

“Fan Power: Calling the shots”;
Lessons from the iconic fans of cult club Sankt Pauli F.C.

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Introduction

Sankt Pauli have been described as “soccer’s coolest club” with a worldwide following of over 11 million fans according to an article on CNN. The fans exert a power over their club like few others, fighting football’s commercial juggernaut, and they have been doing this for more than quarter of a century. Sankt Pauli itself is a gritty mostly working class dockside district within Hamburg, Germany. This article, based on research with fan activists, looks behind the scenes to discover how this happens. It tells a story of how fans are empowered through football and offers a vision for football fans to emulate. It is a tale of fan power.

*“they are not only football supporters
they are people who care.. to not only go
to football as a game but to go to
change the society”.*

Sankt Pauli FC enjoy a reputation of being exceptionally fan-friendly, with their fans even more radical than the club, and it is their fans that is the focus of this research. Sankt Pauli is a haven of fan empowerment and activism in a sea of passive consumer culture in commercialised professional football. They have a global underground following as the leading lights campaigning for fan rights. They are the fans many other fans openly or secretly admire. This research with Sankt Pauli fans reveals that they are highly organised. It analyses how football is used as a mechanism to develop and empower communities. It shines a light behind the scenes on these iconic fans and illuminate how they actively manage to be who they are and how they keep on doing what they do.

Fan Friendly Club

Sankt Pauli FC, who yo-yo between the top two divisions of German football league, has an image as a “rebel” professional football club with a tendency to swim against the tide of unconditional commercialism that so dominates professional football. It has a radical political history from the early 1980s onwards like no other professional football club. At that time allegiances were forged in protests and civil unrest between activists and a professional football club, its players and supporters. And from that time on, left-wing politics permeated the football club and its terraces were strewn with political activists who were not only accommodated into the club but incorporated into its decision making. Fans were drawn to Sankt Pauli because of uncomfortable experiences watching other teams in atmospheres which were either intimidating or simply boring. And for some, who had little previous interest in football, because of the overt political activity and demonstrations linked to the games. But each felt a revelation upon encountering a “special atmosphere” at Sankt Pauli.

Fans and the Club

*“For some people it is very important to
be successful in the first Bundesliga ..For
other people it is more important, to
have a club with a special character
and no commercial playground around
the matches”.*

Sankt Pauli FC enjoys a reputation as being one of the most fan friendly clubs evidenced in its extraordinary adoption of many aspects of the fans political and subcultural leanings. It might be expected that this means that all is rosy in the garden of Sankt Pauli, but it is not. Fans exert an eternal vigilance over the club, are very wary of commercialising tendencies, and the

This 2012 work undertaken by Mick Totten was funded by Leeds Metropolitan University who are the copyright holders. It can be accessed at <http://www.playleftwing.org/fan-power-and-sankt-pauli/> relationship is often antagonistic, sometimes strained. The main issues relate to commercialisation, safety, policing and fan freedom. The biggest tensions amongst the fans are between those who are more focused on football and therefore more tolerant of commercialisation and surrendering control to the club, and those who are most focused on the politics and fan control of the club.

Fan Organisation

Significantly, German professional football clubs must abide by the “50+1 rule”. This means they must be owned at least fifty per cent “plus one voice” by their membership with constituted voting rights and an ability to influence the politics and direction of the football club. And the Sankt Pauli fans have been highly successful in making “50+1” an effective democratic tool by ensuring that the majority of members are actually fans.

Fans are further represented by a fan project (Fanladen) which is a combination of meeting point, social hub, community centre and social project staffed by professional “social workers” and hundreds of volunteers. Unlike most public sector organisations there is no hierarchy amongst the paid workers or between them and the volunteers. On match days it is the most significant meeting point for exchanging information, rallying support for campaigns and initiating protests.

There are also about three hundred and fifty Sankt Pauli supporters clubs registered with the “Fanclubsprecherrat”, which is the body elected by the fan clubs to represent the views of the fan clubs to others. And important relationships have also been formed with other supporter groups across Germany with whom there is collaborative work addressing issues common to them all.

“When we are not living in our own island we have to learn from other groups as well and they can learn from us as well”.

“we have always had a leading or a very important role. ..a lot of other football supporters I think look at Sankt Pauli and try to copy thing, not copy in a bad sense, but try to learn things”.

In the spirit of “internationalism” there are also strong relationships with other fan groups across Europe, sometimes further afield, with Fare (Football against Racism in Europe), and to a Sankt Pauli support drawn worldwide. Through these networks meetings and exchanges take place where fans attempt to learn from each other and act collectively.

Fan Leadership

Fans embrace an extremely democratic culture and emphasise there are no formal “leaders” and that they are profoundly non-hierarchical. But that does not mean that a process of leadership does not exist and activity is quite prolific. Fans describe a meritocracy whereby opinions are debated for hours and talented or committed groups or individuals are informally adopted in leadership roles.

Fans emphasised the difference between those who simply watch games regularly and an “inner circle” of those engaged in other activities as part of their daily lives. The inner circle, of about 1000, are not just regular football fans they are highly motivated and ingenious political and community activists. There are many Sankt Pauli fans, and a core one thousand may seem like an obvious minority? But the influence of the core one thousand is fundamental, and for any other predominantly local organisation a core of one thousand highly committed political activists is formidable, and they are the bedrock of what makes Sankt Pauli admired and unique. Their shared unity of purpose and sustained contribution over decades cannot be underestimated. At its simplest successful decision making takes place because of meeting, lots of meetings and discussions, the

This 2012 work undertaken by Mick Totten was funded by Leeds Metropolitan University who are the copyright holders. It can be accessed at <http://www.playleftwing.org/fan-power-and-sankt-pauli/> principles to value them, the willingness to carry them out and the stamina to be able to do so. Fans were very satisfied with the democratic nature of these processes and felt very little improvements could be made.

Fan Activities

As well as football support fans engage in a variety of cultural and political activity. Fans are involved in many community projects including work with schools, youth and community groups, and work addressing the relationship between the football club and those living around the stadium. And fans engage in a range of political groups, campaigns and protests addressing issues including fans rights, refugees and immigrant's rights, women's rights, gentrification, rising rents, housing rights, homeless and squatters rights, travellers rights, racism, fascism, nazism, homophobia, the transportation of nuclear waste, government, war, and police oppression.

Fans employ a variety of methods including use of their own media, political writing, websites, fanzines, blogs, but also public events, trips, anti-racist football tournaments, marches, protests, demonstrations, banners and chants on the streets and they bring politics to the football the matches as well.

"especially the stadium as a kind of presentation, some kind of stage".

Fans and Community

"The football club is not only a topic in every bar or takeaway or on the street, It's even just a big part of the whole district ..a gap, which nobody could fill".

Fans outline a range of social and political issues that affect their communities from the world of football and beyond. In terms of football, issues included cost and access to the football club, commercialisation, corporate positioning and business, policing and the new "zero-tolerance-politics" perceived as oppressing

football fan activity in a disproportionate way. But fans were mostly concerned about issues affecting the district of Sankt Pauli itself including poverty, unemployment, homelessness, low educational attainment, inter-generational issues between the young and old, a lack of opportunities to participate in social life, and oppression by the state and police against alternative lifestyles.

"If the community has any problems, the fans pick them out as a central theme in their fanzines or with help of banners. They do influence what the fans do".

"there are some people who probably want another way of living or another form of society".

Fans share a strong sense of community in diverse interrelated ways. For many Sankt Pauli is home and they absorb its unique character in their sense of belonging. Shared experience or identity was strongly felt and this was expressed as a feeling of

belonging to something big and special, beyond local, a distinct alternative anti-fascist left wing political football sub-culture, feeling free especially in the shared communion of match days and nights with a festival atmosphere similar to a rock gig. And fans share interests in the passionate support of the football club and also of left-wing politics, a shared imagination of an alternative lifestyle and in the process of being active and putting their ideas into practice.

Fan Empowerment

Fans feel there are many opportunities which develop personal empowerment and many activities offer an informal education

"When there is a very big problem or occurrence many, many people (sometimes more than you believe) staying together and give the community a voice".

and exposure to other ways of doing and

thinking. They offered support, creativity, practical solutions to personal problems, and could inspire individuals to take action for more control over their lives. Fans felt that activities led

"it feels good when you know that you are not alone, to know that you are part of something bigger. You can experience solidarity".

people to increase their self-esteem, acquire status, be happier, more ambitious and improve the quality of their lives. They were able to recount stories of how their own personal lives were enhanced, how friendships and relationships were created, and also how they had changed. Community empowerment occurred through the development of individuals and groups whose activity enhanced and empowered the community as a whole.

Support of the football club plays a central role in community identity. It provides camaraderie and a vibrant rallying point for many other causes. Fans were able to cite project work and fundraising for causes, to recount demonstrations and clashes with the authorities, and to realise the transformative potential of all of this.

"The Sankt Pauli fans bring a lot of manpower and public attention. They put up new things in political action and attract young people for political causes".

Fans and Football

"The football activities is the base for all. But there are many St Pauli Fans who are not football fans in the first instance. They come to St Pauli because of the community and after that they are going to a football fan".

The benefit of football is partly the simplicity of its attraction, and the inclusive atmosphere at Sankt Pauli has recruited many to support it that might not have contemplated it before.

Sankt Pauli attracts people of different ages, genders and sexualities, ethnicities, and social classes and offers different opportunities for friendship, supporting, playing, as well as

other activities including political activity. Fans have campaigned for more fan-friendly arrangements at stadia to ensure a relaxing of stewarding and a sympathetic embrace of fan banners and other homemade paraphernalia. They acknowledge they were pioneers in German and world football at the leading edge of campaigns later adopted more widely in football like those against racism and homophobia. Many of their ideas have now become mainstream.

"This happened at Sankt Pauli, they changed the team and the club, and the supporters as well; we changed because of social influence".

Fans continue to play a leading role, nationally and internationally, creating and sustaining fan networks

"a much greater influence on what is going on than supporters of other clubs, but we fought and still fight for it".

campaigning for fan rights and the power to fight against racism and rampant commercialisation. Many innovative ideas were born in Sankt Pauli whose fans have become role models for many others fans in the struggle to maximise their influence.

Fan Politics

Fans described their political outlook as drawn from a coalition of left wing views. There is an astute awareness of complex influences that stray way beyond the terraces and the backstreets of Sankt Pauli. They

This 2012 work undertaken by Mick Totten was funded by Leeds Metropolitan University who are the copyright holders. It can be accessed at <http://www.playleftwing.org/fan-power-and-sankt-pauli/> attributed the causes of issues to the politics and economics of capitalism, and proposed unity amongst different football fans to regain control of their game, and social justice correcting the injustices of the “free market”.

In outlining their hopes for the future, fans showed no lack of political imagination. Aspirations were expressed within football to maintain a phenomenal atmosphere and for the football club to lose interest in making money. Fans were ambivalent about the importance of footballing success and there was more concern about the commercial pressures caused by too much success, potential threats to the fans do-it-yourself left-wing culture and the need for eternal vigilance upon the football club itself.

“a big machine who sells marketing ideas, big numbers of merchandise, earn millions of euros, you must watch”.

*“Stay as we are and never sell ourselves..
Forever be free in our ideas
and free in our stands and not be forced
by repression”.*

There was concern that success attracts fans who are more interested in football than politics; “Football” fans (!) who do not adopt the radical culture. There was also an ingrained distrust of the German football authorities with their capacity to act against fan interests, and of oppressive police practices at matches and upon protests stereotyping and treating all fans as troublemakers especially at away games. They desired never to forget their radical heritage, and to maintain the political profile.

Aspirations for the district of Sankt Pauli were that gentrification stops, and that people were given more rights to take creative control of their own area. And aspirations were raised for broader society that more priority was given to social and cultural issues.

“There are lots of things that threaten the little island we have here, and you have to take care that one of the parts is not getting too big”.

“you cannot sit down now and say look at the last twenty years, they have been so great, and now we are at the end of the road”.

A consistently radical history dating back to the early 1980s, and its struggles along that road, is in some way evidence of sustainability in its own right, but fans were wary of resting on their laurels.

Fan Activism

Sankt Pauli fans are distinguished in particular by their political activity and activism, and a commitment to take actions to make their views known and to attempt to achieve their goals. They even have their own water cannon! For core fans it was important that their politics was not just limited to ideas but

“I think that we have about 1000 people who are really doing something and that they are the 1000 that make the picture to the outside”.

others to get more involved.

“Freedom through football; Through football it is easier to mobilise, to make people aware of problems and to raise money for campaigns”.

linked to action too. But even amongst those who are only politically “minded”, they may well support Sankt Pauli because others are politically “active”! So, political activism remains at the core of Sankt Pauli even if that is merely a fashionable affiliation for some, though activists were always encouraging

“the FA or the government, they only want to make money with merchandise, so they have no care for us, for our problems.. No that would have to come from the fans”.

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Fans believed that people had to take more control over their own circumstances. In football they believe supporters potentially have the power to solve their own problems and that the authorities are not interested. Fans were very conscious that in pursuing their causes they challenged those institutions with more power and from whom there were unsuccessful attempts to control them.

*“they try but they have got no success.
..the fan base is too strong ..they
sometimes try but its funny to see what
they try”.*

Conclusion; Vision for Fans

Sankt Pauli fans prosper because they successfully utilise the popularity of a football club as a platform and springboard for other political activities. Their relationship to the club is not one of unconditional love and they are critically vigilant of the football club. Activists are effective in influencing the running of the club and scathing of any dilution of political ideals. They are not blinded by romanticism and sometimes treat the club with disdain. Fans are supporting a cause not just a football club. They have an uncompromising visionary commitment, political imagination and unshakable conviction. Fans are highly organised in an informal organic sustainable way. This fosters democratic culture and processes which has led to enduring non-hierarchical community control and self-determined goals. Fans have created a participatory democracy which has demonstrated transformational potential. This has been supported by the fan project (Fanladen) which has sustained the trust of the fans because its operating approach replicates that of the fans themselves; democratic and non-hierarchical, and it has served the fans in an egoless way allowing them to pursue their own agenda.

There are many examples world wide of alternative football networks, football supporters attempting to have more influence over their clubs, of supporter's trusts, and of breakaway clubs less commercialised than their parental alternatives. But Sankt Pauli FC is perceived by many fans around the world as a cult club and their fans offer a template for other fans to follow. They demonstrate how fans can organise to influence and regain more control over clubs, how to resist commercial inducements, to realise the potential of fan power, to challenge the passivity of some of their own fans, and mobilise a fan base. They have not done this all on their own and have enthusiastically networked with others inside and outside football. They have shared ideas about how to challenge oppressive practices and power structures, how to create democratic culture and processes, and how to foster political imagination. They have demonstrated that football supporting, when inclusive, is an attractive and exciting vehicle to rally and mobilise around politically. By adopting a community centred focus fans have placed their club at the heart of its local community, addressed community issues, allied to social projects with community benefits, created non-hierarchical participatory activity, and created unity in diversity, and adversity(!). And they have been doing this for more than quarter of a century and continue to do so.