

Matti Goksøy and Finn Olstad:

” ... far to the north”: Geography and football in Norway

“It is not natural that football should be the unchallengeably biggest sport in Norway”

(Nicolai Johansen)

Nicolai Johansen, legendary Secretary General of the Norwegian Football Association, enjoyed pointing out as improbable the fact that his beloved sport of soccer ever since the 1930's had been beyond question the biggest sport of “that heap of stones” Norway.¹ A thinly populated mountain country far to the north, with long winters and long distances between population centres, was not the sort of place usually associated with a topography suited to football. Great football culture was to be found in warmer Latin climates or at least in countries where grass pitches were no problem and where winter did not necessarily mean snow and ice.

In a footballing context, Norway was something of a late-comer, blindly copying its bigger Scandinavian brother nations or the footballing superpower itself: England. When modern sports made their entry in the 1880s, football was not among them. Only a few boys and men played in fields and open spaces, using a ball someone had brought from Great Britain, be

¹ Nicolai Johansen (1917 – 1999), secretary general of the Football Association 1955 – 1982, interviewed by M. Goksøy August 4th 1999. “Biggest”: Among the Norwegian sports associations.

they tradesmen, seamen or Britons working in Norway. It is said first to have happened in the capital Oslo (which was then named Kristiania) in 1885. In 1902, representatives of three clubs met to form Norsk Fotballforbund, The Norwegian Football Association. The first international match was played against brother nation and arch rival Sweden in 1908, and naturally ended in defeat – 3-11. Another ten years were to pass, before Norway won its first international match. Strictly speaking, Norway has never done really well in international football, except for women’s soccer and a few brief periods of success, most recently under Egil “Drillo” Olsen in the 1990s. Norway has never been respected as a footballing nation by our more sophisticated neighbours to the south and east. Danish opinion has persisted in regarding Norwegians as “mountain apes”, who may be good at winter sports and sports requiring great stamina, but who ruined the noble game of soccer with their systematic “Drillo” football.

It may have been this position as a junior and an apprentice that made Norwegian football tie itself particularly strongly to English football. England was from the very beginning the great ideal for Norwegian football, and this was cemented by the use of English matches on football pools coupons from 1946, and by the televising of English league matches from 1969. Any self-respecting Norwegian football supporter has two favourite teams: One Norwegian and one English, or maybe it should be the other way around – for many would support the English team, were it to come to Norway. One thing, however, was not copied, and that was professionalism in football. For a long time, the amateur ideal reigned, supported by sports leaders who were particularly inspired by the English ideal of amateur sportsmanship. Norwegian soccer forward Reidar Kvammen, a member of the famous Olympic Bronze Team of 1936, received an offer from no less a club than Arsenal. But Kvammen would rather be a policeman in his home city of Stavanger: “We are not suited to professional sports on a larger

scale.”² The amateur rules were gradually watered out from the 1970s on. But professional football, with players in full-time jobs, was only introduced in 1991.

All the same, it may be said that from 1930, football was a national sport in Norway, as in so many other countries. “National sports” is of course an expression which may have several meanings.³ Skiing and to some extent speed skating have had and still have a special place in Norwegian sports and a special importance for Norwegian self-esteem. But it is football that has the greatest number of active participants and supporters, and that gathers the greatest general interest. And the dominance of football continues to grow. The rest of this article will concern itself with the tension between this interest in football and the geographical and topographical preconditions for the sport. Today’s Norwegian football geography is of a particular kind. Norwegian football is decentralised and scattered, with a number of small geographical localities involved. The lack of balance between north and south, which is quite obvious in countries such as for example Sweden, is at present almost redressed in Norway. At the same time it must be pointed out that this spread of the sport was not historically regarded as obvious: It was, on the contrary, the result of a long fight by “the provinces” to be admitted to the footballing community. How did Norway’s footballing geography come to be special in this way?⁴

Centre and periphery in Norwegian football

The Norwegian Football Association (NFF) was formed in 1902 by three clubs from Oslo and its vicinity, and has since had its administrative headquarters in Oslo. The national team’s main arena has been here, which has led to football supporters from Oslo forming the traditional home supporters’ crowd for the national team. During the formative years, it was

² Kvammen, *30 ganger på Norges landslag*, 141-144.

³ Cf. Goksøy, “Nationale idretter”.

⁴ This article in the following is based on material from Goksøy and Olstad, *Fotball! Norges Fotballforbund 100 år*. For more detailed references, see this.

natural for the NFF that this area was to put its stamp on Norwegian football. The knowledge and the resources were here. Here were most of the clubs, and here were the most advanced footballers. Nevertheless, the ambition was to “bring the whole country under the sway of football”. Between 1918 and 1920, regional associations or “*kretser*” were formed in the three northernmost counties (“*fylker*”), and footballing chronicler P. Chr. Andersen noted with satisfaction that football had spread “into the remotest corners of the innermost valleys”.⁵ In the year 1922, all of Norway had been “made subject to football” – and to the Norwegian Football Association. In this year, the *fylke* of Sogn and Fjordane in the west of the country got its own *krets* organisation. This was the last *fylke* where a *krets* was formed.

In the period before a national league system grew into being – which largely happened between 1936 and 1948 – the geographically based *kretser* were the natural unit around which football and in particular everyday football was formed. The *kretser* managed local league games which for long formed, and continue to form, the backbone of Norway as a footballing nation. In the strong footballing areas, this was for a long time where the prestige – and the gate takings – lay. The Association organised the national championships – “the cup”. From 1905 up to and including 1916 this was a tournament reserved for winners of *krets* championships or representatives of the *kretser*. But from 1917 onwards any club which was a member of the NFF could enter. This “opening” of the cup in 1917 in many ways made it a tournament for the whole of footballing Norway, and gave even more legitimacy to the title “national champions”. Participation immediately grew from 13 to 32 teams. In 1932, it reached 151 teams. The cup had become an arena for the really big matches, which put loyalties and minds to the test. This popularity has been preserved up to the present, which also makes the Norwegian cup special in a Scandinavian context. It is probably only in Great

⁵ NFF yearbook 1917-18, 9. Andersen in Aamodt, *Fotballboken*, 12.

Britain that the cup has a similar status. The clubs, on their part, sought to arrange exciting events by playing private matches against attractive opponents. With a bit of luck, this might provide a nice income. Football matches thus became the active line of communications between Norwegian clubs. The development of the footballing network provided ever more opportunities for matches beyond the local network. Thus, in 1923 a total of 61 international matches involving Norwegian clubs were played, more than half (33) against Swedish teams.⁶

But the “opening” was not complete. Only clubs from southern Norway were allowed to participate in the national championships. Nor did the divide between centre and periphery disappear. The first international match to be played in the northern part of the country was to have taken place in Trondheim in 1923. “However, as many Norwegian players are unable to take part due to the match being played on a working day, the match is at the last moment moved to Oslo”.⁷ Norwegian footballers were largely working men who depended on their wages, and who had to turn up for work on the day after the match. During the whole period up to the second world war, national players largely came from Oslo, there were limits to how “district friendly” (i. e. adapted to the needs and wishes of the provinces) amateur footballing could be. Before 1920, it made absolute sense for a player to play for an Oslo club, if his ambition was a place in the national team. Almost two thirds of those pre-selected to play for Norway (241 of 381 players) came from clubs in the Oslo *krets*. During the inter-war period this imbalance was to some extent redressed by the rest of the southeastern part of the country, known as Østlandet. All in all, almost 40 per cent of the pre-selected members of the national teams before the second world war came from the Oslo *krets*.

⁶ In 1921, the figure of 46 games against Swedish clubs was reached.

⁷ Andersen, *Norges Fotballforbund gjennom 25 år*, 116.

Nevertheless, football at a national elite level had to some extent become more geographically widespread in the period between the first national team of 1908 – with ten Oslo players – and the Olympic “Bronze Team” of 1936. Among the players in the latter were Reidar Kvammen of Stavanger, Odd Frantzen of Bergen and Magnar Isaksen of Kristiansund. Among the players who went to Berlin were also other “representatives of the districts”. Although Isaksen of Kristiansund had had to move to Oslo and join Oslo club Lyn to be able to go, his presence serves to confirm the impression that southern footballing Norway had been extended in length as well as width.

After the extension of the cup in 1917, the introduction of a main league and provincial leagues in 1948 opened the door to a more diverse footballing Norway. The 1950s in particular were marked by the appearance of many new clubs from small places few had heard about. Eight clubs from the industrial (and footballing) *fylke* of Østfold, in the extreme southeast of the country played top league football during this decade. This was the heyday of small and large industrial localities. But this was also the time when each of the big cities could be home to several clubs. The situation at the turn of the Millennium, with a number of one-club cities, is thus not historically a necessary one. Rosenborg, with its roots in a working-class part of Trondheim, is perhaps the most junior of today’s top clubs. In the Trondheim region there were several clubs with longer and greater traditions as local representatives. That “the city is Bergen, and the club is Brann” (as the club anthem proclaims), has been sung long enough and loud enough to be taken as the historical truth. However, just as in the case of Rosenborg, the foundations of Brann’s status as the city’s big team was formed by triumphs in the early 1960s – league victories in 1961/62 and 1963, to be precise – as well as the appearance and popularity of local heroes such as Roald “Kniksen” Jensen.⁸ Unlike Rosenborg, Brann had

⁸ “The player who made even the Swedes envious”, according to Norwegian newspapers. *Goksøy and Olstad, Fotball! Norges Fotballforbund 100 år*, 255.

traditions to put into play and its own stadium. Whatever results local rivals might manage, Brann had established a superior cultural capital and credibility as the city's representatives in encounters with "the others". This made it easier to dismiss local newcomers, while the dependence on sporting success decreased.

Oslo occupies a place of its own in this respect. The capital dominated Norwegian football before the second world war – a dominance continued in the immediate post-war years – to the extent that football fans who grew up during the 1960s, tended to think that Oslo was entitled to have four clubs in the top league (Lyn, Vålerenga, Skeid and Frigg). But as early as the 1970s, this proved to be untrue. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a clear decline in sporting results and in national team participation was evident. From having supplied about a quarter of the national team players throughout the post-war period, the clubs' part of the recruitment of national players fell to one eighth in the 1980s. While the biggest cities of other countries are natural footballing centres, Oslo does not seem to have exploited the advantages which may lie in size, traditions and migration to a big city. On the contrary; these factors seem to have hindered the development of a city identity in football. Ambitions to become "the team for all of Oslo", which "modern" business and football leaders have nurtured, have proved in vain. At the same time, opportunities for training have worsened drastically as a consequence of big-city developments, which have eradicated open spaces and replaced casual sparetime football with organised children's and youth's footballing. Oslo has in the main been weakened, not strengthened by the trends towards economic centralization of football, although there have maybe been some signs of a revitalization in recent years with eastenders Vålerenga and west-end club Lyn as pretenders to the Norwegian footballing throne. At the same time, the great inter-city rivalry in Norwegian football has been between

the second and third largest cities, that is between Bergen (Brann) and Trondheim (Rosenborg), as well as in a more regional context.

If we move from the big cities and towards “the provinces”, some developments are very striking. By means of various arguments, some areas in the three northernmost *fylker* (Nordland, Troms, Finnmark) were for long excluded from the Norwegian league system. In the league reform that came into place in 1963, the last southern districts were nevertheless included. Northern Norway had to wait for a few years more. At the time, these areas were all considered as particularly backward as regarded football. Indeed, a phrase such as “underdeveloped football country” – a reference to poor, underdeveloped countries of The Third World – was used about Sogn og Fjordane in the early 1960s. Football in the fylke were at times almost stigmatized by the more sophisticated city neighbours in Bergen. At that time, clubs from “the city” were not much tempted by matches against “district clubs” in the local third division section. The road network was still poor or non-existent. Communications were slow and troublesome. Although developments in these areas accelerated during the 1960s, one needed to have plenty of time if one were to travel in the county. But after 1963 it was no longer possible to exclude clubs from this *fylke*.

Since the formerly excluded areas were admitted in the 1960s and 70s, they have made their mark – at first with the irresistible charm of all newcomers, later on with the same professional skill necessary for all teams who wish to survive. When Sogndal reached the cup final in 1976, the club was regarded as the prototype of a footballing “Askeladd” (the legendary rags-to-riches character of Norwegian folk tales).⁹ The club both gave rise to a footballing community (the eponymous Sogndal) and became a footballing symbol for the

⁹ Sogndal in the fylke of Sogn og Fjordane had 6.700 inhabitants in the year 2000.

fylke. During the 1990s, clubs from Sogn og Fjordane (in practice, Sogndal) made more appearances in the top league (the Pools League) than clubs from the old-established footballing *fylke* of Østfold. At that time, the former “developing country” had already fostered a national team manager. Ingvar Stadheim of Sogndal took over from Swede Tord Grip in 1988. While this may have been a sign that Norwegian football – and football in Sogn og Fjordane in particular – had matured, other things remained as before. Parts of the Oslo press were not yet ready to accept a national manager from “the provinces”. In Norway’s biggest newspaper, Stadheim was presented as “the staff manager of the Sogndal savings bank”. The paper was unable to disguise its scepticism towards a national side manager who in 1988 could not receive the Sky satellite television channel.¹⁰ Stadheims employment, which lasted for rather less than three years, and the achievements of Sogndal were therefore events which both demonstrated the spread of football to new areas and unmasked attitudes at the former centre of footballing Norway.

Rosenborg, Norway’s best-known football club, also began as a local “askeladd”. It was originally the club of a Trondheim district, which first attracted notice by winning the cup in 1960. During the 1990s, Rosenborg on several occasions participated successfully in the UEFA Champions League. In 1996, Rosenborg knocked no less a club than AC Milan out of the competition in San Siro Stadium, and this was one of the greatest “football miracles” in Norwegian footballing history. In the European perspective, Rosenborg was a club from the far north. Within Norway, things are different. Trondheim is the biggest city of the central parts of Norway. Further to the north lies a part of footballing Norway presenting bigger geographical and climatic challenges.

¹⁰ The newspaper *Verdens Gang*, July 9th and 19th 1988.

The “outsider country”

Some peripheral parts of the country had had to wait pretty long, before they were admitted to the decent company of the “proper” footballing nation. But nowhere did this waiting lead to such a large development and experience of a separate footballing history as in the three northernmost *fylker*. For a long period, the areas from Nordland to the Russian border constituted a footballing region that lived in a world of its own, outside of the “real” footballing Norway.¹¹

Even in southern Norway, establishing proper football grounds to European standards took some considerable time. The first grass pitch (in Stavanger) wasn’t ready until 1917. And not until 1918 did the capital city have a grass pitch – after the Danes had refused to play their national matches on grit-covered pitches. The problem was even bigger in the far north, where population was sparse and green playingfields few and far between. Factors of Nature dictated that seasons had to be short, and players had to accept conditions which would have been turned down elsewhere. In 1948, a grass pitch was laid down at the Bardufoss military air base, in spite of warnings about local temperatures and adverse hints from “know-alls”. But according to myth, the firebrands behind the scheme – led by the chief of Air Command North and 1928 Olympic ski medallist Ole Reistad – were determined to do their damndest to have a grass pitch, “even if they had to plant every last straw by hand”.¹² Thus was the border for grass pitches in Norway moved thousands of kilometres to the north. But the pitch itself was covered by asphalt and concrete, when the airfield was extended some years later. Not until 1962 was a new grass pitch ready in the same locality.

¹¹ The three *fylker* of Nordland, Troms and Finmark geographically on a south to north to south axis constitute more than half of Norway. But these areas were and are much more thinly populated than the rest of Norway.

¹² See e. g. Hansen, *I ”fotballens tjeneste”*, 108.

If natural conditions were difficult and the “grounds” imperfect, there was no lack of enthusiasm for football. Football in the far north of Norway developed according to the same pattern as in the southern part of the country. Firebrands fought against economical problems and lack of grounds, laid plans for the training of referees and the provision of trainers. Internal rivalry, quarrels about krets borders, rowdy crowds of spectators and even experiments in women’s soccer were the order of the day in the north as well as in the south.

But football in northern Norway was excluded from the national community which the Norwegian league system constituted. Northern Norwegian football led more or less its own life from the time when the organisation of *kretser* was completed after the first world war, until the early 1960s. A separate football world was built, with its own regional institutions. A separate championship and even a separate northern “national team” were run by The Footballing Committee of Northern Norway. The Northern Norwegian Championships was a series of cup events where – in theory – all teams which were members of the northern *kretser* (from Helgeland in the south to Eastern Finmark in the northeast) could participate. The interest in the cup, and the prestige gained by participating and winning, were very great. The same may be said about the annual “internationals” against Northern Sweden, which were played from 1930 until 1978. In 1931, the match against Sweden gathered 2.000 spectators in pouring rain, while the match was also transmitted to radio listeners. The Footballing Committee of Northern Norway considered that such matches were of “incomparable importance to the progress of the sport of football in the northern part of Norway”.¹³ This cooperation in the far north at times came to be more significant than contacts further south. Cross-border matches had long traditions. As early as 1912, a team from Narvik (a Norwegian port from which Swedish iron ore was shipped) played Kiruna (the Swedish town from which

¹³ NFF yearbook 1930, 67 and 1931, 14.

the ore came by rail to Narvik). From 1916, there were annual matches between the Narvik club Nord and various Swedish clubs. The railway which ran from west to east across the border made travel in these directions easier than was travelling to the north or to the south by ship.

In the summer of 1938, the “northern national team” made a tour in which the purpose was to learn as much as possible, and which brought them to the capital. Here, they played no less an opponent than the capital’s leading club Lyn, which had two of the most famous players of the official national team in their side. The omnipresent P. Chr. Andersen was there to cover the match for his newspaper *Aftenposten*. He passed a sentence which may be said to have been benevolent: The players were praised for at least to have tried to “play proper football”. That they could not manage a better result than a 0-6 loss, was not just the players’ fault. “This part of the country must lag behind southern Norway at sports”, was Andersen’s message to his readers. In a highly analytical manner, the footballing expert pointed out the following reasons for things being as they were: Large geographical distances, long journeys, poor pitches, short seasons, training hindered by professional fishing activities and voyages, and a lack of competent trainers. These were arguments which few – if anyone – could reject. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that Andersen did not settle for a sort of defeatist acceptance of things being as they were. Instead, he argued that contacts with southern Norway must become much closer – both on the active sporting and on the administrative level.¹⁴ Whether Andersen’s article was the reason is uncertain, but the following year, in 1939, the NFF for the first time sent its secretary Asbjørn Halvorsen to represent the association during the regional cross-border match against Northern Sweden in Narvik.

¹⁴ Hansen, *I ”fotballens tjeneste”*, 182-184.

The NFF provided financial support for football in northern Norway, and sent both teams and instructors to the north. The visitors from the south, both trainers and teams, could seem like short-term vitamin injections. But they were *visitors*. In a footballing context, they might have been from another planet, and they came to a world which was “outside”, beyond what they were used to. Players with ambitions to be selected for the national team found they were best advised to go south. Initiatives from the north with a view to participation in the cup, often made by one single club at a time, were always rejected by the NFF congress. Congress representatives from the south, who naturally formed the majority, were reluctant to encumber themselves with additional burdens of travel and costs. Nevertheless, the NFF could claim that it had supported football in northern Norway since the 1920s. In the 50th anniversary book published in 1952, there is no shortage of good will: “The association has no wish for Northern Norway to be an isolated province”. Nobody should doubt that the idea of national unity should apply as strongly here as elsewhere. It was just a great pity that “reasons laid down by nature” dictated that “the quality of play in Northern Norway will always be somewhat lower than in the south”.¹⁵

A regional identity could thus also be expressed in terms of a common fate. The “extraneousness” of Northern Norway in relation to footballing Norway as a whole, was a major contribution to a separate footballing identity. It did not imply any common style of play or other external qualities. It rather implied a feeling of being sidetracked and being treated in an unreasonable manner, and an eternal waiting to be accepted into “decent company”. As early as in the 1930s, the newspaper Tromsø had visions of northern clubs participating in the Norwegian national championships “next year”. When this failed to happen, the waiting instead led to the development and experiencing of a separate footballing

¹⁵ Hegtun: *Norges Fotballforbund femti år*, 146.

history. At the same time, on the basis of “extraneousness” and special circumstances, there arose a picture of the northerner “riding out the storm” by means of humour and a spartan hard-headedness – a self-image which thrived in a footballing context – particularly when the unreasonable aspects of this situation became over-ripe during the 1970s.

Since the situation for football in Northern Norway was so special, the northern events gained a clear region-building character. External contacts underlined this regional aspect as well. Cooperation across national borders in the far north made it necessary to form a separate regional team for matches with teams from neighbouring countries. In spite of the fact that the selection committee, here as elsewhere, came under strong attack for favouring certain towns and certain players, the players were representatives of *Northern Norway*.

This sense of a regional community is nevertheless not the most apparent factor of match reports from the inter-war period. Mutual distrust was great, and visitors could not always count on being received like family members. The newspapers played an ambiguous role in local footballing rivalries. They would like to be regarded as voices of public decency, and at times printed advice and admonitions to the public about rules and proper behaviour in the stands. At the same time, then as now, the journalists had a newspaper to sell, and did not hesitate to criticise – and at times almost slander – the supporters of other towns’ teams. In 1923, the newspaper *Tromsø* wrote: “The crowd behaved as only a Harstad crowd can, and that is saying a lot”.¹⁶

At times, there thus appeared cracks in the picture of Northern Norway as a region with a common fate, a common sense of reality and a common identity. Internal rivalries were

¹⁶ Hansen, *I ”fotballens tjeneste*”, 23.

present, some areas wanted to break out, and other areas were refused admittance. It wasn't easy for clubs in Helgeland, furthest to the south in what is traditionally regarded as Northern Norway, to accept that the border with the real and proper Norway passed just to the south of them, that they should have a fate in common with that of clubs as far away as Kirkenes in eastern Finmark – which was much farther away than Oslo – and that they had to wait until the whole region had achieved a level of footballing maturity which made it possible for the region as a whole to be integrated into the rest of footballing Norway. Frustrated representatives of this *krets* in 1953 proposed that the southernmost clubs here must be allowed to join the southern league system. But the reply from the NFF was clear: “The fact remains that Northern Norway is a unified whole”.¹⁷

At a much earlier stage, The Footballing Committee of Northern Norway had met difficulties in drawing up their own borders. Finmark furthest to the north was a very long way away, even for people from the other northern *fylker* (Troms and Nordland), and the presence of teams from Finmark was not always wanted. Against all the odds, the clubs from this part of the region hung on, to the extent that the newspaper *Tromsø* as early as 1935 proclaimed Kirkenes IF as “the darlings of our football supporters”.¹⁸ The problematical extension to the east and north all the way to the Soviet border nevertheless served to illustrate that northern Norwegian footballing identity was far from a general concept at this time. Just as there were fringe areas in the south, so the fringes themselves had fringes. For The Footballing Committee of Northern Norway, the popularity of the game actually became a problem. In 1933, the committee thought that it would be “an insuperable task to hold the championships, with regard to finances as well as to the limited time available”. The solution was to refuse the new clubs from Finmark participation. In 1931, teams from this part of the region were asked

¹⁷ NFF yearbook 1953, 220, 229-230.

¹⁸ Newspaper clippings in Protocol of the Northern Norwegian Football Association 1933-1935, NFF archives.

to “abstain voluntarily from participation in the matches this year”. None the less, 16 clubs applied to play, in the correct fashion according to the rules of the NFF. The footballing committee unanimously voted to accept all applications, except the one from Kirkenes, which was asked to “voluntarily withdraw its application, since the club’s participation this year was impossible because of the disproportionately large expenses it would entail for the championship finances”. But Kirkenes refused to give in, and sent a “renewed application” which was radiant with the will and desire to play football. Here, an income of 300 kroner as well as free accommodation for visiting teams’ players was guaranteed for the home match in the first round. For a “possible journey to Tromsø in the second round”, the club was willing to pay for its own journey to Hammerfest and back. This made the footballing committee think again:

In the year 1931, on the 20th of July, The Footballing Committee of Northern Norway met in Svolvær. The two committee members who are not resident here, were not called upon to attend, because of the expenses entailed, but after conferring over the telephone they had both declared themselves in agreement with the decisions. (...) Since the Committee’s refusal to let Kirkenes Idrettsforening participate in this year’s championships must be considered to have been made void by this offer, it was decided to accept the club as early as from the 1st round.¹⁹

Two Finmark clubs were set to play against each other, for natural financial reasons. This “local derby” illustrates the very great interest football enjoyed in Finmark. Hammerfest T&IL spent five days travelling to Kirkenes – only to lose 0-10. Kirkenes’ travels to and from the 2nd

¹⁹ Prococol of the Northern Norwegian Football Association, 1928-1933, May-July 1931, April 2nd 1933, NFF Archives.

round match in Tromsø took seven days and nights. People in Finmark, suffering from a footballing famine, were also eager just to *watch* football. The match between Vadsø Turnforening and Kirkenes in 1933 was only surpassed by the final itself, as far as takings were concerned. At this time, Kirkenes were battling their way towards the top of football clubs in northern Norway. As a newcomer with conditions against them, the club quickly became popular. In 1934, the club got all the way to the final, against Glimt, Bodø in Tromsø. They lost 3-4, but the newspapers were very positive and resorted to the use of tremendous allegory: “Kirkenes Idrettsforening have through the years step by step tied Finmark ever more closely to the other parts of the country. (...) It was a muscular fist, which unambiguously and for all time has pulled Finmark’s football up to a level equalling that in Nordland and Troms”.²⁰ Full equality was never reached. No Finmark team ever managed to win a Northern Norwegian Championship, although some have been close.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the relationship of northern Norwegian to other Norwegian football may perhaps be compared to Norwegians’ relationship to English football in the same period. These were two worlds, which were not expected to meet. Many northerners with an interest in football eagerly followed developments in the southern league, while at the same time supporting their local team. Ørjan Iversen has told the story of how football fans at Melbu in the Vesterålen district eagerly awaited the arrival of the *Hurtigruten* – the fast coastal steamers that connected and still connect ports along the northern Norwegian coast – on Wednesdays, because the ships brought newspapers and in particular the sporting paper *Sportsmanden* published on the previous Monday. Ørjan of Melbu himself supported the Østfold club Fredrikstad – in spite of having spent two years as a player for Lyn as a very

²⁰ The Newspaper *Tromsø*, September 2nd 1934.

young man.²¹ After northern Norway gradually and to a growing degree was integrated into the rest of footballing, the regional institutions disappeared during the period from 1969 to 1978.

At last, in 1963, the four best clubs from northern Norway from the previous year were admitted to the national championships. They were scheduled to play against each other in the first round, but not in the second. This encounter between two footballing worlds would turn out to be comparatively successful, and became the first “crack in the wall”. The period from 1963 to 1978 became one of transition. Possibilities for qualification were opened up, and committees were given the task of considering how Northern Norway could be integrated into a league and cup system for all of Norway. In 1972, Mjølnar of Narvik became the first club from Northern Norway to play in the Norwegian 1st division.²² It is true that they were relegated after the first season, but the important thing was that formerly insuperable barriers around Northern Norway were gone – almost. The winner of the northern Norwegian 2nd division still had to play qualifiers, before the club might advance to the 1st. Among those affected by this rule were Bodø-Glimt, during their successful 1975 season. They were undefeated in all their league and cup matches, but failed in the qualifiers. It was only with the 1979 season that all the football *kretser* and clubs of Norway were incorporated into a league and cup systems which gave all clubs the same rights and possibilities to be promoted or relegated, to having their achievements measured and being ranked on sporting premises. At that time, the league system in Norway had become a truly national one.

Even so, although the external symbols gradually disappeared, this last decade was perhaps the one which most strongly substantiated the feeling of belonging to a region – a “problem area”.

²¹ Ørjan Iversen interviewed by M. Goksøyr June 28th 2000.

²² Which was then the top league division. In 1990, the NFF voted to rename the 1st division “The Pools League” (after the league sponsor), in 1991 the 2nd division became the 1st division and so on – a decision with certain logical flaws, which add to the burden of the statistical historian.

The “solutions” of the 1960s were “too little, too late”. In the north, there had long been a feeling that they were ripe for playing the “big lads” in the south. The story of Wilhelm “Wille” Eliassen from Mo (in Nordland) is illustrative of this. Eliassen was a talented player, whom many in the north held to be of national team quality. He wanted to prove this – and that southerners had an easier time. In 1959, he went to Oslo to play for Frigg. He returned a year later – with a match for the national team under his belt! Eliassen won his national shirt as a substitute in the first national match of the 1960 season, which was played in Copenhagen against Denmark, and ended in a 0-3 Norwegian defeat. Eliassen was allowed to play one half, and this was to be the only time he wore the shirt. But he had “proved” a thesis of his own and of many northern Norwegians: He had to play for an Oslo club to be selected for the national team. He had also contributed to the survival of the myth of “those damned northerners”.²³

If the story of Eliassen is an enjoyable anecdote, Harald “Dutte” Berg forms a chapter of his own in the history of football in Northern Norway. Bodø-Glimt and Harald Berg are two closely connected stories, broken by Berg’s absence in the capital from 1965 and abroad as a professional player in The Netherlands from 1969 to 1973. Bergs individual zeniths as a player can probably be dated to the period when he was physically at his best and played for Lyn, ADO and FC den Haag respectively. In the context of Norwegian footballing history, the two periods when he played for Glimt in the early 1960s and mid-1970s are of at least equal importance. Norway’s great radio reporter Bjørge Lillelien described Berg as “Norway’s greatest player through the ages”: “The feints, the parries, the eye for the right ball at the right moment, the tempo. Who can forget his pass to the left wing during the first half of the cup final against Vard? Good heavens! One might fall out of the reporter’s box from less (...) Harald Berg, this Mozart of football.”²⁴

²³ Goksøyr and Olstad, *Fotball! Norges Fotballforbund 100 år*, 133-134.

²⁴ Lillelien in Arntzen, *Dutte*, 6-7.

When Harald Berg was launched on his footballing career, Northern Norway was still extraneous to footballing Norway proper. Berg and Bodø-Glimt nevertheless enjoyed great days fighting for *krets* championships, the Northern Norway Cup, and in the Northern Norwegian team which played Northern Sweden before 10.000 spectators at Bardufoss in 1962. “Dutte” had his breakthrough at the same time as the first “cracks in the wall” against the south became visible. His efforts were to be of importance both mentally and materially. He had shown that it was possible to assert oneself. The period between 1963 and 1979 was in reality a transitional period where the disparity between visible achievement and being excluded were noted by ever more people. The feeling of being unfairly treated continued to grow for each year that passed without the final barriers being removed – a feeling that strengthened regional identity in earnest. At the same time, the football sport became an arena where people, because of the new openings, at times could show how unjust it all was. Interest had been great before. Now it was just waiting to be released by greater occasions. Football as an instrument and an arena had this potential to release latent moods. The great opportunity was to be Glimt’s efforts in the 1975 cup.

The failed attempts at promotion through qualifying matches demonstrated to all the world – and to Northern Norway in particular – how unjust the system was. The enormous interest surrounding Bodø-Glimt must be viewed against this background. The northern part of the country had been given an extremely good football team, where hard-working local players were mixed with prodigal sons of heroic stature, and which had to overcome not just opponents on the pitch, but also a deeply unfair league system. The injustice in this was “proved” by Glimt through their achievements in the cup, and by winning the Norwegian championship in 1975. It is no exaggeration to say that this gathered a far wider set of people than those

traditionally “interested in football” around Bodø-Glimt. “Northern Norway’s team” was backed by inventive supporters who sang the province’s “national anthem”, the song “Å eg veit meg eit land langt der oppe mot nord ...” (“Oh, I know of a country far to the north”) with renewed vigour.

Bodø-Glimts achievements in the 1975 cup became the real great breakthrough for football *teams* from Northern Norway. On the road to the cup final at Ullevaal in Oslo, a popular movement arose and grew. Northern Norwegian culture proved have aspects which could now, at last, be put to use in a national football arena. Glimt’s road to the cup final was not of the easiest. After having defeated Skeid of Oslo after a replay in the 4th round, they were ready for the quarter final against Viking of Stavanger. This was to be the first quarter final to be played in northern Norway. The author Arthur Arntzen has described this festive sporting event with almost 13,000 spectators who displayed humour and inventiveness. The stands were marked by a mixture of northern Norwegian psalms and 1970s style demonstration slogans. “Å eg veit meg et lag” (“Oh, I know of a team”) side by side with demands for “Viking out of the cup”. “Then the hurricane of cheering broke out. For ”king Dutte” and his warriors were now making their entrance. The king was met by a united people. A people which had survived the worst of winters, spring and summer. Who were weighed down by shortages of potatoes, vegetables and aerals enabling them to receive Swedish television and by all manner of freight surcharges. Who were tormented by dry rot, spring tides, not enough warm weather for the hay to dry in and insufficient sales of stockfish. A hardened people, in other words. But in this hour, the apposite question: Could this people stand a defeat, here and now? Hardly. An exodus to the south would be next.”²⁵

²⁵ Arntzen, *Dutte*, 109.

But the exodus proved unnecessary. Glimt won, and were awarded a home game in the semi-finals, this time against Start from Kristiansand, a city in the furthest south of Norway. The supporters, led by local celebrities, developed ever new methods for raising their own spirits and “psyching out” their opponents. According to Harald Berg, the efforts of the supporters has been underestimated in the story of how Glimt reached the final and how the Northern Norwegian footballing identity climbed to new heights. When the Start players left the plane in Bodø, they had to run the gauntlet along an interminable row of people, who just whispered “Start are no good”.²⁶ This had its effect. Bodø-Glimt made history as the first cup winners from Northern Norway. The next year, a European cup match could be played north of the Polar Circle – an impossible thought just a few years previously.

Bodø-Glimt provided the breakthrough. Other clubs followed up, and saw to it that a “new” footballing region was established. Tromsø repeated the feat of Glimt eleven years later, when “The Boys” moved the border for cup victories one *fylke* further to the north, to 70° northern latitude. When the “historic” cup final between two teams from Northern Norway, Tromsø and Bodø-Glimt, was played in 1996, it thus was no longer the great, epoch-making event one might have expected. That the northern parts of Norway could produce top-quality football, had become accepted as a matter of fact, and people could now fondly reminisce about how great it was, when the breakthrough arrived in the 1970s.

Football and the means of subsistence

As we have seen, it has been difficult for some areas of Norway to join the rest and be accepted. Others have, at times, achieved a reputation as a “footballing *fylke*”. From the 1920s to the 1960s, this was a term commonly used about Østfold in the southeast of the country. In addition to Northern Norway, small localities like Sogndal in the west have shown the nation

²⁶ Harald Berg interviewed by M. Goksøyr June 27th 2000.

football teams which have competed with the best the nation has to offer. These, however, are places of another type than the many small footballing environments of the fifties.

The various types of local means of subsistence have in their time not always been favourable to football. Primary industries, i. e. fishing, agriculture and forestry, were not. Fishermen and people in agriculture did not have the amount of spare time necessary to develop organised football, beyond a rather sporadic level. Those regions where such activities were the main means of subsistence, were thus saddled with a handicap. It was symptomatic that local football leaders in Northern Norway in the 1930s were not fishermen and smallholding farmers, but telegraph employees, shop assistants, policemen and office workers. If the fish arrived, the fishermen had to drop whatever they were doing. To play football once the fields had been mown or the catch had been brought ashore, no matter what time of day or day of the week, was frequently the only possibility.

Whalers had to be away a lot. As late as in the early 1960s, this did not necessarily mean goodbye to football. Legendary footballer Thorbjørn Svenssen of Sandefjord managed to combine whaling with top-level Norwegian football of the time – at least for a brief period, after whaling seasons became shorter and more predictable.²⁷ In spite of his whaling career, Svenssen chalked up 104 matches for his national team, one less than Billy Wright who at that time held the record with 105. In the seafaring and whaling town of Haugesund in the southwest, players who were “out” had to be called home for important matches in the cups of 1961 and ’62. To adapt to the “natural” time circumstances of the primary industries was a

²⁷ Sandefjord, a small town on the Oslo fiord to the south of Oslo, was for a long period a centre for the despatch of whaling expeditions to the Antarctic.

common characteristic of pre-modern sports in general, but were not very advantageous for more modern footballing.²⁸

Industrial society was advantageous to football in the sense that it gave its employees regular spare time as a central part of the lives of most wage earners. It also offered young people work throughout a large part of the century. Both of these factors were important for the framework conditions for Norwegian amateur football. The disadvantage with this aspect of footballing Norway was that people were exhausted. “I have seen boys in our first team so weary from the day’s toil, that we have said they shouldn’t train today (...) The player has been at work from 5.30 AM to 4 PM and heaving flour all day, and that boy has no strength left over for training”²⁹ There may in other words be reasons why one should be wary of simplifying the connection between industrialisation and football. Where machines were running and people had to work round-the-clock shifts, the preconditions for football at a high level were naturally not of the best. The workers’ environments nevertheless created many well-known and strong football clubs, which were not particular to any one part of the country, but which were typical of their time. When the great era of Industrial Norway approached its end – and toil was replaced by stress – these footballing environments entered upon harder times. To keep hold of the young people became almost a magical formula.

When the framework conditions of football once again altered from the 1970s on, clubs in locations with large educational facilities thus had an advantage. Activities in typical tertiary industrial locations could draw advantages from more flexible hours of work, which could more easily be adapted to football in a modern and less amateurish version. So what sort of society is best suited to a variant of football where the game itself is not only the main activity,

²⁸ Cf. Thompson, “Time, Work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism”.

²⁹ Arne Gustavsen from the Østfold football *krets* at the NFF Congress in 1968. NFF yearbook 1968, 227-8.

but the only one? The dominant teams of the 1990s are usually from towns and cities with a strong influx of new inhabitants, from places which either has an economy, educational facilities or an environment which may attract younger players. Even though the players are now professional, it has probably done the development of Tromsø IL no harm that the city has a university. Nor has it harmed a team such as Sogndal that trade and industry is on its feet, and can support a professional footballing team.

Developments in Sogn and Fjordane may be said to be symptomatic. Jotun from the industrial area of Årdal had dominated footballing in this *fylke* through the 1950s and 1960s, but from the 1970s Sogndal took over – and the club has reinforced its position in the 1980s and 1990s. It wasn't Sogndal as a farming and fruit producing district that took over, but the educational and service providing centre. With a college of further education in place, it was easier to keep young people from leaving the district and the *fylke*, and to attract players from elsewhere. There were also municipal authorities and businesses which saw the potential of football. An example of the near oppsite is Kristiansund, which around the middle of the last century had a much stronger footballing environment than e. g. Sogndal. Kristiansund was a traditional coastal town with small industries and no educational institutions of particular note. As time went by, it became a town young people moved away from rather than into. It is typical that the football club Kristiansund FK played its only top division season in the 1950s. Nevertheless the town has kept a reputation as a footballing town, because of a good environment, and a number of fine footballers hail from here. Ole Gunnar Solskjær is one of them. But the good work which has been done in the local clubs, has not prevented Kristiansund becoming a town which ambitious footballers moved away from – a “footballing town without a club”.

The organisational structure of the NFF has contributed to giving outlying areas and small clubs considerable influence. All clubs have the right to attend and vote at football conferences, together with the *kretser* and the governing committee. During the 1990s, the top clubs were awarded two representatives. This has only disturbed the balance of strength to a certain degree. The majority of the representatives at the congresses is still constituted by club representatives – from “small clubs”. All clubs within the NFF in theory have the same chances of promotion in the league system, and to be represented in the national team. One level where this is more than a theoretical possibility, is in the younger teams classified according to age groups. In a historical context, these have to a far greater degree than the elite national team recruited their players from all of Norway, from small clubs and small localities. On the top level, other mechanisms dominate, and together with professionalisation these make their way downwards. After entering a new millennium, one must therefore be allowed to say that Norwegian football *still* is of a decentralised nature. This may have been the strength of Norwegian football as a people’s sport.

While Sweden has experienced depopulation of the countryside, and hardly has seen a men’s club from north of Sundsvall in the elite division, Norwegian football from the end of the 1990s on has been marked by an ever stronger “northern character”. The centre, judging by results, has been in what is in Norwegian called “Middle Norway”. Rosenborg of Trondheim in 2006 won their 16th league championship since 1988, and are the only Norwegian club which has advanced from the preliminary rounds of the UEFA Champions League. The “real north” was put on the footballing map by Bodø-Glimt’s and Tromsø’s victories in the Norwegian championships (the cup).³⁰ Both Bodø-Glimt and Tromsø have been runners-up in the top league division (Glimt in 1997 and 1993, Tromsø in 1990). As a consequence of these

³⁰ Bodø-Glimt won the national championship in 1975 and 1993, Tromsø in 1986 and 1996.

developments, the understanding of the concept of a periphery within fotballing has been altered. The borders of the periphery have retreated. Talented northerners no longer have to travel to Oslo or Trondheim to play top league football. In the year 2002, there were only two *fylker* in Norway which had never had a club in the top division, these being Finmark furthest to the north and Aust-Agder in the far south.

The Gulf Stream may be said to play a role, but factors of climate and topography cannot explain the great *change* that has taken place in top-level Norwegian football. Tromsø and Bøde haven't become towns for indoor sports such as Luleå in Sweden, and it is possible to list several possible explanations for this. But on the Norwegian side, two stand out in particular: The first is the politically planned building of arenas financed with pools money after the second world war. This arena building was part of the build-up of the Norwegian welfare state. The principles of the welfare state, that everybody should have the same rights whether to health services, to education or to cultural services, could also be applied to sports. Rolf Hofmo, the great arena builder of Norwegian sports and a state-employed sports ideologue, was very clear on this point: Everybody should have the same rights to a sporting arena, from the most snowed-in farmer to the most weatherbeaten fisherman.³¹ The northern *fylker* benefited particularly strongly from this. This arena building policy applied to all sports, and led for example to swimmers from a *fylke* such as Finmark in the 1960s being able to win Norwegian championship titles for the first time. Secondly, technological developments in the fields of artificial grass and halls for indoor football have been more important in Northern Norway than in most other places where football is played. At the turn of the century, there were 14 indoor football arenas built to full international measurements in Norway, plus a number of training halls. The government-supported NFF project "Hall in the North" led to a

³¹ Goksøy, Andersen and Axdal, *Kropp, kultur og tippekamp*. The building of arenas and other facilities was financed from three sources: Pools money, the clubs' own efforts – through savings or voluntary, practical work – and municipal funding.

drastic extension of the possibilities for footballing in Northern Norway. Football could now be played as an indoor and winter sport. Ice hockey, which is a major sport in Northern Sweden, was on the other hand to suffer from a lack of halls in Northern Norway. It is true that the progress of the northern regions in Norwegian footballs cannot be explained by this alone. That progress began before the era of the indoor halls. But the progress could be consolidated on a material basis. State-run arena policy, on the other hand, has given Norway a distribution of sports which might not have been expected, judging by the size of the population and by financial income – a distribution of sports which is not solely directed by commercial strength.

Here lie possibilities for comparisons, whether with other Nordic countries or with more southerly countries such as Spain and Italy. Most countries have a periphery. Even in football mad Scotland, Inverness has had to fight hard to be allowed to play the great names of the domestic league. Norway has perhaps been an “annerledesland”, a “different sort of country”³² where the sporting dimensions of centre and periphery have not always coincided with economic dimensions. This may also demonstrate something of the relative autonomy of sports, in terms of central concepts such as identity and belonging.

List of references:

Aamodt, Asbjørn et al. *Fotballboken*. Kristiania: Gyldendal 1921.

Andersen, P. Chr. *Norges Fotballforbund gjennom 25 aar*. Oslo: Norges Fotballforbund, 1927.

Arntzen, Arthur. *Dutte*. Oslo: Cappelen, 1976.

Goksøyr, Matti. ”’Nationale Idrætter’ – et 1800-tallsprodukt?” In *Nasjonal identitet – et kunstprodukt?*, edited by Øystein Sørensen. Oslo: Norges forskningsråd, 1994.

³² A word that came into usage during the political battle over Norwegian membership of the European Union in 1994, by forces which feared that Norway was to become too much of a special case in an European context. The word was later also adopted by the opposing side, i. e. those who opposed Norwegian membership of the EU

Goksøyr, Matti and Finn Olstad. *Fotball! Norges Fotballforbund 100 år*. Oslo: Norges Fotballforbund, 2002.

Goksøyr, Matti, Espen Andersen and Kristin Asdal. *Kropp, kultur og tippekamp*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1996.

Hansen, Jonny. *I "fotballens tjeneste". 75 år med Troms fotballkrets*. Tromsø: Troms fotballkrets, 1994.

Hegtun, Halvdan. *Norges Fotballforbund femti år, 1902-1952*. Oslo: Norges Fotballforbund, 1952.

Kvammen, Reidar. *50 ganger på Norges landslag*. Oslo: Prent, 1949.

Thompson, E. P. "Time, Work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism", *Past and present* 38 (1967): 56-97.

