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Will big money kill off community ownership in League of Ireland?

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Four in a row League of Ireland titles for the multi-millionaire backed Shamrock Rovers

Analysis: With just six of the 20 league clubs now owned by supporters, fears are growing of an 'arms race' in private spending

By Barry Kearney and Olive McCarthy, UCC

Despite a turbulent history of poor governance and financial instability at the hands of wealthy owners, there has been a recent resurgence in private, millionaire ownership in the League of Ireland (LOI). As the Dermot Desmond-backed Shamrock Rovers clinch their fourth Premier Division title in a row, closely followed by billionaire-owned Derry City and privately owned St Patrick's Athletic, public speculation continues around the potential war-chests that will be available to billionaire backed Shelbourne and Galway United this winter.

The current trend of private investment follows a strong period of supporter-ownership in the LOI which peaked in 2019 with nine of twenty clubs being supporter-owned, a figure that now stands at six. Of those nine clubs, six were constituted as co-operatives, while three were member-owned associations. For supporters of co-operative and member-ownership, there is now a sense of concern and frustration as an 'arms race' in private spending accelerates.



From RTÉ Soccer Podcast in February, preview of the new League of Ireland season

The LOI has a very long history of clubs that have disappeared following financial collapse, including Monaghan United, Kilkenny City, Sporting Fingal, Dublin City and Limerick City. Other such as Dundalk, Galway United and Waterford survived following painful periods of financial distress, while the likes of Derry City and Cork City were resurrected following liquidation. For the sake of the League's integrity and stability, supporters do not want to see history repeat itself.

The League's huge potential

The LOI is currently experiencing significant and sustained growth in support, with attendances up 27% in 2023. Several clubs are struggling to meet demand for tickets and games have regularly sold out at Dalymount, Brandywell, Tolka and Richmond Park. For many, the increased attraction is down to the league's authenticity, an antidote to the direction of the English Premier League. The LOI offers a counterculture to the commercialisation and commodification of football witnessed across Europe over the last two decades.



From RTÉ Radio 1's Today with Claire Byrne. Evelyn O'Rourke reports on a bumper era for Irish football as attendances surge at League of Ireland games

The member-owned model taps into that heart and local embeddedness central to the LOI's authenticity. In contrast to private ownership, member-ownership is driven by the view that supporters should be viewed as stakeholders rather than consumers. Co-operative clubs are not driven purely by profit, they offer supporters a voice in their clubs, and challenge the ever-growing agenda that football clubs are toys for the wealthy or state-backed investment vehicles for sportswashing.

Supporter ownership of football clubs is not something radical or confined to the margins of European football. Examples of such ownership models exist in Germany (Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund), Spain (Barcelona, Real Madrid, Athletic Bilbao), Portugal (Sporting CP), Norway (Rosenberg), Sweden (Malmo FF) and Scotland (Hearts, St Mirren and Motherwell). It has been supported and celebrated by UEFA as a model that can achieve financial sustainability, good governance and volunteer engagement.

In Ireland, both the co-operative and member-owned models have delivered a vehicle through which clubs can embed themselves within their communities. Evidence of this can be seen through the fundraising and community work at the heart of Sligo Rovers and Finn Harps in the northwest. Elsewhere, the engagement of clubs such as Bohemians and Cobh Ramblers in championing charities and local initiatives leads one to question why so many would be eager to usher back in an era of private investor dominance.



From RTÉ Radio 1's Reignite, Aine Kerr visits Dalymount Park to learn more about how Bohemians became the ultimate community football club

Long term stability

While the co-operative and member-owned model offers financial stability, community embeddedness and sporting success, it is helpless if the waters it swims in are unhealthy.

Unfortunately, there now appears to be a rush by football clubs across the LOI to attract private investment or fall behind.

Further evidence comes this month following the acquisition of both Treaty United and Drogheda United by separate North American investment firms. These are not encouraging signs for co-operative and member-owned clubs such as Sligo Rovers, Finn Harps and Bohemians who may be forced to either increase their own spending or face some very difficult years ahead on the pitch.

For the long-term stability of the game, clubs and supporters need to take stock and recognise the true priorities of those who attend LOI matches. Is it all about increased spending and winning titles or is it about supporting your local club with your friends and family? Co-operative and member-owned clubs must learn from past mistakes and refuse to be seduced into financial decisions that jeopardise their long-term stability and ownership structure.



From RTÉ Radio 1's Today With Claire Byrne, League of Ireland fans on the highs and lows of following their team

Only one club can win the Premier Division title each year, but that doesn't have to mean that the season was a failure for the other nine. Co-operative clubs get to define their own success, whether that's financial stability, affordable ticket prices, the development of women's football and underage sides, improved facilities for players and supporters etc. Members of a co-operative club have a voice in defining what success means to their club.

No club can have constant success on the pitch regardless of the model. But members can have a club they are proud of with values and actions that contribute to the local community, regardless of the result on the pitch.

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