

When stadium ownership meets Corporate Social Responsibility: The case of U.C. AlbinoLeffe

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Received December 10, 2023 – Accepted March 7, 2024

Online first: 7 giugno 2024

Abstract

This article aims to understand the importance of having a stadium owned by a football club as an added value if it is designed and managed from a socially responsible perspective in a context, that of Italian sport, which is still far from European standards in terms of infrastructure. The approach adopted focuses on the AlbinoLeffe Campus, serving as an example of how the ownership of a sports facility can shape and reflect socially responsible policies and practices adopted by a football club. The study examines the distinctive characteristics of the stadium considering the logistical, infrastructural, and environmental aspects underpinning its construction to act as a strategic lever to implement Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, a prerogative of club ownership. Some important managerial implications emerge from the analysis: 1) the need for a sustainable management approach for the stadium considering logistical, infrastructural, and environmental aspects; 2) the implementation of CSR strategies aligned with the company and the stadium's characteristics.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Sport Management, Football Management, Stadium Management, Corporate Governance.

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Corporate Governance and Research & Development Studies, n. 2-2024
(ISSN 2704-8462-ISSNe 2723-9098, Doi: 10.3280/cgrds2-2024oa16962)

Sommario

Il presente articolo si propone di comprendere l'importanza di avere uno stadio di proprietà per una società calcistica come valore aggiunto se progettato e gestito in un'ottica socialmente responsabile in un contesto, quello sportivo italiano, ancora lontano dagli standard europei in termini di infrastrutture. L'approccio adottato pone al centro dell'attenzione l'AlbinoLeffe Campus, fungendo da esempio per capire come la proprietà di un impianto sportivo possa modellare e riflettere politiche e le pratiche di responsabilità sociale adottate da un club di calcio. Lo studio esamina le caratteristiche distintive dello stadio considerando gli aspetti logistici, infrastrutturali e ambientali alla base della sua costruzione tali da fungere da leva strategica per implementare le iniziative di Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), prerogativa della proprietà del club. Dall'analisi emergono alcune importanti implicazioni manageriali: 1) la necessità di un approccio gestionale sostenibile per lo stadio considerando gli aspetti logistici, infrastrutturali e ambientali; 2) l'implementazione di strategie di CSR allineate con la società e con le caratteristiche dello stadio.

Parole chiave: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Sport Management, Football Management, Stadium Management, Corporate Governance.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices in companies has undergone a significant transformation. Before, CSR was seen as primarily a charitable or philanthropic activity, as a way for companies to demonstrate their social commitment through occasional donations or sponsorship/attendance at charitable events (Latapi Agudelo *et al.*, 2019). In the recent past, however, there has been a paradigm shift. Indeed, companies have started to integrate CSR into their business model, strategic decisions, and governance.

These changes have also been driven by an increased awareness and assumption of responsibility by the stakeholders of individual companies (Lee and Shin, 2010). The latter, in fact, have begun to pay more attention to the policies pursued by the various organizations their approach to ethical, social and environmental issues, the transparency and clarity with which they transmit information to the outside world and its well-founded truthfulness, distancing themselves from the companies or instead developing a greater affinity with them based on their judgement and perception of how their respective activities are carried out (Fernandez-Villarino, 2021).

In this context, the sports industry has taken a leading role, highlighting how sports teams and organizations are not only pivotal players on the

field, but also in promoting ethical and sustainable values off it. Therefore, many sports companies have recently adopted corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to manage their stakeholders, maximize profits, and leverage their social position (Kolyperas and Sparks, 2011). Indeed, the sports sector, with its large fan base and media visibility, has emerged as a fertile ground for the implementation of innovative CSR practices. In the Annual Review of Football Finance 2023 (Deloitte, 2023), the consulting firm analyses the sector where professional sports clubs operate as highly commercialized and rapidly developing. This development stems from the socio-political importance of sport and the media attention it attracts, generating strong external pressure from society in general and stakeholders specifically (Brady, 2008). Thus, commercial, and operational concerns, such as stakeholder management, brand reputation, fan attendance and corporate governance, have created a situation in which CSR is especially important for professional football teams, football events, individual players (Kolyperas and Sparks, 2011) and infrastructures such as owned stadiums. For all these reasons, the management of these companies must be fully aware of and up to date with developments in the socio-political-economic environment, just as business managers in other sectors are.

CSR practices and their reporting, also in the football sector, have therefore become crucial for the involvement of shareholders and stakeholders and their growing range of interests. In this regard, one of the main priorities has become to invest in an owned stadium, as a corporate asset that can contribute to enhancing the club's prestige and increasing revenues, especially in order to finance and self-sustain the club's activities and related social purposes, as well as to offer the public a high level of comfort, a higher degree of safety and numerous other services that otherwise could not be guaranteed if the facility was not managed by the clubs. Accordingly, an investment plan also allows them to launch important projects both for the development of the territory, such as urban regeneration works or the enhancement of certain areas of the city, and for the reduction of the environmental impact, promoting its preservation and favoring the recycling and reuse of materials and natural resources.

This study was therefore created with the idea of gaining a more in-depth understanding of the importance of having a stadium owned by a football club as an added value if it is designed and managed in a socially responsible manner in a context, the Italian sporting one, that is still far from European standards in terms of infrastructures. By taking into account these considerations, the present paper is based on the study of a real case, the U.C. AlbinoLeffe, whose practices and methodologies demonstrate that if a football company takes place a process to improve the quality, sustain-

ability, and social responsibility of infrastructures, it can lead football to be a decisive and viable factor to drive change in developing develop a better future and society.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. CSR: what it is and how it is defined

For several years now, the need for active and proactive contributions by all to address sustainability management has been entering political, social, and economic agendas in the form of calls for immediate action to address current and future challenges (Fernandez-Villarino, 2021). Corporations, companies, businesses, and any organization are therefore not exempt from assuming specific responsibilities in this regard; indeed, as they carry out significant day-to-day activities and are an active part of the context in which they operate, these entities have an even greater duty to carry them out with respect for the social and environmental context that surrounds them.

A much-debated question is how ethical and respectful of environmental and social standards the businesses conducted by companies are (Torelli, 2021). It is clear that the exclusively profit-oriented way of conducting business is no longer feasible in light of the need to supplement the need to achieve the final profit with a mode of action that is sustainable over time, not only from an economic point of view, but also from a social and environmental point of view, paying particular attention to the needs of its stakeholders and ensuring that it carries out its activities ethically, respecting the guidelines and regulations for the respect and protection of the territory. In fact, as previously mentioned, it is the stakeholders themselves who pay increasing attention to the ethical, social, and environmental issues that companies pursue by distancing themselves from them or instead developing a greater affinity with them based on their judgement and perception of how their respective activities are carried out (Fernandez-Villarino, 2021). For all these reasons, Corporate Social Responsibility is now considered by public and private companies as the main indicator of sustainability (Breitbarth and Harris, 2008). Over the past two decades, this has forced companies to recognize and pay greater attention to the expectations of their shareholders and stakeholders and to clarify their corporate ethics to integrate them into their practices for the benefit of society. Such attention to CSR practices enhances the company's reputation, improves financial performance, and helps to safeguard the various stakeholders involved (Bapuji *et al.*, 2020; Guan *et al.*, 2020).

The literature divides CSR activities into two groups: a) instrumental actions aimed at achieving specific financial and competitive objectives; and b) ethical and philanthropic actions (Johnson *et al.*, 2011). The activities in the first group are conditioned a corporate strategy (Michael, 2003) and concern practices for improving corporate profitability (McAdam and Leonard, 2003) or increasing brand loyalty (Vitolla *et al.*, 2019). In the second group, philanthropic actions go beyond obligations to improve the quality of life, while ethical actions ensure proper behavior in relation to moral principles (Carroll, 1999). For example, activities based on philanthropy can reduce certain public problems (Mahmud *et al.*, 2021) such as poverty, crime, or environmental pollution.

Although the implementation of such practices and strategies is not always easy for companies as engaging in CSR activities, in addition to existing organizational ones, may require additional capacities on the part of the companies in question, the strong focus of stakeholder and institutional policies over the past decade has led to the inclusion of such practices in an increasingly consistent manner (Khan *et al.*, 2022). This process has included the development of various activities such as CSR reporting to ensure its transparency (Tregidga *et al.*, 2019), organizational legitimacy (Khan *et al.*, 2013), public trust (De Grosbois, 2016) and increased corporate performance (Malik and Kanwal, 2016). So, it is evident how CSR, by creating functional relationships with various stakeholders (Guix *et al.*, 2018) and enhancing corporate image, reputation, and trust of the company with the public (De Grosbois, 2016) can be a useful tool for companies to engage with shareholders and stakeholders. CSR, therefore, can be framed from multiple aspects and perspectives depending also on the scope and sector in which the organization operates and according to the corporate policies it intends to pursue.

CSR is certainly implemented more easily, to a greater extent and on a larger scale by organizations that have greater economic resources, necessary to promote actions of a certain type and level, and an equally greater pool of users and stakeholders, a determining factor in assessing the relevance of an ethically and socially responsible activity (Dey *et al.*, 2018). However, with the right proportions and available human and economic resources, even small and medium-sized enterprises or micro-enterprises can achieve their objectives and economic results through socially responsible actions and through a sustainability-oriented strategy and approach (Pil and Rothenberg, 2009).

2.2. CSR in sport organizations and football clubs

In line with the above, CSR issues have evolved and become a common topic of public opinion in recent decades. This attention has generated a profound change in looking at organizations and their relations with stakeholders (Lewis, 2001). This change has also affected athletes, local teams and national leagues (Carey *et al.*, 2011; Heinze *et al.*, 2014; Manoli, 2015) and sports companies in general (Sheth and Babiak, 2010). As early as 2005, the consulting firm Deloitte (2005, cited in Holt *et al.*, 2005) strongly recommended that sports clubs integrate CSR management into their practices to strengthen their healthy relationships with the community. Such societies, precisely because of the associative nature with which they are born, lend themselves well to the integration of activities aimed at social relations. Indeed, as mentioned above, football operates in a rapidly developing sector (Deloitte, 2023) and is subject to strong external pressures due to the socio-political importance of sport and the media attention it attracts (Brady, 2018). Therefore, for football clubs CSR has become a key strategic issue and no longer a commercial trend or optional practice (Breitbarth and Harris, 2008; Walters and Chadwick, 2009; Kolyperas and Sparks, 2011). In team sports in general, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) identified four factors that contribute to the practice of CSR: 1) the interest that sport generates worldwide; 2) the economic structure of the leagues; 3) the transparency of the company (club) in the conduct of all its activities and 4) the strong involvement of stakeholders (Babiak and Wolfe 2009).

Specific to the world of football, although this is not necessarily a model for all developments in the sporting world (Chadwick, 2009), the literature identifies three interconnected and overlapping characteristics that support the development of CSR. The first characteristic is the increasing commercialization of the sport, which has transformed what was once a game into a full-fledged industry (Beech and Chadwick, 2013). This has led to increased social demands on football as stakeholders and the public have drawn attention to various unethical practices carried out by the industry such as illegal gambling, corruption, etc.) (Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013). The second characteristic that has created a favorable environment for the development of CSR is the strong community ties and the importance of stakeholder relations created by football (Breitbarth and Harris, 2008; Walters and Chadwick, 2009). The third characteristic is the strong media coverage that football clubs have assumed which has necessitated an increased focus on good reputation practices for a positive brand image (Zeimers *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, it seems evident how essential it is for football to adapt and align

itself with the principles of social responsibility (Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013; Chadwick, 2009), hence modern football organizations are favorably inclined to engage in CSR.

Among the sports organizations, particularly football, that are most active on CSR issues is the *Union of European Football Associations* (UEFA). In 2021, in fact, it outlined the *Football Sustainability Strategy 2030* (UEFA, 2021), called “*Strength through Unity*”, which, starting from the general framework of sustainability (i.e. CSR), also includes on Environmental-Social-Governance (ESG) criteria. This perspective is well stated in the strategy’s mission statement: “to inspire, activate and accelerate collective action in the context of European football for the respect of human rights and the environment”, calling all stakeholders operating in the football world to collaborate and join forces for the achievement of common, accessible, measurable and quantifiable, but at the same time very ambitious objectives, which affect the entire football environment and society as a whole and which, for this reason, must be addressed jointly, leaving individual interests aside, through collaborative and coordinated action plans (UEFA, 2021). Among the 11 main priorities for action that UEFA has outlined, all of which conform and are aligned with the international guidelines and standards of the *United Nations’ 2030 Agenda* (UN General Assembly, 2015), we have paid special attention to the goal of “Sustainable Infrastructure”.

2.3. Stadium ownership as a CSR tool in football

In the context of the redefinition of a sports club’s management strategies imposed by new CSR practices, one of the main priorities has become investment in an owned stadium. In this direction, Francis *et al.* (2017) place green stadiums at the center of a new movement in the field of architecture and sports clubs. Indeed, for a decade now, professional teams in North America have discovered the environmental and economic benefits of having stadiums that include energy and water efficiency, waste management, accessibility, and a strategic link to public transportation (Francis *et al.*, 2017). The implications of these activities in the CSR context have forced the governance of these clubs to devise new strategies with the aim of increasing club prestige and revenues, especially to finance and self-sustain the activities of the sports club. By leveraging directly on CSR initiatives, a company can yield positive implications on offering public a high level of comfort for fans, a higher degree of safety and numerous other services that otherwise could not be guaranteed if the stadium facility is not managed by the clubs. An in-

vestment plan of this kind also allows the clubs themselves to be able to run up important projects both for the development of the territory, such as urban requalification works or the enhancement of certain areas of the city (Barghchi *et al.*, 2009). According to the *Football Sustainability Strategy 2030* (UEFA, 2021) a football club is required to have strong commitment to environmental impact reduction, by promoting its preservation and favoring the recycling and reuse of materials and natural resources.

The primary objective for a sports club that chooses to invest in an owned stadium will no longer be the achievement of a specific sportsperson but will increasingly shift towards the involvement of different stakeholders to foster the well-being of the community (Grieve and Sherry, 2012); and since most of these effects are considered specific and contextual to the community in question, sports facility managers should focus on them when operating them (Vanclay, 2002). Several studies, infact, show how a sports facility should be designed so that it can be used by the entire population, especially families, and not only for sporting events, but also as a meeting place, a place for social interaction and recreation, catalyzing restaurants, bars, cinemas, museums, theatres, conference centres, libraries, shops, recreational areas, green spaces, gyms, and children's playgrounds in one place (Testa *et al.*, 2023). In practical terms, UEFA itself produced the «*UEFA Guide to Quality Stadiums*» (UEFA, 2011), a document that is still applied today for all kinds of infrastructure projects in football stadiums in Europe concerning the design and construction, construction, renovation, and modernization of stadiums. The guiding principle of the guide is the quality of the facilities: «Ensuring the highest quality is a fundamental aspect of ensuring the highest level of comfort, well-being and safety for spectators, players, all staff, media and officials» (UEFA, 2011). Great emphasis is placed on the definition and framing of “green architecture” a construction and utilization model with an approach strongly based on the adoption of ecological standards.

From an economic point of view, stadium ownership allows football clubs to diversify their sources of revenue. For example, the “*Report Calcio 2023*” of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC, 2023), reports a 52.2% increase in spectator attendance between 2007 and 2022 for clubs that decided to build their own stadium. This source of match revenue, for clubs in the five major European leagues, i.e. England, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, represents approximately 12% of the source of revenue (Deloitte, 2023). Not only that, through a shrewd project to enhance the ownership of the facility, but additional sources of revenue can also be generated, such as, for example, the naming rights of the facility and the provision of commercial areas around the stadium.

The latter, if designed synergistically with the city context to offer additional services to the local population, can guarantee the club a significant increase in commercial revenues, which can also derive in part from the merchandising activities promoted by the club. However, the financial objective and return is not the only aspect to be considered, as having a stadium of one's own, if this is designed with a social commitment in mind, can also lead to benefits other than financial ones, such as effectively contributing to the pursuit of one's social purpose.

2.4. The current situation of owned stadiums in Italy and Europe

The issue of building owned stadiums in Italy or modernizing them has been a source of heated and open debate for many years. According to a recent survey conducted by YouGov in 2021 and reported by the website "Calcio e Finanza" (Calcio e Finanza, 2021), 61% of Italians and 67% of football fans are in favor of football stadiums being owned, as, according to most respondents, this would more than positively affect the investment possibilities of teams to raise their level of competitiveness. It is also commonly acknowledged that a more modern and functional facility would mainly benefit the match experience for fans, but also the level of entertainment, safety, and comfort. However, what almost everyone agrees on is the significant social, economic and tourism improvement for the city and the consequent possibility of urban redevelopment of some of its neighborhoods. However, the fact that must be emphasized with particular attention is the increasing relevance of the sustainability profiles of facilities, identified by 52% of respondents aged 18 to 24 as the main priority for action (Calcio e Finanza, 2021). In any case, what emerges strongly from this survey is the general negative reputation of Italian stadiums, considered excessively obsolete and too unattractive and functional compared to most European facilities.

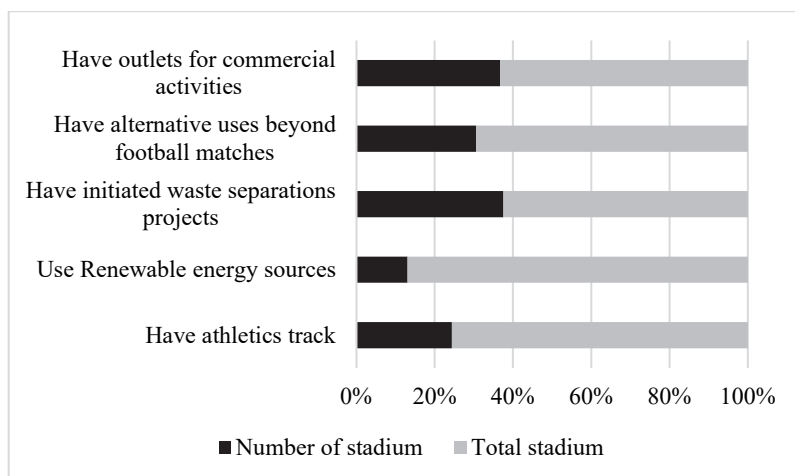
The infrastructural situation in Italy is strongly linked to the World Cup in Italy in 1990 in which several sports facilities and stadiums were renovated. On the World Cup, as many as 10 facilities were renovated like the Renato Dall'Ara in Bologna, the Comunale in Florence, the Luigi Ferraris in Genoa, the Giuseppe Meazza in Milan, the San Paolo in Naples, and the Olimpico in Rome. In addition, the 56,875-seat Stadio San Nicola in Bari and the 67,411-seat Stadio Delle Alpi in Turin were built.

It is evident that the World Cup, the most important and followed sporting event worldwide, represented a significant opportunity for Italy to modernize its structure and technology. It is equally evident that this opportunity was exploited in the short term but not in a long-term perspective.

The most relevant issue concerning Italian stadiums is the non-ownership of the facilities by the clubs. Currently, of the 93 stadiums used in Italy by professional football clubs (Serie A, Serie B and Serie C), 85 are publicly owned and only four are club-owned (FIGC, 2023). This prerogative does not allow sports clubs to benefit economically and socially, as it only represents a significant cost due to the expense incurred in renting the facility. The clubs in Italy that own a stadium to date are Juventus FC, U.S. Sassuolo Calcio, Atalanta Bergamasca Calcio, Frosinone Calcio, Udinese Calcio and U.C. AlbinoLeffe. The FIGC indicates that there are currently 14 projects being planned and/or implemented in Italy that are expected to lead to an estimated increase in stadium attendance of 3.3 per cent, an increase in revenue of 205.8 per cent and an employment impact of approximately 12,000 new jobs created (FIGC, 2023).

Public ownership is not, however, the only major problem with football facilities in Italy. First of all, the average age of each stadium in the top three categories is 65 years since the first inauguration; some, as mentioned, underwent modernization works for the 1990 World Cup, but we are already talking about more than 30 years ago. Furthermore, they are characterized by significant structural deficiencies and a low level of innovation. These issues are highlighted in the FIGC Report (FIGC, 2023). Out of the ninety-three facilities used in the 2020-2021 sports season by Serie A, Serie B, and Serie C clubs, it shows that:

Graph 1 – FIGC Report (FIGC, 2023)



The main consequence of these infrastructural shortcomings is a strong public disaffection and significantly lower fan attendance at the stadium. In fact, the average attendance of spectators at the stadium has been significantly decreasing over the past thirty to forty years: from almost 40,000 at the beginning of the 1980s, it has fallen to just under 25,000 in the 2019-2020 season (FIGC, 2023).

All this translates into a significant decrease in revenue for clubs from the sale of tickets or season tickets for matches, leading to a lower incidence of match revenues in corporate budgets, the consequence of which is less financial resources available to invest in the club's sports competitiveness, in facilities and new technologies, in order to also improve the quality of training and preparation of players.

The low presence of non-sporting commercial activities and services of a recreational nature represents a further major shortcoming of Italian stadiums, making them unattractive to the public and not allowing them to remain open during the week to exploit a potential additional source of revenue. Often these facilities are totally disconnected from the daily social life of the urban context in which they are located, thus playing an exclusively sporting role, offering no added value for the community and the territory.

Starting from these considerations, when designing a new facility or modernizing an old one, it is not only the average attendance (i.e. fans at the match) that is of fundamental importance to make the economic investment a winning one, but rather the total attendance at the facility. In fact, this figure also takes into account attendance due to non-sporting events, commercial activities, proximity to public transport, etc.

Returning to the social value of investing in an owned stadium, this can be done in a variety of ways according to the needs of the citizens, in order to compensate for any shortcomings of the territory, also guaranteeing access to numerous types of services, provided that the facility is equipped with facilities that are open to the public seven days a week.

After analyzing the current state of football stadiums in Italy, it is appropriate to compare it with the corresponding situation in Europe. An indicative figure in this regard, reported by the FIGC, concerns the renovation or new construction of stadiums in Europe. Of 153 projects realized on the Old Continent in the last decade, only four are Italian. European owned facilities are, therefore, an important source of revenue for clubs, thanks to their multi-functionality and the different types of extra-football services they offer, which allow the facility to remain open even on non-match days. A strong impact also derives from the considerable level of structural and technological modernity of the facility and the high degree of safety and

security, elements that seal this gap and contribute to making stadiums considerably more attractive to fans, but also to a more general public, consisting of simple fans or occasional tourists visiting the city or region of reference. Differences in the environmental sustainability of facilities are also evident. Most other European countries have facilities equipped with sophisticated state-of-the-art systems for energy efficiency, for the reuse of natural resources and to avoid all forms of waste, in order to reduce CO₂ emissions and, more generally, the environmental impact of the stadium.

The study aims, therefore, to analyze the case study of U.C. AlbinoLeffe, one of the 7 football clubs in Italy that has its own stadium, the only one not in Serie A.

3. Methodology

The case study was conducted by a semi-structured interview with U.C. AlbinoLeffe President (hereafter, the interviewed) and an in-depth visit of the AlbinoLeffe Campus with Secretary and General Manager. The purpose of the interview was to understand the history of the club, why it chose to invest in certain CSR practices, and the importance of having an owned stadium for a football club as an added value if it is designed and managed in a socially responsible manner. We believe that the analysis of a reality that is not at the top end of the league (U.C. AlbinoLeffe plays in Serie C) can provide a good example of how, even without having significant budgets and resources, it is possible to invest in a corporate asset that contributes to increasing the prestige of the club and increasing revenues, but above all with the aim of financing and supporting the sporting and social activities that the club has set itself.

4. Case study: U.C. AlbinoLeffe

4.1. The current situation of owned stadiums in Italy and Europe

In the first part of the interview, the President briefly introduced the history of U.C. AlbinoLeffe. The history of U.C. AlbinoLeffe began on 2 July 1998 following the merger between Albinese Calcio and Società Calcio Leffe, two municipalities, Albino and Leffe in the province of Bergamo. Until promotion to Serie B in 2003, the new club used the stadium that had previously been used by Leffe, but with the jump in category and the new infrastructural criteria required, they decided to move their home matches

to the stadium in Bergamo. The President explains how this brought about an important change in the club's outlook and external perception: no longer being a club from the valley, but trying to become a club from the province, widening its range of action in the area, aspiring to involve and attract not only the former supporters of Albinese and Leffe, but also a catchment area more closely linked to the Bergamo area. Participating in the championship of the second highest national series, it became important to have a sports facility that was for one's own exclusive use, not to be shared with others, as had been the case until then. The training centre, therefore, was moved from Albino to Verdello, until a short time later, the club was faced with the opportunity to purchase the sports centre of a Cooperative Credit Bank in the municipality of Zanica. The president tells us how a turning point in AlbinoLeffe's recent history occurred in early 2010, when the club's failure to be promoted to Serie A and subsequent relegation to Serie C meant that it had to abandon the use of the stadium in Bergamo and play its home games in the town of Gorgonzola. This strongly risked alienating AlbinoLeffe from its home territory and therefore led the club to take the decision to build its own stadium, choosing to do so where the training centre had originally been planned.

In the next phase of the interview, we discussed with the President the values that the AlbinoLeffe club wants to convey to its stakeholders and the practices that have been implemented in recent years on the topic of CSR. The interviewed explains how the AlbinoLeffe club, by its express wish, intends to be a point of reference at a sporting level for the entire Bergamo area. The social purpose, which is also the club's primary aim, is therefore to give local youngsters, aged 7/8 years and upwards, the opportunity to play sport and grow, so that possible champions can be formed who can be the future of football in our country and who can help the national team and the major Italian clubs to compete at the highest international levels. The President believes, in fact, that the football system should be based on a pyramid structure, with the Serie A at the top and the minor leagues and clubs at the bottom, which, according to this logic, should carry out their activities in support of the top clubs, promoting the training and education of young players and future champions. However, in order for this to work for the best, it is necessary to have a corporate organization in line with this vision, which invests in its youth sector and in modern, functional facilities for the growth of youngsters, and this is exactly what is expressed in the club's mission statement: «U.C. AlbinoLeffe has set itself the goal of training and enhancing the value of the youngsters who become part of this important reality from both a human and sporting point of view. To this end, we are equipping ourselves with our own structures, organization, and di-

dactics, developing the AlbinoLeffe Method. Our dream is to have a first team composed mainly of boys who have grown up in our youth sector with a well-defined football identity» (Unione Calcio AlbinoLeffe, n.d.). According to the President's wishes, the boys in the youth sector must come from the Bergamo area, without going looking elsewhere and staying within a radius of 30 km. But in this project, the interviewed specifies that he is well prepared to welcome into his youth sector young immigrants or children of immigrants, who arrived in Italy as children or very young children, and who have few job opportunities. This allows them a chance to find their own path of personal fulfilment and affirmation. The interviewed is keen to point out that a sport like football can take on an important function of inclusion, integration, and aggregation, but above all how it can represent an opportunity for all young people from different social classes. The strong territoriality referred to by the President stems from the idea that young people, if they are of a certain age, have an obligation to continue to focus as much as possible on their studies, which must be put first. Young people must, therefore, make sure that they reconcile competitive and professional sporting activity with school and university. Playing football for a professional club, especially if not at a high level, must not result in a partial or total abandonment of study, as not all young people who play football in their teenage years or as soon as they come of age will realize their dream of playing in the Serie A, earning a living from football. Continuing to study is fundamental for them, not only for a complete personal growth path, but also to build a career and professional path. The interviewed tells us how, for example, to meet the needs of the boys and not to burden their families, the club has arranged a shuttle service that picks up the boys at home to take them to training and then brings them back at the end of the session.

A pivotal element in President's ideas is sport as a functional tool for learning how to be in a group and together with others, how to fight for the achievement of common and collective goals, how to respect the rules, but also how to be respected and how to conquer one's own space. Firmly believing in sport as a fundamental element in the educational and formative development of a youngster, central to the path of sporting growth defined by AlbinoLeffe is the transmission of ethical and moral principles and values, which must be adopted by youngsters not only on the pitch while playing, but also and above all off it, so that they become better men in a better society. The President emphasizes how this vision is shared by all those who work within the club, from managers to coaches, from staff members to collaborators. By building an organization of this kind, with a youth sector that is optimally structured with fully dedicated pitches and staffed by

full-time professionals such as, among others, scouts, physiotherapists, and masseurs, and by pursuing a teaching methodology that fuses together technical-tactical training, sporting instruction and the transmission of certain values and principles, one can, therefore, speak of the “AlbinoLeffe Method”.

4.2. Corporate governance implications: The case of AlbinoLeffe

Subsequently, the President points out how pursuing social responsibility goals of this kind is very complicated for a football club, especially for smaller and less emblazoned clubs, especially if these, as is often the case, find themselves in a constant loss-making financial situation. But at the same time, the mission of the President and the whole of AlbinoLeffe is, as mentioned, to become an educational, social and cultural reference point for the Bergamo area, developing and advancing an ideal of playing football that is at the service of the community and the area itself, offering an opportunity for growth to the young people of Bergamo and supporting them in their sporting and other careers.

To support this vision, the interviewed tells us about the important strategic choice that the club has made: to invest in modern and functional facilities that provide a way and space for youngsters to grow in a healthy and clean environment that makes them feel at home. This choice goes against the trend with those often taken by other football clubs that concentrate their financial resources on the purchase of stronger players to improve and establish themselves on a sporting level. However, for AlbinoLeffe, since the club’s ultimate goal is not to compete in more important categories, the clear, clear and shared direction that was taken was to pursue its mission and social purpose 100%.

With pride, the President tells us about the AlbinoLeffe Campus, the new state-of-the-art home of U.C. AlbinoLeffe. Although an official media inauguration has yet to take place, the sports centre is scheduled to open at the end of 2021. This project takes on significant value as AlbinoLeffe is the first, and at the moment the only, non-Serie A club to have invested in a stadium of its own and to have not only a facility for home matches, but also an entire hundred sports facilities available for both the first team and all categories of the youth sector and the AlbinoLeffe Academy, a new building including changing rooms and offices serving the training grounds.

President specifies how investments of this kind are fundamental both for social aspects and for the development of the entire national football system. As proof of this, says the President, the sports centre was visited by

the participants of the “Head of the Youth Sector” course held at Coverciano by the FIGC. In fact, the facility not only includes the AlbinoLeffe Stadium, but also a training centre with four football pitches adjacent to the stadium. Here, the boys in the youth sector, training alongside the first team and just a few steps away from such a high-level facility, see it as a goal to aspire to, but also as a concrete and tangible opportunity that spurs them on to do their utmost to make their dream of becoming a professional footballer come true.

The interviewed also tells us that this dynamism and modernity was also conveyed in the logo that was chosen for the campus. This, in addition to echoing the stadium’s architecture in its design, sanctions, through an intricate set of lines, the close link that the facility and the sports centre aspire to create with the entire Bergamo area. In fact, with the new owned facility just a few kilometers from Bergamo, the club hopes to establish a strong relationship with the local community and to recover many fans and supporters who had drifted away in recent years following the relocation of matches to the municipality of Gorgonzola, which led the President to decide to invest in a stadium of his own after a short time.

On a strategic level, the President tells us how the decision to locate the facility in the municipality of Zanica, in the province of Bergamo, came about. This area was chosen for its geographic, logistical and spectator flow management position, although currently for very small numbers, which is very convenient due to its proximity to the Bergamo ring road and does not cause any traffic problems for the city and surrounding area. This prerequisite is fundamental in the guidelines drawn up by UEFA in terms of infrastructure (UEFA, 2011). Locating the stadium on a semi-urban site offers the advantage of lower ground costs, but still has good, or at least reasonable, access to the public transport network. Lower land costs, UEFA says, make it possible to purchase a larger site, which will also allow the inclusion of facilities such as an indoor car park. The fact that the stadium is in a less densely populated area will also reduce the obvious impact of a new building on the surrounding area and thus limit the potential risk of disputes with the local community. But the President tells us, the choice fell on this specific area because the land the club acquired was part of a former sports centre of a Cooperative Credit Bank. This made it possible to reuse a portion of land already in use for sports, limiting the consumption of the land itself and thus avoiding the need to intervene further on the territory for the design of new fields and playing fields.

4.3. The AlbinoLeffe Campus: the property's infrastructural choice

At the infrastructural level, the stadium concept was conceived by a Spanish architectural studio, Batlleiroig, led by architect Joan Roig, the same architect who designed and built the Johan Cruyff stadium owned by FC Barcelona. Both facilities, in fact, have a stadium inside or adjacent to them that is used for the matches of their respective youth sectors, but with a similar capacity and requirements to those of AlbinoLeffe. The stadium project envisaged a single grandstand with a capacity of 1,791 seats, with the possibility of expanding the remaining three sides by almost another 4,000 seats in the event of promotion to Serie B, to be ready to meet the infrastructure standards required for the higher category. The grandstand currently present is structured on three levels (lower grandstand, upper grandstand and the top floor dedicated to the speaker's booth, television, radio announcers and police headquarters) and has been designed according to very modern representations of the way football is played. In particular, the President focuses on the strong attention and importance that the club wanted to give to its fans, which is reflected in the very structure of the grandstand, especially the lower grandstand. It was decided, in fact, to dedicate the portion of the grandstand closest to the pitch to the fans, rather than to the VIP stand or to sponsors and authorities. The motivation behind the choice, the President explained, was above all to offer a public that was also popular the possibility of watching the game in close contact with the pitch and the players. In addition to this, the choice was also to empower the fans, even the hottest and potentially most dangerous for public order, by eliminating any kind of architectural element that could disturb the viewing of the match. The upper grandstand includes a central 100-seat grandstand of honor with a dedicated hospitality area, where refreshments are set up before the start of the match and during half-time. The third level of the grandstand, dedicated to the media and security area, also envisages a part of glass parapets, currently left empty inside, but which in the future can be used as Sky Boxes. In the area below the lower grandstand, the stadium is divided into different spaces, each with its own purpose and destination: the mixed zone (where the post-match flash interviews are held), the press room, the conference room, the home team, visiting team and referees' changing rooms, and the doping control rooms.

The interviewed also explains the sporting, but also the social importance of the AlbinoLeffe Academy, a structure adjacent to the grandstand on three floors. This, in addition to an office area with adjoining meeting room and the four training fields, is the operational engine of the sports centre for all categories. In fact, inside it is the changing rooms for

the staff, warehousemen and teams, a single medical room for the first team and youth sector, a refreshment area, and a rest room to be used in the pre-match period. The basement is reserved in part for parking for the minibuses, in part for a large gymnasium area as well as a laundry area and rooms used as warehouses for wetsuits. Just outside the facility there is also a sand pool for rehabilitation and recovery from injuries.

4.4. The AlbinoLeffe Campus: the environmental impact

At the end of the interview, the President would like to draw particular attention to the centrality he gave to the issue of the new stadium's environmental impact. For the interviewed, central to the design of the facility is, in fact, respect for the territory, the natural environment and important principles of environmental sustainability, so that the construction and management of the sports centre itself does not have a negative impact on the surrounding area. He emphasizes that the facility has been conceived and designed to be as efficient as possible in terms of energy and use of natural resources.

First of all, as far as the energy system is concerned, it is 100 per cent sustainable, as it is based on the use of solar energy obtained from the photovoltaic system located on the roof of the Academy building and used to supply energy to both the Academy itself and the stadium facility. In terms of water, the centre's system is based on the use of groundwater, drawn from two natural wells already present in the area. The water that is collected is then used for multiple purposes such as the heating and cooling system of the rooms inside the facility of both the Academy and the Stadium, as well as the irrigation and maintenance system of all the football pitches and all the remaining green areas in the sports centre, and as the basis of all the water and sanitation systems.

Going into more detail, the President wishes to emphasize the absolute ban on the use of methane gas and GPL in all systems. Heating and cooling systems use, as anticipated, almost exclusively water. To power them, so-called heat pumps are used, innovative and ecological technologies that not only have a considerable economic advantage, thanks to significant savings on energy costs, but also respect the environment and make it possible to use renewable energies such as air, groundwater and geothermal energy from the subsoil to power heating, cooling and hot water systems. All of these operating systems allow the entire plant to be defined as running entirely and exclusively on renewable sources and resources: in addition to solar energy, which reduces CO₂ emissions by not generating any gas

combustion, groundwater is used, which would otherwise be lost. The latter is also almost entirely returned to the ground, except for the water used for irrigation, which is naturally lost, and the water for domestic use, for showers and various services, which is discharged into the sewers.

As described above, the entire sports centre, including the stadium, training fields, parking area and Academy building, has not had a negative impact on the surrounding area. In fact, a sports area with playing fields was already present on the construction site of the facilities, and consequently no excessive soil and subsoil changes were necessary. Furthermore, the layout and architecture of the centre are in complete harmony with the landscape context in which it is located.

5. Conclusions, limitations and future remarks

By considering all the issues raised in the interview, we can highlight that the stadium ownership is a driver of social responsibility for a football club. This remark, in line with the literature (Francis *et al.*, 2017), can be explained with the main goal of improving the social context in which is the football stadium is placed, by a mitigating the impact on the territory and the natural environment. Our results confirm that to be a strong point for a football club, the stadium ownership must be functional, first and foremost, to the improvement of sporting results possible through daily work on the technical quality of the players at its disposal and the staff that trains them. This technical growth will then be an element in increasing the company's turnover, by generating a mechanism that allows reinvestment into the infrastructure, players, staff, and other various activities. According to the current literature on theme (Blumrod *et al.*, 2013), the analyzed case stadium shows that the stadium ownership, built and managed in a socially responsible manner, can lead to the achievement of social and sustainable objectives. In pursuing this goal, the football clubs are required to attract the maximum number of fans by ensuring that they have access to efficient facilities that meet the most diverse social needs and desires. The stadium ownership must also include a social purpose and a commitment to respecting the local area and the natural environment by investing, for example, in obtaining energy from sustainable sources or reusing running water as *Guide to Quality Stadiums* (UEFA, 2011) require. Consequently, what becomes particularly relevant in the design of a stadium ownership is the club's decision to combine the club's sporting with one or more socially responsible goals, designed according to the values and principles in which it believes and which it intends to pursue through its activities. It is not so

important whether these objectives specifically concern the redevelopment of an urban area, the improvement or increase in the offer of certain services, the improvement of the safety level of the facility, the minimization of the environmental impact of the facilities, or the development of its youth sector.

Thus, an important lesson that we can obtain from this case study is that the ownership led by the President has allowed such an investment, the scale of which is so conspicuous that such a project should also be taken as an example by the major Italian clubs that have the financial resources to be able to launch it without necessarily having to sacrifice the technical aspect. AlbinoLefte's example is a concrete demonstration of how central and important it can be for a football club to be socially responsible and not to have sporting victory as its sole and exclusive objective.

We are aware that the single case study (Leone *et al.*, 2021) of a property does not fully represent the complexity and diversity of situations present in the Italian football system. However, we believe that the case of AlbinoLefte can be representative for all those non-first-tier teams (in terms of financial resources, sponsorship, etc.) that also play in Serie A to the exclusion, therefore, of those listed on the stock exchange or with larger business volumes. The case study describes an interesting reference model for the target of companies described and different, for example, from that of companies such as US Sassuolo Calcio in which control of the owned stadium is entrusted to the family-sponsor that owns the sports club itself. Therefore, future research could benefit from incorporating more case studies to improve the robustness of the findings and provide a broader understanding of the relationship between stadium ownership and CSR. In addition, scholars could examine the UC AlbinoLefte phenomenon in more depth with the multiple case-studies methodology thus implementing the analysis with semi-structured interviews conducted with other components of the organizational chart.

A further phase of analysis should focus on considering a practice that has become increasingly prevalent in the recent past in corporations and even sports clubs: greenwashing, or the deceptive practice of expressing concern for the environment and claiming credit for providing solutions while doing the bare minimum, if anything at all (Harvey, 2014). In fact, communications about an organization's sustainability initiatives are considered part of corporate social responsibility (Thorne *et al.*, 2013), and their effectiveness influences the organization's reputation, social standing, and even rating (Robinson *et al.*, 2011; Du *et al.*, 2010). However, many sports clubs and leagues have implemented policies outlining their environmental initiatives, which should be met with hesitation regarding their

feasibility and follow-up, as in the case of the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup (Boykoff and Mascarenhas, 2016; Ali, 2017). It would be interesting to explore this topic further by analyzing the communication activities that UC AlbinoLefte will pursue in the coming years.

Ultimately, future research should focus on the long-term impact of U.C. AlbinoLefte's responsibility initiatives on the local community and territory. Such research should investigate the involvement and perception of various stakeholders, such as fans, sponsors, athletes, local authorities, regarding the impact of the stadium by examining in more detail how this initiative may have influenced the club's image. Ultimately, it would be interesting to compare the way the U.C. AlbinoLefte stadium is managed with those of other Italian and foreign clubs to identify best practices to consider for future investment.

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