is therefore not seen as a cause for economic gain, but rather juxtaposed as its opposite part. Sylvén's problem however is not that the tournament will commercialise football, but rather that the agents involved fail to appreciate the irrelevance of Norden (or rather Scandinavia) as a category.

The main assumption underpinning Sylvén's argument thus seem to be that of a discrepancy between the unhinged views of the managerial elite which have designed the tournament, and the allegedly sound and realistic realisation that football games between Scandinavian neighbours aren't that exciting. These sentiments are echoed by *Expressen* writer Mats Olsson, who claim that the tournament exist for the sake of the "bank vaults of the clubs" rather than for the sake of "fans, associations and players".<sup>33</sup> The difference between "clubs" and "associations" is not spelled out, but should be understood against the background of many clubs in Sweden at the time move from being pure associations to becoming partly incorporated.<sup>34</sup> The "clubs" in Olsson's world thus stand for greed and commercial interests, while "fans, associations and players" connotes a sense of grass roots and reality based in Scandinavian traditions of a strong civil society,<sup>35</sup> which the Royal league project fails to relate to.

Lastly, the idea that playing against Scandinavian neighbours in the middle of winter is a terrible idea is echoed and further spelled out by *Aftonbladet* writer Lasse Anrell, who decries the format of the tournament weeks before it is about to start. Anrell admits to having been initially positive to the idea, but claims to realise, as he gazes across a "cold, Nordic landscape" that the project

31 Stefan Alfelt, "Underbart, nu blir det fotbollsfest mitt i vintern", *Aftonbladet*, 2/12-2003, s. 2.

32 Sune Sylvén, "Vem vill egentligen se den nordiska ligan?", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 30/10-2003, s. 23.

33 Mats Olsson, "TILL SIST", *Expressen*, 2/11-2003, s. 76.

34 Noa Bachner, *Den sista utposten : en berättelse om svensk fotboll* (Stockholm, 2023).

35 Richard Giulianotti, Hannu Itkonen, Arto Nevala & Anna-Katriina Salmikangas, "Sport and civil society in the Nordic region", *Sport in Society*, 2019 (vol. 22:4)

was a folly from the start. Like Sylvén, Anrell jokingly questions if anyone in Sweden "wants to watch Bodö/Glimt", and also berates the idea of the tournament being "Royal". Intra-Scandinavian footballing competition is, according to Anrell, simply not sellable enough.<sup>36</sup> Notably, Anrell's statements echo earlier critics of proponents of Scandinavian cooperation, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavists, who have later on been berated as overly naïve and delusional.<sup>37</sup> Whether such criticism was justified or not have been debated, but the tradition of lampooning Scandinavian sentiments from an allegedly realistic viewpoint would have enforced Anrell's argument.

## Advertisement

Right before the start of the tournament, the Royal league is repeatedly marketed in the newspapers by way of advertisement. The featured ads are directed towards potential Swedish television viewers, and instead of following the launch events in framing the tournament as an intra-Scandinavian means to a European end, these ads revolve around the theme of Scandinavian rivalry.

In an *Aftonbladet* ad published mere weeks before the tournament is about to start, the headline reads "Sweden has fought wars against Norway and Denmark for a thousand years: this winter, it's time to go again". Below, the ad, in a seemingly egalitarian vein, claims that "Norwegians can't dribble", that "Danes can't pass the ball" and that "Swedes daren't go for goals", but then continues to ask whether it wouldn't be "a drag if the Danes or (even worse) the Norwegians were to win" the tournament. Conclusively, it tells the neighbours to "keep their slimey *smorrebröd* and their dull salmon" since the "Royal League title is on its way to Sweden".<sup>38</sup>

Undoubtedly, the advertising agency responsible for the ad identified intra-Scandinavian rivalry as a selling point for the new tournament. This may not appear unsurprising given the important role played by such rivalries in the formation of the imagined 20<sup>th</sup> century geography of Nordic sports, where media outlets crucially used humour to diffuse and make sense of tensions between rivalry and friendship.<sup>39</sup> Such uses were mainly focused on tensions between national categories, and the Royal league ad notably address nations rather than club teams, revealing thus a wish to follow in the footsteps of older discourses.

36 Lasse Anrell, "Royal league borde grävas ner i någon sumpig leråker", *Aftonbladet*, 3/10–2004, s. 24.

37 Rasmus Glenthøj & Morten Nordhagen Ottosen, *Union eller undergång Del 1: Kampen för ett enat Skandinavien* (Lund 2022).

38 anon., "Sverige har krigat mot Danmark och Norge i tusen år. I vinter är det dags igen", *Aftonbladet*, 10/11–2004, s. 68.

39 Helena Tolvhed, *Nationen på spel: kropp, kön och svenskhet i populärpressens representationer av olympiska spel 1948–1972* (Umeå 2008); Martin Johansson, *De nordiska lekarna*

Given many football clubs' reluctance to identify with their national authority rather than their city or borough,<sup>40</sup> this marketing strategy was indeed less predictable than a first glance may indicate, and the nature of many of the obstacles that the league would later face associates with this tension between club and country. One newspaper on one occasion gleefully remarked how Royal league statistics proved that "Swedish teams are the best in Scandinavia", but newspapers otherwise refrained from portraying teams as representatives for their respective nations.<sup>41</sup> Towards the end of the tournament's short life, intra-Scandinavian rivalry would indeed play a smaller role in the ads, since these instead focused on fights between able and competent teams.<sup>42</sup>

## Game coverage

As the tournament commenced in late 2004, newspapers continuously reported on the games themselves, and revealed various stances towards the newly launched league centred around the empirical game experience of teams and spectators. Continuous match reports and betting discussions preceding games indicate assumptions of a widespread interest, and various articles reveal notable enthusiasm among writers regarding the tournament. A television reviewer praises Swedish Kanal 5's work with the broadcasts,<sup>43</sup> and another article stipulates that "more and more" people are now looking forward to Royal league games and the "battle of Scandinavia".<sup>44</sup> Such sentiments were also depicted as being present among fans, and the chair of the main Hammarby IF fan club is quoted as viewing the Royal league as his club's "most important" venture during the winter months.<sup>45</sup>

From the very start, however, criticism against the tournament remained prevalent. Lasse Anrell continued to ridicule the "Nordic folly" that was Royal league throughout its existence,<sup>46</sup> and a TV critic explained how "no one could call the Royal league open games a success" due to the "expected" friendly-game nature of the match as well as the "minimal interest paid by the audiences".<sup>47</sup> The audience in question was in this case those present at the grounds, but the critic notably considers their fewness in numbers as

40 Katarzyna Herd, *"We can make new history here": rituals of producing history in Swedish football clubs* (Lund 2018).

41 Samuel Johansson, "Linderöth lyrisk efter 4-0: fantastiskt bra", *Aftonbladet*, 13/2-2006, s. 68.

42 anon., "Nu gäller det Royal League", *Aftonbladet*, 10/2-2007, s. 81.

43 Dan Edström, "Skit som skit – Kanal 5 kan inte ändra det", *Expressen*, 13/11-2004, s. 58.

44 Stefan Persson, "'Katastrofen' kan bli succe'", *Aftonbladet*, 1/11-2004, s. 62.

45 David Tanentsapf & Henrik Lundgren, "'Det här snackar fansen om", *Aftonbladet*, 11/1-2006, s. 67.

46 Lasse Anrell, "Fabienne reste sig för sent – diskades", *Aftonbladet*, 13/8-2006, s. 71; Lasse Anrell, "Norska kassörer älskar Das Königliches Liga", *Aftonbladet*, 7/11-2004, s. 69; Lasse Anrell, "ANRELL", *Aftonbladet*, 28/10-2007, s. 76.

47 Edström *Exp* 13/11-2004.

detrimental to the broadcast's appeal. A football game, it seems, needs fans at the ground to become interesting as a television programme, and if the critic was correct, the Royal league's organisers and promoters had either failed to grasp this, or failed to attract the necessary supporters.

Moreover, newspaper coverage of the ongoing tournament reveals a similar divide between negative and positive experiences in its depictions of the players and coaches that were involved in the tournament. The initial discussions around money and growth which surrounded the launch of the tournament here gave way to more practical discussions, and team member on numerous occasions express criticism in the press that both converge and diverge with those of the spectators.

During the end of 2004 for instance, various agents representing the newly dubbed Swedish champions Djurgården express concern regarding the viability of the new tournament. Coach Kjell Jonevret says the congested schedule indicates a lack of "respect" on behalf of the organisers, and chairman Bosse Lundquist is said to be worried that the above mentioned lack of fan excitement will also impact the experience of the players negatively.<sup>48</sup> Players and teams were apparently so explicitly negative that the broadcasting company contacted them directly, asking them to "stop the spread of bad publicity regarding the league".<sup>49</sup> At a later stage, a player is quoted as claiming that the poor pitch quality and the bad weather of the Scandinavian winter makes the Royal league "more of a burden than asset" for the the clubs.<sup>50</sup> Especially, Norwegian pitches and arenas are singled out as a problem in this regard.<sup>51</sup>

On numerous occasions, however, players and coaches buy in to some of Theorin's central visions for the league's functions, such as promoting the construction of new arenas,<sup>52</sup> and providing teams with good match training in the dark months of the year.<sup>53</sup> During the inaugural season, *Aftonbladet* discusses how players who had previously been negative towards the tournament now believe it is better than the alternative, i.e. no competitive winter games at all.<sup>54</sup> Such sentiments remained prevalent after two seasons of empirical experience, as is evident through a quote from a coach in 2006, where the tournament is lauded as a tool for keeping up "match tempo" during the winter.<sup>55</sup> Around the same time, *Aftonbladet* columnist Simon Bank seem to agree, albeit with some reservations, when arguing that there are "no reasons not to

48 Johan Rikner, "Djurgården rasar över spelschemat i Royal league", *Aftonbladet*, 2/11-2004, s. 40.

49 Jan Majlard, "Dif-tränaren har svalnat i sin kritik: nu börjar man tända till", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 11/11-2004 b, s. 26.

50 Marcus Leifby & Hans Abrahamsson, "o8-panelen", *Aftonbladet*, 17/10-2006, s. 59.

51 DN, "Förslag på skärpta arenakrav i Royal League", *Dagens Nyheter*, 18/1-2006, s. 74.

52 Daniel Sjöberg, "Realistiskt har vi inget guldäge", *Aftonbladet*, 27/10-2007, s. 95.

53 Leifby & Abrahamsson AB 17/10-2006.

54 Persson AB 1/11-2004.

55 Leifby & Abrahamsson AB 17/10-2006.

continue with the wobbly project that is the Royal League” if Swedish clubs are to be able to compete in Europe.<sup>56</sup>

Arguably, there is a temporal aspect to these conflicting stances among players, coaches and officials. Much of the criticism appear in late 2004, when *Expressen* depicts a ”tourmanent that no player wants to know about”, which contrasts starkly to an *Aftonbladet* article three years later, which describes how the ”tournament has been criticised in the media, but have received support from players and coaches.<sup>57</sup> In the summer of 2006 AIK, a club based in the Stockholm area, also argues that the winner of the Royal league should be awarded a UEFA Champions League qualification spot in the future, which indicate acceptance and belief in the tournament on AIK’s behalf.<sup>58</sup> Judging from these press representations, Theorin appears to have been right when he in late 2003 assumed that players and coaches would eventually warm to the league.

## Coverage of downfall

No positive aspects of the Royal league experience seem however to have been able to counter the difficulties the league experienced in attracting audiences, which also forms the central theme of the press representations of the league’s demise. As early as July 2006, *Svenska Dagbladet* report discontent among the tournament’s broadcasters, who are said to be ”putting pressure on concerned clubs and the Royal league board to make the product better”.<sup>59</sup>

Here then, the problem does not appear to be the ability of the tournament to enhance the quality and economy of Scandinavian football, but rather its value as a media spectacle or ”product”. Crucially, *Svenska Dagbladet* points out, perhaps sarcastically, that ”Nordic winter football has failed to become the success that the broadcasters hoped for” since ”viewers have been much fewer in numbers than was expected”.<sup>60</sup> Soon afterwards, the same newspaper also cites miniscule crowds in attendance as a main reason for the tv-companies disinterest, thus echoing the criticism launched by television critics during the tournament’s early days.<sup>61</sup> Scarce attendance is here indicated to fulfil both a direct and an indirect reason for financial troubles, since they not only denied substantial profits for the clubs at the gates, but also rendered the televised spectacle dour and unappealing for the viewers at home.

The news that the league might face dissolution are met by the aforementioned critic Lasse Anrell with a vindictive urging that readers should remem-

56 Simon Bank, ”Sluta nöta bänk, killar”, *Aftonbladet*, 17/10–2006, s. 66; Erik Gustafsson, ”Vakna nu, MFF”, *Expressen*, 4/11–2004, s. 59.

57 Laul AB 29/10–2007.

58 Johan Orrenius, ”AIK vill (...)”, *Expressen*, 6/6–2006, s. 55.

59 Anders Lindblad, ”Tv vill dra sig ur Royal League”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 28/7–2006, s. 17.

60 Lindblad *SvD* 28/7–2006.

61 TT, ”Royal league på väg läggas ned”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 13/8–2006, s. 30.



ber where they "first heard" that the league was non-viable.<sup>62</sup> No further news on the matter appear in the sources that year, and the 2006/2007 was played and carried out as planned, but alarm sounds begin to ring again in 2007, when the league stands without a television deal, and is reported to be "fighting for its survival".<sup>63</sup>

*Svensk Elitfotboll's* chair Tommy Theorin again here feature frequently, this time as a defiant optimist who remains positive and confident that the league will survive right up until the winter of 2007.<sup>64</sup> The fact that the league releases a new format draft in June the same year indicates that he was not alone in taking this stance,<sup>65</sup> and his hopes for the tournament's survival was also shared by press writers. In *Aftonbladet*, Stefan Alfelt reiterated his support for the league as late as August,<sup>66</sup> and *Expressen* writer Christina Lindström argues that a "giant sponsor" could save the league. Lindström also suggest that such a sponsor ought to be looked for in Denmark, whose clubs had excelled in the league.<sup>67</sup> Apart from indicating the endurance of hope regarding the league's future, Lindström's reasoning also resonates with ideas of Denmark as the "home" of the Royal league, alleging thus that relations between the nations were not seen as totally horizontal. This aligns with previous research on Nordic sports, and indeed on Nordic cooperation in general, which has been marked and even plagued by the inescapability of political and geographic differences between nation states.<sup>68</sup>

Tensions between countries would again come to the fore in October 2007, when the new Royal league were supposed to have started, and this time it is the Norwegians who play the main part in the newspaper narratives. Mere days after Tommy Theorin expresses confidence in the press about securing a tv deal, the Norwegian FA are reported to have left the venture altogether, and the Royal league is pronounced dead by *Aftonbladet* on the 29<sup>th</sup>.<sup>69</sup> However, Theorin maintains that Swedish and Danish officials "have agreed to continue", and thus puts the blame solely on Norway.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Theorin also engages in open conflict with a player who describes the current state of affairs as "foolery", by claiming that the any player with ambition should be ready to play games also during the winter.<sup>71</sup> At this time of the year, however, Theorin's position appears isolated, and an op-ed piece in *Dagens Nyheter* questions not

62 Anrell AB 13/8–2006.

63 TT, "Royal League kan stupa på tv-avtal", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 14/9–2007, s. 24.

64 anon., *Svenska Dagbladet*, 22/3–2008, s. 41; anon., *Dagens Nyheter*, 10/10–2007, s. 82..

65 TT, "Ny gruppindelning i Royal League", *Dagens Nyheter*, 9/6–2007, s. 90.

66 Stefan Alfelt, "Europa här kommer vi", *Aftonbladet*, 31/8–2007, s. 66.

67 Christina Lindström, "Räddningen är en jättesponsor", *Expressen*, 24/3–2007, s. 67.

68 Leif Yttergren, *I och ur spår! En studie om konflikter och hjältar i svensk skidsport under 1900-talet* (Lund 2006); Monica Janfelt, *Att leva i den bästa av världar*.

69 Laul AB 29/10–2007.

70 Laul AB 29/10–2007.

71 David Bogerius, "Idiotiskt med vinterfotboll", *Dagens Nyheter*, 1/11–2007 a, s. 99.



only the attraction of the media spectacle, but also the tournament's ability to live up to its performance-enhancing ambitions.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the Swedish press continuously represented heated discussions surrounding the Royal league during both its conception and its demise, these representations reveal both positive and negative stances towards the project, and by extension towards Scandinavian football cooperation as an imagined space of opportunity. Arguments both for and against the existence of the tournament remained fairly stable throughout the period, as evident from the positions of columnists such as Alfelt and Anrell, meaning the main lines of conflict are readily accessible after having been exposed to analysis.

The appeal of the tournament, and the reason that people thought it was viable both before and during its conception, mainly seemed to stem from its ability to enhance the competence of involved teams. This is the main argument presented at the launch of the tournament, and also one that is taken up by writers and most poignantly players and coaches with experience of the tournament. The promotional material also reveals that the "Scandinavian category" was considered sellable to a media audience, along lines clearly reminiscent of earlier media framings of national rivalry.

Such advertising evidently failed to attract spectators, and it is around this absence of viewers that much of the discussions of the tournaments weaknesses and eventual failure focuses. Bad weather and poor pitches form obvious explanations for lack of paying spectators at the ground, and the lack of television viewers, i.e. the direct cause for the league's failure, are seen as a consequence of the lackluster visuals that these small crowds form. Additionally, the emphasis put by promoters on finance and growth made the tournament vulnerable to accusations of greed and disconnectedness. This might seem as an unfair assessment of the league corporations' activities, given that it was rather the lack of financial gain that eventually caused the tournaments demise. Still, during an age in which the private market enjoyed a high status, it was probably easier to attack representatives of football's governing bodies than the broadcasters who had financed the launch.

However, the apathy and disdain directed towards the league also appear caused by, and are thereby able to reveal, attitudes to the Scandinavian category in itself. Firstly, Scandinavian neighbours are in themselves represented as irrelevant and even ridiculous to Swedish football viewers, in line with a general yearning revealed by previous research for Sweden to move away from a Nordic periphery towards a continental European centre at the time. Second,

<sup>72</sup> David Bogerius, "Royal League har haft en negativ inverkan på toppklubbarna", *Dagens Nyheter*, 1/11-2007 b, s. 99.

various reports indicate tensions between the three nationalities involved in the organisation of the league, not least with regards to Danish sporting superiority and Norwegian geographic and meteorological challenges. Ironically, it is then finally precisely these intra-national tensions that the promotion of the league tried but apparently failed to relate to in order to create interest in the league. Club sentiments could not be translated into the emotional investment in the nation that the advertisements related to, and the problems would have been made even worse from the Danish dominance. Additionally, Scandinavian sports rivalry have been shown by previous research to be framed within a more moderate and civil discourse than its diehard football counterpart, making the attempted marriage between the two an extremely difficult thing to arrange.<sup>73</sup>

Through this exploratory study, future research is encouraged to pursue the explanations offered to why the tournament was launched and why it failed, but also why obstacles weren't anticipated or countered by the tournament's organisers. As an example, Swedish club football during the noughties had little experience of televising games, and an investigation into whether this lack of experience forms a viable explanation to the tournaments marketing failures would be worth pursuing. It is also possible that the organisers were inspired by the new ground broken by many integration projects at the time, who showed that the fact that something hadn't been done before didn't mean that it couldn't be done in the brave new world offered by globalisation and European interconnectedness.

Lastly, and perhaps most poignantly, one can make the argument that the Royal league was simply too much ahead of its time, since many of the main arguments against it have been countered and reversed during the last fifteen years. The abysmal quality of Swedish and Norwegian pitches is for instance on many locations now a thing of the past, since astroturf technology enables players to play on adequate surface throughout the winter, as made evident by the successful reformatting of the Swedish FA cup as a winter tournament. Furthermore, Swedish attempts at becoming immersed in a loosely defined "Europe" are today, if not replaced, then at least challenged, by notions among increasingly diehard fans of Sweden as "the last stand" of true football culture against an overly commercialised European scene.<sup>74</sup> If positioned as a nicety in its own right rather than a means to a higher end, winter games against more or less non-continental neighbours might then today not appear such a bad idea for fans who yearn to keep their club identity active throughout the year.

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<sup>73</sup> Herd, *We can make new history here*; Johansson, *De nordiska lekarna*

<sup>74</sup> Bachner, *Den sista utposten*.