



*Critical Research in Football*

# FOOTBALL, FANDOM AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by  
Przemysław Nosal, Radosław Kossakowski  
and Wojciech Woźniak



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# Football, Fandom and Collective Memory

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This book examines the topic of identity and collective memory in football fandom. Drawing on global research in history, sociology and political science, the book looks at how, where and why football fans and supporters' groups introduce particular role models into their self-identity and performative narratives.

The book presents original, cutting-edge research that illustrates the complex, multidimensional nature of the (re-)formulation of collective memory and the elevation of role models. It looks at the processes by which some supporters' groups celebrate historical and contemporary figures – including political leaders, warriors, revolutionaries, or armed resistance groups – that they believe embody patriotic, regional or nationalist virtues, as well as supporters' groups who define their patriotism in opposition to these figures. The book presents cases ranging from Ukrainian football ultras in the shadow of Russian aggression and Jewish role models in Germany's collective football memory to the symbology of Che Guevara and Diego Maradona in Brazilian and Argentinian football to hero formation and the myths of national identity in Australian football.

This is fascinating reading for anybody with an interest in the sociology, culture or politics of sport, or in fandom, identity, nationalism more broadly in sociology, political science or history.

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Edited by Przemysław Nosal,  
Radosław Kossakowski and  
Wojciech Woźniak

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# Contents

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Contributors</i>	<i>ix</i>
1 Introduction to studies on football, fandom and collective memory: Why investigate the role models of football fans? PRZEMYSŁAW NOSAL AND RADOŚLAW KOSSAKOWSKI	1
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Role Models, Nation and Patriotism</b>	<b>13</b>
2 The evolution of Ukrainian football ultras in the context of war: Tribune of heroes MICHAEL COLE	15
3 The political and war symbology in the universe of the supporters: A reading of the appropriations of the figure of Che Guevara between organized supporters in Brazil BERNARDO BUARQUE DE HOLLANDA AND RAPHAEL RAJÃO RIBEIRO	33
4 An example of patriotism within a subcultural group: Bad Blue Boys Zagreb ANDREJ IVAN NUREDINOVIĆ AND DINO VUKUŠIĆ	50
5 The rejection of individuals as heroes in football supporters' groups: Difficult heroism in Mexico ROGER MAGAZINE AND RICARDO DUARTE BAJAÑA	67
6 Hero formation and the myth of Australian national identity in Australian football KEITH D. PARRY	78

**PART II****Role Models and History 93**

- 7 From collective memory to collective identity: A case study of FC Bayern Munich 95  
PAVEL BRUNSSSEN
- 8 On the ambivalences of fandom's collective memory: Communist officer and the hero of the anti-communist terraces 112  
WOJCIECH WOŹNIAK
- 9 Cuauhtémoc Blanco: Hero and antihero, and his personification of contradictions in Mexican society 128  
ROGER MAGAZINE AND JORGE ROSENDO NEGROE ALVAREZ
- 10 Collective memory and charismatic affect: The cult of Maradona among Argentinean and Neapolitan football supporters 143  
ANTONIO DONATO, EDUARDO GALAK, AND LORENZO PEDRINI

**PART III****Teams and their Role Models 161**

- 11 Deconstructing the sociopolitical, ethnic and racial dimensions of Zimbabwe's Dream Team (1992–1995): 'Ndivo vakomana vekwedu vanotamba kufanana neshumba' 163  
MANASE KUDZAI CHIWESHE AND GERALD DANDAH
- 12 Claiming, space and identity: Analysing Tractor football club's catalyst role in the publicisation of ethnic and ecological claims 182  
DORNA JAVAN AND MEHDI HAMIDI SHAFIGH
- 13 Between a historical moment and the brand of a football fan group: The Republic of Ploiești 204  
ANDREI GHEORGHE
- 14 History, collective memory and social representations associated with Futebol Clube do Porto: The "Nation" and its hero 220  
DANIEL SEABRA
- 15 Folktale patterns and memory-building processes in Swedish football: Transfer me a hero 240  
KATARZYNA HERD
- 16 Fandom identity, collective memory and blank spots in knowledge: Conclusions and the book's contribution to further research agenda 257  
RADOSŁAW KOSSAKOWSKI, PRZEMYSŁAW NOSAL AND WOJCIECH WOŹNIAK

*Index* 269

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# **Introduction to studies on football, fandom and collective memory**

## **Why investigate the role models of football fans?**

*Przemysław Nosal and Radosław Kossakowski*

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### **Introduction**

Football fans are an essential part of the football industry, accompanying the development of the sport from its modern beginnings. It is particularly evident in the numerous publications that focus on fan behaviour both from a historical perspective and in relation to the multidimensionality of fan culture that has developed over the past decades (Dunning et al., 1988). In fact, since the early days of modern football, fans have been ‘knitted together’ with the football culture, the footballers and the events in the stadiums. It was primarily due to the similarity – mainly in terms of class – between fans and footballers. Until the end of the twentieth century, it was possible to maintain, albeit essentially only on a mythological level, a narrative about such a class homology between the world of fans and the field of football (Giulianotti, 1999). For many decades, such an identifying symbiosis was based on the assumption that football grew out of and was specific to a working-class environment. It is remarkable that even today, when football is first and foremost a billion-dollar business, the myth of shared – working-class – roots resonate in hyper-modern stadiums (Hughson, 2009). This myth is maintained primarily by the fans, although the clubs, which are corporately managed brands (in many cases global), also appeal to this traditionalist content. The situation is paradoxical in that, due to economic pressures, the middle and upper classes have increasingly become the recipients of the commercial entertainment that football has become when we speak about the highest echelons of football on a global, European or national scale (Giulianotti, 2011).

Contemporary football is saturated with references to historical events, memorable moments, and, above all, people – legends – who are saved from oblivion by monuments erected in front of stadiums, commemorative displays or showcases in club museums (Yang, 2017). This nostalgic component in football culture, on the one hand, is a guarantee of continuity between a “golden age” in which things were “different” (implicitly: better, more authentic) and the club community formed a unique unity; and what it is now: a moment full of dilemmas about the boundaries of commercial compromises

made to keep up with football competition. Tradition, history and nostalgia fulfil essential functions as an identity “fuse” – they can always be invoked when economic pragmatics force, for example, the sale of the club to a foreign investor. Tradition and the myths of the past are the last weapons that fans can use in a clash with economics. It is a weapon that sometimes brings results, as evidenced by fans “defending” the club’s colours, crest or name (Hayton et al., 2017), although this is not the rule (as in the cases of clubs managed by Red Bull Company). History and tradition also serve as the “opiate” of the fans – even as commercial processes tighten the noose ever tighter on modern football, identity myths help anaesthetise the unbearable feeling that “our” club is “ours” only symbolically (Cocieru et al., 2019). However, ownership rights are in the hands of “strangers”: individuals and companies who originate from outside the local context (and are therefore not “one of us”); history and a sense of continuity help to maintain supporter identity. This identity, based on identification with history and tradition, is becoming even more pronounced nowadays when it opposes the business-orientated tendencies in sport (after all, everything can be bought, but not “our identity”). Another consequence of the fans’ strong attachment to the non-material space of the club is the widespread – multifaceted – fans’ activism in recent years, concerning, above all, the defence of tradition against commercialisation (Cleland et al., 2018; Antonowicz et al., 2015). It is somewhat of a paradox that the reflexivity from which this activism arises is the result of commercial, neoliberal forces in football (Numerato, 2015).

### ***Football fans and social identification***

The attachment to a club, its history, its colours and its traditions did not start in recent years due to economic pressures. However, the essence of this phenomenon becomes essential in the context of commercialisation and becomes an object of interest for marketing. Because football has become an attractive product, fans are perceived as consumers whose demand for ‘belonging’ becomes a valuable economic asset. All the more so because – unlike consumers of classic brands (e.g. food or clothing) – fans are specific consumers: their loyalty does not end when the quality of the ‘product’ diminishes. In other words, fans can support (also financially) their club in a situation of relegation to a lower league or a series of defeats, as described in the literature as “West Ham syndrome” (Parker & Stuart, 1997). This attitude seems invaluable from the view of commercial processes in contemporary sports. It is not surprising, therefore, that a large number of articles on fan identification with the club (brand) appear in the academic literature on sports marketing and various typologies of fan identity (Branscombe & Wann, 1991) emerge from these analyses. The knowledge from these studies can be applied to the diverse marketing campaigns that sports organisations and clubs can undertake.

Topics related to fan attachment and identification are also of interest to sociology and social psychology. In the former case, the analyses mainly focus on qualitative research, which yields – sometimes very expressively articulated – testimonies about the love for a club and the role that fan identity plays in the everyday existence of individuals (Kossakowski, 2021). Sociological studies of fan identification and “fervour” result in conceptual taxonomies of fan identity (Giulainotti, 2002). Social identity theory, used to study the identification of football fans with their groups, has also proven to be a powerful and fertile research approach. Numerous studies in this area show that in various situations (e.g. street fights or confrontations against police), the identities of individual fans become one with the social identity of the group, making fans more inclined to pro-group actions, even if these involve danger and risk (Stott et al., 2001). Interdisciplinary research employing the methodologies of sociology and social psychology shows that in the case of committed fans, a phenomenon called “identity fusion” can occur when members of fan groups experience a visceral sense of oneness with the group (Kossakowski & Besta, 2018; Besta & Kossakowski, 2018).

### ***Areas of non-football-related social identification – state, nation, local community***

The specificity of strong supporter identification goes beyond the contexts of football clubs and stadiums, although it undoubtedly grows out of them. Love for a club is very often linked at the same time to love for the local region to which the club belongs. In many instances, the club is a representative, a carrier of a symbol of local identity, often more critical to the fan than, for example, local heritage sites. The club’s specific addition to the catalogue of local identity is not necessarily the result of an artificial mechanism or an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), as many clubs and stadiums, are embedded in the historical fabric of the city or region. In addition, this unification of the club with the locality is reflected symbolically – it is not uncommon for the clubs’ coats of arms to include symbols associated with the locality, such as the towers of castles or the towers of churches. This symbolic dimension underlines that the club is an equally important (for supporters more important) part of the local identity (Gómez-Bantel, 2016).

Therefore, it is unsurprising that, around the world, supporting the club crosses the sporting dimension and moves to the municipal, regional or even national level. One could say that club “patriotism” is being transmitted into regional or national patriotism. Fans of the Dutch Twente Enschede express their love for the club and the region they come from by using the phrase “Proud to be Tukker!” (“Tukker” is a term describing a member of the local community), and the emblems on the club’s scarves (including its logo) feature an image of a horse, reflecting the region’s agricultural character (Kossakowski, 2013). For FC Barcelona supporters, their club is not only



a source of football fascination but also a symbolic vehicle for the region's identity, Catalonia (and at the same time, a means of expressing dissent from the national capital; Shobe, 2008). Spain is also home to Athletic Bilbao, whose fans ardently support the club's policy of only recruiting players with Basque roots. The club's logo, which supporters proudly wear on scarves, caps, or shirts, includes important symbols of Basque identity, such as the oak tree symbolising Biscayan freedoms (Vaczi, 2023).

In this context, it is worth emphasising that ultras groups develop "urban patriotism" and use many communication tools, such as flags and banners, to present attachment to and love of the community and city (Ginhoux, 2012). In Italy, the concept of "campanilismo" exists, symbolising the love of one's city depicted in ultras choreographies. For example, Inter ultras displayed an impressive choreography of the Madonnina, the statue of the Madonna that sits atop Milan's cathedral, bedecked in Inter colours. Underneath bore the legend: "Ti Te Dominet Milan" ("You dominate Milan"), which comes from the city's unofficial anthem. In the context of the derby, combined with the use of Inter's colours, it gains an additional, ambiguous meaning. Likewise, ultras of AC Milan have presented many choreographies suggesting that they "rule" the city. One of the performances included a slogan declaring "Fin dall' antichita' tutta mia la citta" ("from ancient times the city is mine"). The local identity is a space of confrontation in other derby rivalries. Ultras from FK Sarajevo presented a banner reading "Jedan Grad Jedan Klub" ("One city one club") during the derby match against FK Zeljeznicar. During the Hamburg derby in 2019, Hamburg ultras displayed a banner saying "Our city and its club," while their St Pauli counterparts displayed a huge tifo stating "Hamburg is brown and white" (brown and white are the colours of St Pauli). In each case, the ultras propagated the vision that only one group can be entitled "owners" of the city (Doidge et al., 2020).

The glorification of the region is sometimes transferred to the national level when fans present topics and ideas dedicated to national heroes or events. This issue can be regarded in the broader context of the political engagement of football fans. During the Madrid derby in 2008, Ultras Sur (Real Madrid group) unveiled a choreography depicting a Nordic king seated upon a throne accompanied by two wolves and two ravens. The Nordic theme was reinforced by runic symbols surrounding the image and the legend "huestes a vencer" ("Victory to the hosts") in a Gothic font (Doidge et al., 2020). The nuance is that the use of Nordic imagery denotes far-right and nationalist sympathies, themes that feature in many of the tifos of ultras in eastern Europe and the Balkan region where the references to national heroes seem strongest. Fans from these regions are more willing to incorporate such symbols and emphasise the warlike representations in their performances. Choreographies decorated with knights, soldiers and warriors refer to an "imagined" historical order and state, but are used as references to current events. For example, the ultras of Spartak Moscow presented a huge image of an army of warriors from

the Middle Ages to celebrate the group's fifteenth anniversary. In Poland, very popular and common historical topics are choreographies dedicated to the "Cursed Soldiers" – the members of anti-communist guerrilla troops operating in Poland in the first years after World War II. As it is assumed, "Cursed Soldiers" represent typological role models for Polish ultras fans who glorify them uncritically (Nosal et al., 2021). In some cases, the glorification of historical persons as role models raises controversy due to past actions undertaken by idealised heroes, which was the case of Croatian fans' recalling of the Independent State of Croatia, a fascist World War II quisling state (Brentin, 2016).

The fans from eastern European and Balkan countries tend to commemorate mainly persons connected with the patriotic (or nationalist) side of the history of their countries/regions. This is associated with the general rightist attitudes of these fans. However, historical role models can also be found in other areas. Fans of Scottish Celtic Glasgow commemorate leaders fighting against British imperialism, for instance, during the Champions League match against AC Milan, the image of William Wallace. During the same match, they also displayed the image of Bobby Sands – the leader of the IRA. The glorification of political revolutionists is – to some extent – not only the expression of historical nostalgia and longing for "real" heroes but also the expression of the rebellious nature of fandom itself, and Celtic Glasgow fans are well known for their anti-system and anti-governmental actions (Atkinson, 2022).

For western European fans, recalling differently orientated role models is much more common. One famous example is Che Guevara as a role model for rebellious, emancipatory social identity. His image was present at Italian, Israeli, French or German stadiums. Fans of Italian Livorno refer to left thinkers and to such persons as Stalin (Doidge 2013). Similarly, ultras of Hapoel Tel Aviv performed choreographies with images of Che Guevara, Karl Marx or Gandhi. Fans from Tel Aviv cultivate their club's working-class and leftist tradition ("Hapoel" means "the worker"). The rebellious nature of ultras fandom is also symbolically demonstrated by the image of Cochise – one of the Apache leaders in resisting intrusions by Mexicans and Americans. He is perceived as a role model, a hero to follow by ultras of the French club Saint Étienne (Ginhoux, 2012). It is significant that in general – regardless of cultural differences – ultras supporters refer to role models who are of insubordinate, rebellious, and anti-system character. Very often, these are characters who have faced the need to defend their identity. The choice of such role models seems understandable in the context of the feeling expressed by ultras fans about being discriminated against and stigmatised by official agents (football organisations, state authorities) (Doidge et al., 2020). This rebellious identity is sometimes expressed by referring to illegal activities and persons. For example, ultras from the Polish club Motor Lublin displayed a giant choreography of a skull with a cowboy hat and masked face above a banner reading

“Bandit city, bandit club.” One of Motor’s ultras chants contains the words: “It is our habitat of lawlessness.” Being “out of the system” or on the verge of the system makes fans more prone to present such criminal models as points of reference even if most fans are not engaged in illegal activities.

### ***Football-related role models***

Politicians, historical heroes or contemporary leaders do not exhaust the pantheon of figures glorified or commemorated by fans. History or politics creates additional value for identity work, but football is the most important frame of reference. In this context, fans perceive many football legends (players, coaches, managers) as role models and put much effort into maintaining social memory of them. Fans initiate actions for building monuments around stadiums. Fans call for naming stands at the stadium after legends’ names. The images of legends are performed during extraordinary matches. Deciding who deserves to be called a legend (worthy of commemoration) is not based on a simple rule. However, the indisputable quality behind fans’ choices is the dedication to the club or unremarkable character. Fans glorify footballers (coaches) who have spent a long period at their club (the ideal candidate for a role model in this context is an alumnus of the club who has spent his entire career at the club) because this confirms the importance of tradition and reinforces historical continuity. Footballers are worthy of being role models precisely because their example goes against the prevailing trends in commercial football, where players and coaches are for hire. Bill Shankly, Bobby Charlton, Alex Ferguson, and Maradona are figures who are connected to the club’s history. Fans owe them something for spectacular and remarkable achievements (Brescia & Paz, 2023).

### **The role models in the collective memory of football fans’**

Most of the research on fans’ social identification is twofold. On the one hand, studies often focus on one specific theme – patriotism, racism, or resentment towards sexual minorities. They then analyse this element across multiple supporter groups (e.g. nationalism in Polish football fandom, racism among English supporters). On the other hand, a specific group of supporters is examined. Then, all forms of fan involvement, such as flags, banners or songs, are described. This stream also approaches the characteristics of the fans’ collective (e.g. the local commitment of FC Barcelona fans).

Investigating the role models of football fans’ patriotism combines these two approaches. Historical or contemporary persons praised in the stadiums play an important role to one particular group of fans (e.g. local heroes), while at the same time they are representing a set of universal values (e.g. bravery, loyalty, honour). Role models tell us what supporters have in common with each other (within one supporter group) and what they have in common with different supporters’ groups (e.g. conflicting supporter groups

celebrate the same hero). In addition, they also show fans' relation to the local or national community. As a result, such research provides a wealth of information about fan activity and their sense of identity, patriotism and shared collective memory. However, adopting such a research orientation also brings many other benefits. First, it reminds us that fans attribute various cultural meanings to football matches. Many of these go far beyond football and concern politics, history, or social issues. It is an obvious thesis but emphasises that a sporting event is a cultural text (Jary et al., 1991). In turn, different operations are performed – dominant/ oppositional/ negotiated reading, acts of presumption and cultural poaching. Fans use the match for their ends (Cricher, 1979). They attribute meanings that seem relevant to them (e.g. political manifestation, expressing opposition to situations in public life) to different aspects of football.

Second, researching the role models of football fans shows the connection between the sociology of sports and celebrity studies (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Williams, 2006). The linking element between them is fandom. Celebrity reminds us that football is subject to the exact mechanisms of all other areas of the entertainment industry: mediatisation, individualisation, globalisation, the attention economy and the role of performance. Paradoxically, focussing on the individual allows us to see several vital processes around the individual – discussions about shared values or ways of building community.

Third, most of the studies on fans' social identification use abstract categories, like "patriotism," "freedom," "brotherhood" or "bravery." They are easy to proclaim because one does not know what they mean precisely. In contrast, honouring chosen figures in the stands provides specific examples of those abstract categories (Holt et al., 1996). The praised persons embody abstract ideas but have specific biographies, did specific things in their lives and acted in specific circumstances. For example, they show how patriotism concretely manifested during World War II. They are living symbols of essential values. Besides, their image is easy to display on banners or flags.

On the other hand, the figures show the complexity of reality, particularly concerning patriotism. The sociopolitical engagement of people is described in simplistic oppositions: patriotism vs betrayal, left vs right, conservative vs liberal and racist vs anti-racist. However, analysing the figures celebrated by fans shows the multidimensionality of human actions. Many of the supporters' role models are people who make diverse political choices; for example, they cooperate with the regime but support the local community. Fans weigh their merits and sins and decide whether they deserve respect. The case of Ludwik Sobolewski, described in one of the chapters, is illustrative. He is the legendary chairman of the football club Widzew Łódź, who was also a communist officer in the infamous military unit. Although Widzew fans hold anti-communist views, they celebrate the memory of Sobolewski.

Fourth, analysing the supporters' role models leads to discussing official and unofficial patriotic figures. It provides a map of mainstream and alternative national symbols. Investigating the "official" role models is investigating pop patriotism (Edensor, 2002) or banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). It is a dominant patriotic discourse constructed by the state and its media. "Unofficial" role models supplement or contest the dominant discourse. Many figures appearing in the stands are examples of guerrilla patriotism (Nosal et al., 2021), a particular mode of patriotism and collective memory. In this model, not the official national heroes but somewhat controversial figures are praised. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, in their work on political memory (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014), use the categories of "mnemonic actors" and "memory regimes." The concept of guerrilla patriotism applies those categories to study the role of individual and collective (institutional) actors (both praised and despised) who became themes in collective memories within football fandom.

Fifth, analysing the significance of role models in fans' lives can be viewed in the context of changing perceptions of history or even shifting historical narratives and attitudes towards them. Processes related to historical knowledge, the increasing and changing role of education and the emergence of new perspectives on the past influence the reformulation of ideals and heroes within the realm of fan imagination. In many cases, historical discoveries allow for uncovering new facts about previously "flawless" heroes. For instance, in recent times in Western culture, there has been a tendency to topple statues and express opposition to postcolonial history. Supporters, generally, do not participate in such large-scale political actions (at least they are rarely visible as a distinguished group); they often focus on individual heroes, frequently of local significance. The significance of these role models often changes over time, as evidenced by the fascination of Polish fans with guerrilla units like the Cursed Soldiers (Nosal et al., 2021), who have relatively recently become role models in Polish stadiums due to the changing context of memory politics in the country.

Sixth, role models in football are necessary to reinforce the identity-related message that goes beyond the consumerist nature of the sport. They legitimise the "anti-consumerist" character of the most passionate fans by connecting the fans' identity with transcendent values that elevate fandom practice. Role models often occupy normative spaces associated with qualities such as honour, loyalty and fidelity – qualities that, according to fans, are lacking in the football world. Key figures in this regard are footballers from the "golden days," such as Maradona or Cruyff, and especially local players (or coaches) from the past who were "boys from the neighbourhood." Evoking their presence represents a form of "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), creating a sense of times that no longer exist and forging traditions that might be considered a "swan song" in the business-driven circumstances of modern football. The role of such role models may paradoxically grow over time – primarily because it is increasingly rare to encounter "boys from the

neighbourhood” in modern football, thus enhancing the iconic nature of former local and national heroes. As time passes, details of their lives may fade away, leaving what is necessary for fans’ identity-related work.

### **Research questions asked and unasked – the book’s aims and content**

This book explores the complex and multidimensional sphere of role models and collective memory in the world of football fans. The identity of fans has already been analysed in the scientific literature. However, the existing literature has yet to explore implementing historical or contemporary heroes as the role of models in the world of fans. This edited volume intends to fill this gap. This book constitutes an innovative and new approach to fans’ identity and (re)formulations of the collective memory, analysing the influence of role models, history and patriotism, bringing together authors from various countries and disciplines.

The book presents different kinds of role models in various geographical regions. Particular emphasis is given to the relations between role models and fans’ national and local patriotism. As authors in this volume will show, some supporter groups use specific characters that they believe represent the nation, country, sometimes city or even district and embody patriotic attitudes. These include mainly recognised historical figures – former rulers, liberators or famous warriors. However, persons from more recent history also appear – e.g. revolutionaries, social movement leaders, politicians or armed resistance groups. At the same time, many supporters define their patriotism precisely by contesting these figures – by expressing opposition to them and their vision of patriotism. The works link contemporary research on the football fandom and dominant collective memory within the fandom with the historical research about the role models commemorated and contested at the football stands.

The authors discuss how, where and why fans introduce particular role models in their identity and performative narration. In their chapters, authors provide cultural, social and political context, stimulating specific characters’ use in fans’ narrations and performances.

The volume contains three main parts. In this Introduction, we outline the theoretical framework of the texts available in the book. It provides a broader perspective and a deeper understanding of the phenomena.

The core part of the publication consists of texts presenting the collective memory and role models’ case studies. They are divided into three sections. In the “Role models, nation and patriotism” section, the authors focus on the relationship between nation, patriotism and fans’ role models. Michael Cole assesses the performative patriotism of Ukrainian football ultras in the context of Russian aggression. Bernardo Buarque de Hollanda and Raphael Rajão Ribeiro consider the political and war symbolism in the universe of Brazil supporters with particular attention to the figure of Che Guevara.



Andrej Nuredinović and Dino Vukušić investigate the expression of patriotism among Bad Blue Boys. Roger Magazine and Ricardo Duarte Bajaan explore the rejection of individuals as heroes in football supporters' groups in Mexico. Finally, Keith Perry explores hero formation and the myth of national identity in Australian football.

The section "Role models and history" includes four papers. Pavel Brunssen analyses the Jewish role models in Germany's collective football memory. Wojciech Woźniak describes the case of Ludwik Sobolewski – the president of Widzew Łódź football club. Roger Magazine and Jorge Rosendo Negroe Alvarez write about Cuauhtémoc Blanco, and Antonio Donato, Eduardo Galak and Lorenzo Pedrini treat Diego Maradona.

The "Teams and their role models" section analyses the various football figures as mnemonic heroes. Gerald Dandah and Manase Kudzai Chiweshe focus on Zimbabwe's football Dream Team. Mehdi Hamidi Shafigh and Dorna Javan describe the reconstruction and publicisation of the Turkish-Azerbaijani ethnicity and identity issues through the case of the Traktor Football Club. Petrolul Ploiești and its fans are the topics of Andrei Gheorghe's paper. Daniel Seabra presents the collective memory of ultras in Portugal. The text aims to demonstrate how the two Ultra groups that support Futebol Clube do Porto emulate the club and its legendary president Pinto da Costa. Finally, Katarzyna Herd investigates how to become a local hero by analysing the career paths in modern football viewed by scouts and players.

In the Conclusion, Przemysław Nosal, Radosław Kossakowski, and Wojciech Woźniak synthesise the outcomes of all the articles presented in the book. This chapter discusses the similarities and differences of the specific cases, how they may or may not intersect and what more general assumptions can be drawn on their basis.

The contributors cover various topics and are diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Nevertheless, they only touch on a few possible topics related to role models and football fans' patriotism. Further questions arise immediately: How do football fans choose their role models? How do role models correspond with dominant patriotic discourse? What is the role of such figures in the national discourse of football stadiums? Is looking for "controversial" symbols and figures a form of fans' distinction? Do fans use such symbols to stress their "deviant" character? Is praising local characters an act of resistance against globalised and commercialised football? The list of possible research questions shows that using role models as a theoretical framework gives space for various sociological, cultural, anthropological, political or historical research on football fans' patriotism.

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## Fandom identity, collective memory and blank spots in knowledge

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