

Choosing to focus on multi-club ownership in my dissertation reinforced and highlighted the alarming errors and frequent mismanagement of Charlton Athletic since Roland Duchatelet and Katrien Meire became involved in 2014.

It was painful to write, but equally fascinating to research and put together. I chose to compare Watford – a club owned in a similar sort of structure, but with drastically different owners.

The Pozzos are competent footballing people. The Pozzos communicate with the Watford fans. The Pozzos turn up to matches.

They don't have pitch invasions during the last game of the season. They don't have banners draped from the stand calling them a liar. They don't go missing for months. They don't go on holiday in the middle of the season, and they certainly don't refer to fans of the Hornets as customers.

They understand football – Duchâtelet and Meire do not - that's the essence.

Just how the duo has managed to create this situation is farcical in itself, but the fact that they continue to act as though they've done nothing wrong is the most disgraceful thing of all. It's disheartening, it's insulting, and they're getting away with it.

Below is an abridged extract from my dissertation, submitted in May 2016 – both clubs have since appointed new managers.

In 2012, the Pozzos, an Italian family, took over Watford FC. Led by father and son Giampaolo and Gino, the Hornets became added to their network with Udinese – a team in Serie A in their homeland which they had bought in 1986, as well as Granada in Spain, whom the family had purchased in 2009. At both of the clubs previously, success had been hard to achieve and both were notorious for slipping up and down their respective league tables – but the Pozzo influence brought stability and success. The same is now true of Watford, who after achieving promotion from England's second tier in the 2014/15 season, have now held their own in the Premier League and could be set to be a fixture in the lucrative top division for years to come.

The new owners brought fellow countryman Gianfranco Zola in as manager to oversee the model, and manager Sean Dyche was sacked as a result. The Italians took over the club from Laurence Bassini – who took over when the club's parent company Watford Leisure PLC was delisted from the London Stock Exchange in 2011. His turbulent reign ended in controversial circumstances, before he was subsequently charged by the Football League over payment irregularities and banned from involvement in football. Evidently, the Pozzos arrival was welcomed – much in the same way as Roland Duchatelet was down in south-east London. However, stark contrasts can be made between the beginnings of the respective tenures.

It is important to note that the respective ownerships made managerial and personnel changes and appointments at different times of the season. Charlton's new owners set about recruiting

in the middle of the season, whereas the Pozzos at Watford installed Zola in the summer and set him up with a flurry of loan signings for the forthcoming 2012/13 Championship campaign. Ten players from Udinese arrived on loan to the club, and initial scepticism looked to be justified. Among the new arrivals from the Italian sister club was striker Matej Vydra: he scored 20 goals in his debut season in England and helped Zola's side reach the play-off final, which they subsequently narrowly lost to Crystal Palace. A season then that could be deemed unsuccessful, but in reality it had shown that the recruitment pool that the Hertfordshire club was now operating in could potentially produce dividends in the long-term.

In south-east London at Charlton, the loan signings that arrived at the club in January 2014 didn't quite have the same impact. The side, latterly managed by former Standard Liege coach, Jose Riga, did manage to avoid relegation in the 2014/15 season. But arguably, that owed much to the individuals already in place and the management behind the scenes that remained following Powell's departure, rather than the new recruits from Belgium.

“To an extent at Watford it has been successful. But they've done it differently (to Charlton), with the Udinese and Granada players – they have settled down, have a set way of playing, and whenever a player comes in it is to play a certain role and they know he will be suited to the Championship.”¹ - Chris Powell

It's clear then that one obvious difference between the two sides is where they recruit players from. Not only did the Pozzo family recruit intelligently, but they also cleared £20million worth of debts at the club, and replaced the tatty old main stand with a brand new state of the art 'Sir Elton John Stand'. They also looked to be building a winning team capable of playing attractive football. The difference between the philosophies of the owners is made very apparent by Duchâtelet's reluctance to invest as heavily and thoroughly in the playing staff as the Pozzo family at Watford.

The next point of comparison between the two owners is the subject of their involvement in terms of their day-to-day running of the two clubs. Gino Pozzo is based in England and engages with the Hornets regularly. In contrast, Charlton's owner has watched just two matches at the club since his takeover, and made another brief visit earlier in 2016 – for reasons which shall be explored later in this chapter. Fans of the Addicks are told that the Belgian watches games 'on a live stream' by chief executive Katrien Meire.

“There is clearly a close harmony at the club. Gino Pozzo keeps a low profile even though he is intimately involved with the day to day running of the club. He moved to the UK and lives with his family and the boys go to school in England.”²

A similarity between the two clubs is the turnover of managers during the time that the owners have been in charge at the respective sides. However, as is the case with the recruitment of players, the managerial appointments at both Charlton Athletic and Watford

¹ (Chris Powell – Interview with CAS Trust)

² (John Fawell - Watford Supporters Trust)

FC provide stark contrasts in terms of pedigree and impact on success. Since his takeover at the start of 2014, Roland Duchatelet has appointed six ‘head coaches’ within 24 months, and the club find themselves in a worse position than when he took over.

From August 2014 to the end of last season, Watford FC had five different managers. In the same way as that figure is scoffed at by Charlton fans at their club, onlookers from the outside have been similarly critical of the Hertfordshire club’s decisions. Their 2015/16 Premier League manager, Quique Sanchez Flores, boasts a superb pedigree and has had a hugely successful managerial career. The former Atletico Madrid chief won the Europa League with the Spaniards in 2010. The important thing to note when studying the managerial changes at Watford is the circumstances that have triggered the departures. Flores’ predecessor Slavisa Jokanovic was extremely successful during his time in charge at Vicarage Road. The Serbian was appointed in October 2014 after Billy McKinlay had spent just eight days in charge of the club, and Jokanovic had an immediate impact as the Hornets reached the Premier League the following May.

As previously mentioned, the reasons for the changes are different to those in SE7 – Jokanovic left Watford shortly after promotion due to disagreements about wage demands, clearly a different circumstance to being sacked due to poor form and performances. The year before, Spaniard Oscar Garcia left the club after just 27 days in charge due to ill health. The afore mentioned McKinlay replaced Garcia and preceded Jokanovic but lasted just eight days, but that owed more to the fact that Gino wanted the Serbian rather than the Scot as opposed to poor performance. Before all of the above, the Pozzo family’s first appointment – Zola, actually offered his own resignation after a poor run of form the season after the play-off final defeat – a winless home run of five matches influenced his self-triggered departure. Zola falling on his sword is an illustration of the difference in the ways of working between the two clubs. Beppe Sannino followed Zola’s reign and resigned when the Hornets were second in the table. He was quoted as saying he had ‘taken the club as far as he could’.

“Watford are separately owned by Gino Pozzo. The plan was to make us the main focus and that has been done. The separation of the businesses has been designed to avoid possible conflicts of interest and we have no fears on that score.”³

As John Fawell from the Watford Supporters Trust states above, the fact that his side are owned by a separate individual to Udinese means that there are no conflicts of interest between the two, and they can be the focus of Gino who is able to give the club the time and attention the fans feel it needs – this has clearly been rewarded with promotion to England’s top flight and a successful team.

“We are now a stable club with a long-term strategy.”⁴

³ (John Fawell – Watford Supporters Trust)

⁴ (John Fawell – Watford Supporters Trust)

Gino's involvement with football owes much to his father's involvement with Udinese since 1986, and it is an emotional attachment and knowhow that is on the complete opposite end of the scale compared to Katrien Meire of Charlton.

*"Ms Meire's inconsistencies were quintessential as chocolate, beer, moules and Tintin."*⁵

One of Meire's many PR catastrophes has been the comment that came at a Web Summit in Dublin in late 2015, where she referred to Charlton fans as 'customers'. It goes without saying this did little to appease an already infuriated fan base.

When looking to the future, it is evident that Watford's outlook looks decidedly more positive than Charlton's.

⁵ (Chicago Addick - Voice of the Valley fanzine – February/March 2016, pg15)