

FOOTBALL IN DENMARK: TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This country-specific chapter seeks to explore football in Denmark. We start by examining the early years of football, starting from the 1870s. From there, we present decisive landmarks for the understanding of Danish football, leading up to insights into the current state of play. Overall, we conclude that Danish football is characterised by four unique traits: firstly, organised club football is based on an autonomous associative decentral democratic structure incorporating clubs, regional county unions, the League Association, the Women's League Association and the national Danish Football Association; secondly, a large number of grassroots clubs, financially dependent on regional municipalities, are spread around the country; thirdly, late professionalism, beginning from 1978, due to Danish sport and culture policy; and fourthly, the creation of a certain business model of professional football, including talent development, engaging sponsors, floating shares, facilities and stadium development, and diversification.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an understanding of football in Denmark. As in numerous other countries, football is a popular game that engages with men and women of all ages both on and off the pitch, where people are involved as players, volunteers, employees, fans and so forth. According to national sports participation surveys, football is one of the most popular activities (Ibsen et al., 2021; Rask et al., 2021), and at the same time the sport with the highest demand in terms of spectators and live attendees (Nielsen et al., 2019). The empirical backdrop is the existing body of literature and the latest data on issues such as participation and commercialisation. For theoretical underpinning, we will build on an understanding of society formed by four basic social orders viewed as ideal types: *civil society*, *market*, *state* and *associations*. Each ideal type has its own characteristics designated the ‘public sector’, the ‘informal sector’, the ‘commercial sector’ and the ‘voluntary sector’ (Pestoff, 1992).

We kick off by describing the early years of football, starting in the 1870s. From there, we highlight decisive landmarks that are essential for understanding Danish football. We continue by exploring the present landscape of football, including grassroots football (self-organised and club-organised) and elite-level football¹. Finally, we conclude by focusing on selected current issues concerning, respectively, grassroots football and elite-level football.

Regarding the Danish history of football, it is important to note that several issues only briefly touched on or not addressed here are described in detail by others. It is worth highlighting two books (in Danish) titled *Football, fair play & business – the history of Danish club football* (Grønkjær & Olsen, 2007) and *Women who win – Football history 1887-2013* (Weber, 2014). Moreover, Bonde (2008) did extensive work on Danish football during WW2.

THE EARLY YEARS OF FOOTBALL IN DENMARK

We begin at the ‘Constitution’ of 1849, which is of crucial importance to the development of sports clubs in Denmark. The Constitution established ‘freedom of association’ and ‘freedom of assembly’, and in the following period many sports clubs were formed. The first sport clubs were established in relation to the Danish-German conflict in the

¹ A contemporary profile of the organisation of club football in Denmark is thoroughly analysed by Bennike, Storm, Wikman & Ottesen (2019), which is recognised as a key paper for this chapter. Several perspectives from this peer-reviewed article are incorporated in this chapter.

mid/late 19th century, and the activities organised included shooting and gymnastics (Kaspersen & Ottesen, 2001). Subsequently, more clubs were formed around English sports such as cricket, tennis and football (Ibsen & Ottesen, 2003). In the early years of the formalised organisation of sport, shooting and gymnastics activities received state support because a physically strong and ‘ready-to-shoot’ population (men) would contribute to a stronger defence and simultaneously create a more productive, healthy, and efficient workforce (Kaspersen & Ottesen 2001). In contrast, the organisation of other sports, including football, was not (significantly) financially supported by the state until well into the 1900s (Ibsen & Ottesen, 2003). At that time, funding was established because sports associations were highlighted as institutions that contributed to the formation of democratic structures and practices (Gundelach & Torpe, 1999).

The introduction of football in Denmark in the 1870s is described by Toft (1993) and touched on in a recent paper by Grønkjær (2022). Even though it is difficult to conclude how it all began and several myths of the early days exist, the link to the UK seems clear (McDowell, 2017). Grønkjær (2022) states that the introduction came with the help of British engineers working in Denmark. Firstly, football gained a foothold in the boarding school environment in Zealand at Sorø Academy and Birkerød Boarding School. In 1878, the first club to organise football in Denmark, and in mainland Europe, was Copenhagen Ball Club (KB), primarily organised around cricket. In the early years, the game was strongly dominated by (predominantly) men from the upper-middle class, both as players and leaders (Toft, 1993). There is documentation that women did also play football, though in very limited numbers. The first women’s football club was founded in 1887 (Weber, 2014).

In the following years, more football clubs came into existence, enabling the first official club-based men’s match in 1887 (Toft, 1993). One year later, in 1888, KB arranged the first tournament, in which 15 teams participated (Toft, 1993). As more clubs were formed, for football to spread and further consolidate it was necessary to secure better organisation, unified rules, and organised tournaments. This led to the foundation of the Danish Ball Games Association (DBU) in 1889, which represented football, cricket, and tennis². Women’s football was not included in DBU until 1972 (Brus & Trangbæk, 2003). In the first league tournament organised by DBU, held in 1889, seven ‘near Copenhagen’ based clubs participated. The first official national men’s team match was played at the 1908

² Tennis was included in the DBU until 1920 and cricket until 1953.

Olympics against France, and the first national league tournament was held in 1912-1913 (Grønkjær & Olsen, 2007). The first mention of a women's football match was in 1902 (Weber, 2014), and the first women's (unofficial) national team match was played at the (unofficial) women's world cup in Italy in 1970. Denmark was represented by the club BK Femina and was crowned champions. The following year, more than 200 clubs participated in the national women's tournament, making the recruitment basis large enough to pick a 'real' national team (Brus & Trangbæk, 2003), and the Danish team won the world title for the second successive year in 1971.

The DBU, the first national football association in mainland Europe, had a difficult start and almost dissolved in 1895 with only two clubs as members (Olsen & Grønkjær, 2009). The struggles came to an end at the beginning of the 1900s as the popularity of the game grew. An important point raised by Toft (1993) is that in 1896 the Danish Ministry of Culture recommended that football should be incorporated in physical education lessons in schools, thus pushing forward the popularity of the game. It was emphasised that football contributed to character building and health for both boys and girls (Brus & Trangbæk, 2003). This was an early example of state involvement in the game, which had massive importance for its popularity and uptake.

Rather quickly after it was founded, the DBU transformed into something resembling its present structure as an umbrella organisation comprising six regional Football County Unions (FCUs).³ Moreover, the National Olympic Committee and Sports Confederation of Denmark (DIF) was established in 1896 with the DBU as a member. In this structure, the clubs were no longer members of the DBU; they were members of the regional FCUs, which were members of the DBU operating at national level and functioning as members of DIF. This structure is illustrated in Figure 2, which depicts the present organisation of Danish football. It is important to note that all clubs and organisations functioned as associations, being non-profit and relatively autonomous. With reference to Pestoff (1992), these are positioned in the 'voluntary sector'.

THE CONSOLIDATION OF FOOTBALL IN DENMARK

The consolidation of football and sports club activity was hugely influenced by state laws in the period from 1937 to 1968. In 1937, a new school law required the local authorities

³ FCU Jutland (1895), FCU Zealand (1902), FCU Copenhagen (1903), FCU Funen (1904), FCU Lolland-Falster (1906) and FCU Bornholm (1907).

(municipalities) to provide public schools of a certain size with a playing field and to make the facilities available to local sports clubs after school hours (Ibsen & Ottesen, 2003). This included football clubs and solved a major issue regarding playing fields. Furthermore, in 1948 the Danish Parliament adopted an Act on Receipts from the State Football Pools⁴, which secured DIF a relatively large part of the national monopolistic betting profits (including the national lottery profits in 1989), bringing funding to the DBU. This led to a professionalisation of sports organisations in the years that followed. Women's football also requested stronger organisation as part of the DBU but was turned down. Instead, three clubs formed their own union – the Danish Women's Football Union (Brus & Trangbæk, 2003). In 1968, the Danish Leisure Act⁵ was adopted. It provided favourable conditions for sports clubs, as it obligated the local authorities to support all leisure-time activities, including football, organised in associations (Ibsen & Ottesen, 2003). Leisure time was considered a welfare benefit, and the culture and leisure-time policy became significant for building municipal welfare (Ottesen, 2012). The Leisure Act obligated each municipality to provide facilities and financial support for clubs. In its present form, it is important to highlight that financial support is primarily provided for the organisation of activities for children and young people below the age of 25. In relation to the following, this is an important point for understanding the purpose and interest of grassroots clubs. By this time, a subsidised structure was created that remains within association-based club sport and football today; the state supports the work of the DBU (through DIF) and the local authorities (municipalities) support non-profit football clubs, to whom the citizens pay membership fees. Kaspersen and Ottesen (2001) define this as the 'double democratic principle', in which the financial support and state recognition of sports clubs creates an 'associative democracy' as a parallel form of government to 'representative democracy', forming a dual strategy. The passing of these laws was a key factor in the continually growing numbers of people playing football up until 1980. Another aspect regarding the increasing number of players in the DBU is the inclusion of women's football in 1972 (Brus & Trangbæk, 2003). See Figure 1 for an overview of participation numbers and clubs from 1930-2020 (DIF, 2022).⁶

<Figure 1 here>

⁴ Today's version is the Allocation Act (*Udlodningsloven*).

⁵ Today's version is the Enlightenment Act (*Folkeoplysningsloven*).

⁶ The figures for participation in 2021 were 344,678 members and 1,577 clubs (DIF, 2022).

FIGURE 1: Participation numbers and clubs

At the same time, the above-mentioned state laws were a key factor in maintaining the amateur code and associative structure of the clubs, as funding and facilities could not be assigned to for-profit organisations. Meanwhile, while the countries around Denmark introduced professional football, Denmark retained its amateur code up to 1978, based among other things on state funding and the argument of its importance. As related by GrønkJær (2022), there were strong amateur ideals in DIF and the DBU, for example that professional players playing abroad were not allowed to represent the national team. These ideals were heavily challenged over time, and from 1978 onwards the mixture of football and money finally resulted in some clubs establishing a stock-based foundation, which was private and for-profit and thus positioned in the ‘commercial sector’. An important step towards the introduction of professional football was the founding of the Danish League Association (LA) in 1969 as an organisation representing men’s top league clubs and addressing issues in favour of professional football. The female equivalent is the Women’s League Association (WLA), established in 1981. Note that the WLA is not an official member of the DBU. Instead, it has cooperative agreements with the LA and the DBU respectively and is represented in both the DBU’s board of directors and boards of representatives. For detailed insights, see Bennike et al. (2019). With the introduction of professional football and for-profit activity, the football landscape found its present form, which is presented in Figure 2 and further explored in the following.

<Figure 2 here>

FIGURE 2: The organisational system of football in Denmark

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF FOOTBALL IN DENMARK

Overall, the present organisation can be divided into different ideal types, also reflecting the organisational structure of Danish football. Grassroots football is positioned either in the voluntary sector as club-organised football or in the informal sector as self-organised football. The latter can be exemplified by a group of friends meeting in the park to play football. Elite-level football is positioned in both the voluntary and commercial sectors, depending on the economic foundation of the club. In the following, we focus first on

grassroots football, including both club- and self-organised settings, before providing insights into elite-level football, with a strong commercial perspective.

INSIGHTS INTO GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL

Football is a popular grassroots sporting activity in Denmark, particularly among children. In 2020, the number of children aged 7-15 years that had played football regularly within the last year was estimated at 31%. Among boys, 45% were reported to have played football, while the figure among girls was 17% (Rask et al., 2021). Among the children who play football, nearly all are involved in a sports club setting. For adults aged 15+ years, the percentage that had played football within the last year was estimated at 11%. More men (17%) than women (6%) are playing (Ibsen et al., 2021). Thus, participation in football is highest among children, with a significant drop-out in adult life. In respect of adults, 5% play football at least once a week, 3.5% play in a sports club setting and 1.4% play self-organised football (Ibsen et al. 2021). 0.4% are reported to play both self-organised football and in a club setting. This leaves 1% of adult Danes who play self-organised football on a weekly basis without any connection to a sports club (Elmose-Østerlund, 2022). While for children club-organised and self-organised football are mainly complementary activities (Pilgaard & Rask, 2016), these organisational forms seem to be more exclusionary among adults. And the fact that one in five regularly active adult football players is active outside football clubs indicates that grassroots football should be looked at in a broader perspective than solely as a club-based activity. Recent data concludes that most adult Danes who are not club-active but play self-organised football at least once a week are young adult men aged between 15 and 29 who play with friends (Elmose-Østerlund, 2022).

As mentioned, the dominant organisational form of football is as a club-organised sport. In Denmark, there are 1,577 grassroots football clubs of different sizes organised under the umbrella of the DBU (DIF, 2022). The distribution of club size is portrayed in Figure 3. It is important to note that Denmark has other national sporting umbrella organisations besides the DBU (and DIF) that have different structures and ideologies, but all work to improve conditions for grassroots sport, including football. As the DBU is the supreme authority for organised football and officially represents Danish football in national and international matters, our focus will rest with them.

<Figure 3 here>

FIGURE 3: Distribution of club size based on number of members (DIF, 2022)

Typically, the purpose of grassroots clubs is social interaction, training, and tournament participation (Bennike et al., 2019). Even though almost all clubs are involved in competitive activities, most club chairpersons perceive their club to be largely social and agree that it is important to organise football with a focus on social benefits (Bennike et al. 2019). This perspective, in which competitiveness and social interaction exist side by side, is also expressed by Ibsen and Seippel (2010) and Breuer et al. (2016) independently of sports club activity. Furthermore, Bennike et al. (2019) show that the clubs see their main purpose as being to create sound leisure-time activity for young people, a social community for members and a cultural centre of attention for the local community. This is exactly what the state wants in order to create a strong civil society in which people's leisure time is believed to be important. This did not just grow out of nothing; rather, the state created a policy system beneficial to associationism, cf. the previously mentioned passing of state laws. In relation to the creation of a social community, providing a place where members feel comfortable and enjoy spending their leisure time should be considered important because their membership fees and voluntary work are important for the running of the club. The importance of membership fees and voluntary work is also indicated by the fact that most clubs agree that it is important to recruit more members and more volunteers (Bennike et al., 2019).

Overall, 344,678 members are active in grassroots clubs (DIF, 2022) and an estimated 126,000 are taking on volunteer tasks, such as board membership, coaching, etc. (DBU, 2018). In 2019, Bennike & Schelde (2020) led an extensive analysis of grassroots players focusing among other things on age, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. It is worth highlighting that more than 50% of club members are children and young people, and internal DBU data shows that participants are active for the whole lifespan; there are more than 3,000 club members over the age of 70 (DBU, 2022). The analysis also concluded that there was an underrepresentation of members with immigrant or descendant-of-immigrant status compared to Danish society as a whole. It can also be observed that sexuality varies according to gender (i.e. relatively more bisexual and gay women than men participate in football). For further perspectives on diversity in Danish football, see Bennike et al. (2020). The analysis was conducted because a political commission (DBU, 2017) employed by the DBU recognised the need for a higher degree of diversity, and this present analysis represents a change from

sweeping yet passive statements relating to football being ‘for all’ towards the explicit recognition that specific groups are underrepresented.

INSIGHTS INTO ELITE-LEVEL (COMMERCIAL) FOOTBALL CLUBS

Disregarding the national teams, which are organised under the DBU, elite-level football in Denmark is represented by the LA and the WLA. These organisations work to create the best possible conditions for elite-level football and to develop Danish professional football. As already mentioned, the DBU lifted the ban on professional football in 1978. At this point, the transitioning of the (men’s) clubs from amateur status to commercial entities began, and it slowly developed up to the 1990s, when revenues in the Danish men’s clubs grew significantly (Storm, 2009). In short, the top-tier men’s clubs broke from the voluntary sector into the commercial sector, incorporating formal hierarchical organisational structures and a private, for-profit foundation (Bennike et al., 2019). Even if the top-tier men’s clubs are for-profit, it does not mean that the clubs are genuinely profit-maximising entities in the traditional sense of private firms. Following contemporary studies, they are merely win-optimising entities using money as a means to sporting success (though with some exceptions (Storm, 2009)). In respect of top-level women’s football, the players are still mainly amateurs, with only a few Danish top-tier clubs fielding professional and semi-professional players, though resting on a non-profit foundation in grassroots clubs and thus positioned in the voluntary sector (Brandt-Hansen & Ottesen, 2019). Furthermore, the difference between men’s and women’s club revenues is significant, as it is for men’s and women’s salaries. While there is no data available for Danish women’s professional football, anecdotal evidence reveals that even the highest female wages are minimal, in significant contrast to the best male players.

When money enters football due to commercialisation, financial resources become a powerful competitive tool, as the increased revenue enables clubs to buy up players to improve their chances of success (Szymanski & Kuypers, 2000). However, the financial dimension of the professional game also constitutes a problem. As pointed out by Whitney (1993) and Dietl et al. (2008), European professional clubs are faced with a competitive structure that is creating a rat race for players. This goes for Danish clubs as well. Financial difficulties and indebtedness are the direct result (Nielsen & Storm, 2017). In the Danish league, all clubs have faced financial problems due to this ruinous competitive structure, and most clubs operate with deficits year by year (Storm, 2013). Fortunately, because the clubs

face soft budget constraints (Storm & Nielsen, 2015), they are usually bailed out or rescued by creditors, sponsors or shareholders, thus keeping them afloat.

In addition to receiving capital injections, clubs have developed various solutions to the central problem of remaining competitive. Storm (2013) argues that during commercialisation clubs have developed certain ‘programmes’ to optimise their chances of becoming successful – both financially and in sporting terms. These programmes, including *talent development*, *engaging sponsors*, *floating shares*, *facilities and stadium development*, and *diversification*, constitute the Danish business model of professional football and will be briefly examined in the following. On the commercialisation timeline, *talent development* was the first programme developed by the clubs. In fact, it already started being institutionalised before the commercialisation process in which the clubs transferred from the voluntary to the commercial sector. However, talent development now helps the clubs commercially and in relation to sporting performance by developing players who can be utilised by the clubs themselves or sold on the international transfer market. The second programme developed was *engaging sponsors*, which naturally follows from the commercialisation process. By selling sponsorships and using football players as advertising stands for various products, the Danish clubs have aimed to earn income that can be used for improving sporting performance and, in turn, revenue. The third programme is turning clubs into stockholding companies and *floating shares*. This is essential to understanding professional clubs as part of the commercial sector. In 1987, Brøndby IF became the second football club in Europe (after Tottenham Hotspur a year earlier) to float shares and become a stockholding company. This development should be seen as part of the process of attracting investors and financial investment to the club to remain competitive, making the idea of floating shares a significant trend in the commercialisation process of Danish professional football. *Facilities and stadium development* programmes have also been part of the commercialisation process. Most facilities are owned by the municipalities, though some clubs, such as FC Copenhagen, FC Midtjylland and Brøndby IF, have bought or built their own stadiums. Over the years, league clubs have pushed for improvement of existing facilities to attract more spectators or sponsors, and during the 2000s many had their home grounds renovated, mainly paid for by municipalities. This means that the public sector (the municipality) is investing in facilities built to support actors in the commercial sector (Storm & Brandt, 2008). It is clear that Danish professional football clubs have played an active role in promoting these investments. Upgraded facilities are necessary to improve demand among

sponsors and spectators and are thus an essential tool for success. Finally, *diversification* into other leisure and entertainment activities was a strategy of the Danish clubs from the 2000s up to the international financial crisis in 2008/09. Many clubs saw it as a means to gain additional income from, for example, property investments and leisure-activities such as concerts and events. Even investment in fitness centres and hotels – or other property – was part of the diversification process. FC Copenhagen, in particular, was successful in building a highly diversified business by buying the Danish national stadium, a chain of fitness centres and a large holiday resort. Other Danish football clubs were inspired by this and started to diversify into other businesses as well. From 2000, nearly all Danish top-tier clubs diversified to some extent. However, after the crisis of 2008/09, many clubs started to de-diversify and focus on the core football business due to financial difficulties and problems capitalising on the new investments. During the last ten years, the clubs have been finding new business models, but many are still struggling to make financial ends meet sporting ambitions.

FINAL REMARKS AND CURRENT ISSUES

To sum up, all organisations except the professional elite-level clubs represent a specific institutionalisation of associative democracy built on state laws from 1849 to 1968. In a Scandinavian context, Andersson & Carlsson (2009) refer to this as football having historical roots in the development of the welfare state. If we look into grassroots football, this is extremely clear, whereas elite-level football, when organised in a professional football context, extends into the market and the commercial sector, with clubs organised as for-profit (stockholding) companies and not therefore resting on a democratic platform. These historical roots have resulted in a relatively high number of non-profit democratically organised grassroots clubs of different sizes spread around the country involving volunteers and creating local cultural and social communities, especially for children and young people. These aspects can be traced as direct outcomes of the state-initiated political system, which at the same time contributed to late professionalism.

This final section will focus on three emerging issues that we pinpoint as ‘points of attention’. Two are related to grassroots football – one with a focus on self-organised football and the other on club-organised football – while the third is related to elite-level football. Each point of attention is related to different societal sectors and will arguably influence the future organisation of football. The first point of attention relates to self-organised football, which is positioned in the informal sector, and the point that grassroots football should not be

addressed as solely a club-sport activity. So far, self-organised football players have not received much attention from research or practice, and we know very little about these football players beyond what is presented in this text. Nevertheless, self-organised football is part of a general trend in sports participation towards a growth in self-organised sports, especially those practised outside (Rask et al., 2021). In order to better understand the motives and barriers of these players for practising self-organised football, a strengthened focus from both research and practice seems highly relevant. Questions regarding whether self-organised players are drop-outs from club-organised football, why and how they were recruited and how they organise their activities seem particularly relevant. This knowledge could inspire the Danish national sports organisations, DIF (representing the DBU) and DGI, with regard to initiatives to increase the number of self-organised football players as part of their “vision 25-50-75” in which they aim to promote both club-organised and self-organised sport.

The second point of attention relates to grassroots football clubs, which are positioned in the voluntary sector, and the observation that cooperation and co-production with public authorities are apparently becoming increasingly more common among football clubs. Specifically, the DBU is now entering into ‘welfare alliances’ with municipalities, with the mission for grassroots football to contribute explicitly to the resolution of societal challenges such as health, integration and unemployment. It is hardly revolutionary for sports clubs and sports organisations to be used for non-sporting objectives (Thing & Ottesen 2010; Bennike et al., 2018). However, the role of sport, and in this case football, within the ‘welfare alliance’ initiatives seem to have progressed from a passive and symbolic focus on resolving societal challenges to something more explicit and ambitious. This development brings organised grassroots football closer to the public sector in a form that will arguably challenge the autonomy of clubs. Moreover, and as discussed by Bennike & Ottesen (2020), implementational challenges must be expected as the DBU and organised grassroots clubs explicitly enter policy arenas other than sport.

The third point of attention relates to elite-level football, and more specifically professional football positioned in the commercial sector. One central issue remains a recurring challenge for the Danish clubs: finances and dependence on the market. The question of economic power is top of the agenda because clubs are trying to balance financial stability with sporting success nationally and internationally. During the last couple of years, a growing number of new foreign investors have looked to Denmark and even acquired

Danish clubs (for example, FC Nordsjælland, FC Midtjylland, FC Vejle and FC Amager), while others have provided capital to financially distressed clubs. It is reasonable to believe that Denmark's work with talent development in an international context plays an important role (FIFA, 2021). Denmark is highlighted by FIFA as "a unique example of how to maximise talent" (FIFA, 2022), Providing access to Danish clubs for such investors could be a future development aspect of the business model of Danish football mentioned earlier. Whether Danish fans and stakeholders will welcome foreign ownership to a larger extent than before remains to be seen.

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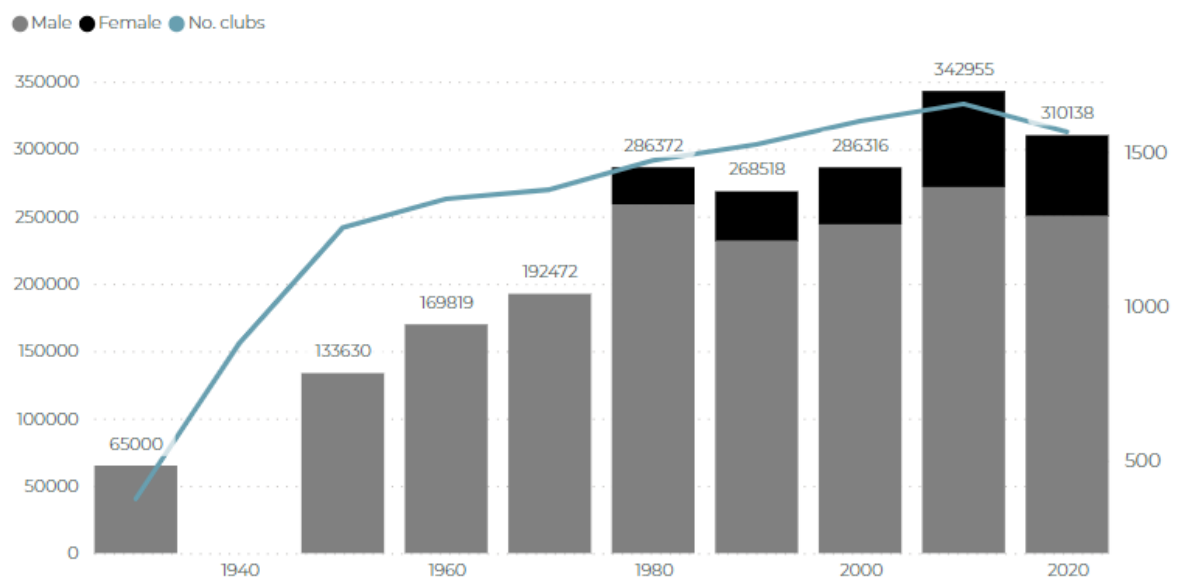
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FIGURES

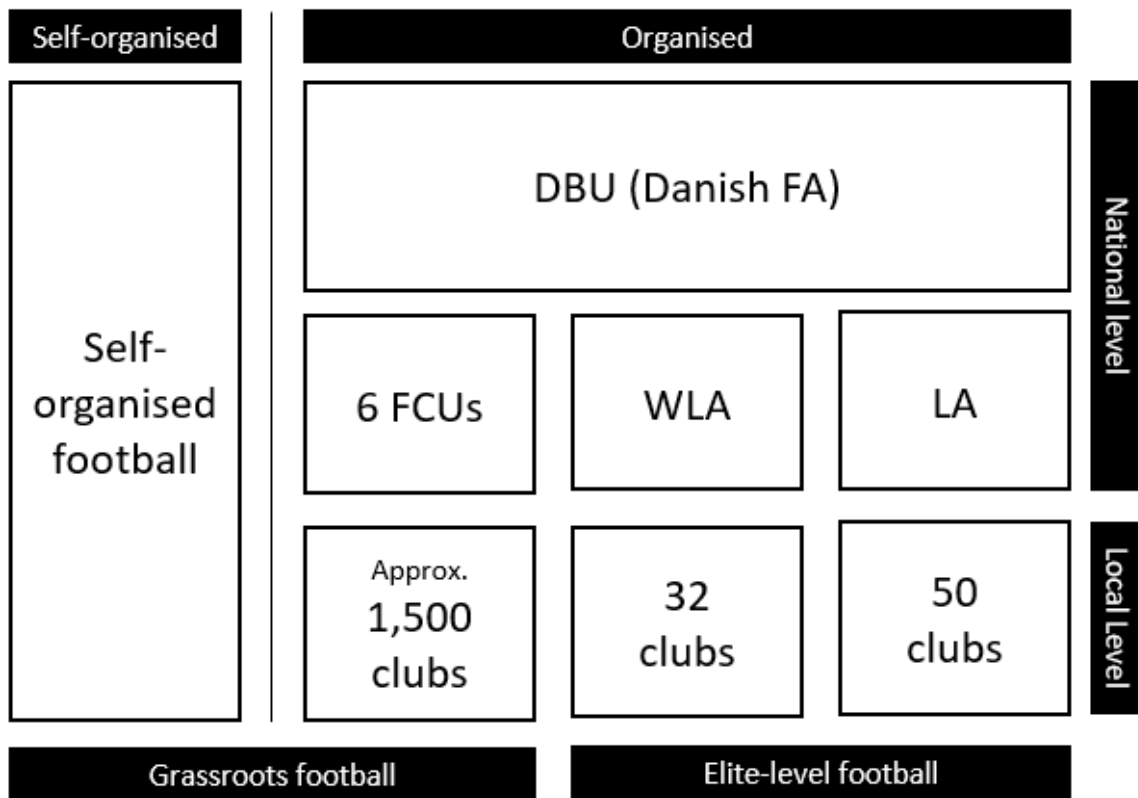
FIGURE 1: Participation numbers and clubs



Alt text:

By using a graph and a bar chart it becomes clear that the amount of football players and football clubs has been rising since 1930. The numbers are provided in a 10-year interval.

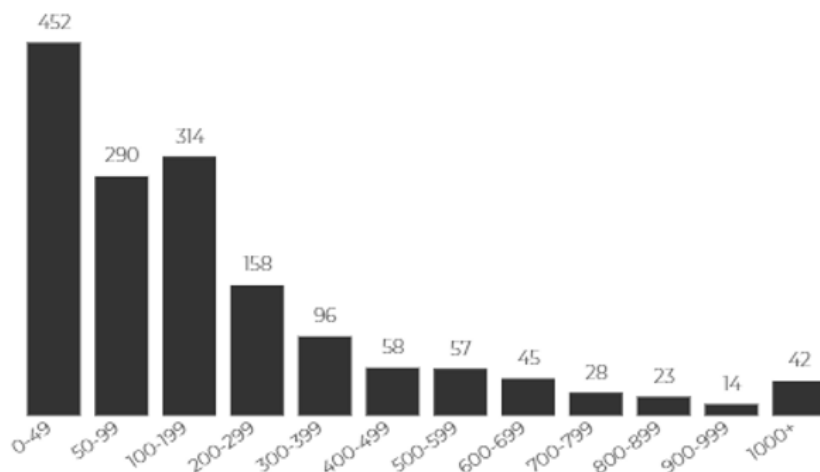
FIGURE 2: The organisational system of football in Denmark



Alt text:

This figure provides an illustrative overview of the organisation of Danish football. It shows how the organisation of football is divided into different levels and types of organisations.

FIGURE 3: Distribution of club size based on number of members (DIF, 2022)



Alt text:

By using a bar chart, it becomes clear that many clubs are small with no more than 200 members.

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