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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Dissecting the survivors – how the age of a club contributes to the ability of a team to maintain the top position in the European soccer leagues

Comment l'âge du club contribue-t-il à maintenir dans les ligues de football européennes la première position de l'équipe

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Received 25 August 2015; accepted 21 January 2017

KEYWORDS

Soccer;
Survival;
Cox proportional
hazard rates

Summary

Objectives. – To test the hypothesis that the age of a club is a major determinant of the higher survival rates exhibited by European soccer teams.

News. – We studied 185 teams from the 2006/2007 season to the 2012/2013 season. We used Cox proportional hazards regression models. We also controlled for the age effect with variables suggested by the literature. These variables included transfer flows, the presence of the team at UEFA competitions (Champions League or Europa League), stadium attendance, and the percentage of national players.

Prospect. – We observed that the age of the club is an important determinant in explaining the higher survival rates of the teams belonging to older clubs. More nuance was discovered when the teams were analyzed by professional league. Among English teams, the survival rate at the top is positively affected by having higher percentages of national players, higher transfer inflows, participation in UEFA competitions and higher stadium attendance. Stadium attendance is an important factor in keeping a team at the top, independent of the European league (with the exception of the French competition). French teams' survival tends to benefit from the acquisition of players (proxied by higher transfer outflows). Although significant, the age effect nevertheless does not prevent young clubs (those founded within the last 50 years)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scispo.2017.01.008>

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Please cite this article in press as: Mourao PR. Dissecting the survivors – how the age of a club contributes to the ability of a team to maintain the top position in the European soccer leagues. Sci sports (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scispo.2017.01.008>

MOTS CLÉS

Football ;
Survie ;
Taux de risque
proportionnel

from achieving first place. Young clubs that manage transfers well, have impressive stadium attendance, and are stimulated by UEFA participation tend to experience additional positive effects on their survival rate at the top.

Conclusion. – The most robust results indicate that the age effect is a statistically significant determinant. Older clubs tend to benefit from four age-related dimensions: the relevance of assets, more efficient decision-making processes, monopolistic market power and the control of decisions by the executive board.

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Résumé

Objectifs. – Tester l'hypothèse que l'âge du club est un déterminant des taux de survie plus élevés des équipes européennes de football.

Actualités. – Nous avons étudié 185 équipes de la saison 2006/2007 à la saison 2012/2013. Nous avons utilisé des modèles de régression des risques de Cox. Nous avons également contrôlé pour l'effet de l'âge avec les variables suggérées par la littérature. Ces variables comprenaient les flux de transfert, la présence de l'équipe lors des compétitions de l'UEFA (Ligue des Champions ou Europa League), la fréquentation des stades, et le pourcentage de joueurs nationaux.

Perspectives. – Nous avons observé que l'âge du club est un déterminant important pour expliquer les taux de survie plus élevés des équipes appartenant à des clubs plus âgés. Plus de nuance a été découverte lorsque les équipes ont été analysées par chaque ligue professionnelle. Parmi les équipes françaises, le taux de survie au sommet est affecté positivement pour avoir des pourcentages plus élevés de joueurs nationaux, la hausse des entrées de transfert, la participation à des compétitions de l'UEFA et une meilleure fréquentation du stade. La fréquentation du stade est un facteur important dans le maintien de l'équipe au sommet, indépendant de la ligue européenne (à l'exception de la compétition française). La survie des équipes françaises tend à bénéficier de l'acquisition de joueurs (représentée par la hausse des sorties de transfert).

Conclusion. – Le plus robuste des résultats indique l'effet de l'âge est un déterminant statistiquement significatif. Les clubs plus âgés bénéficient de quatre dimensions liées à l'âge : la pertinence de l'actif, les processus de prise de décision plus efficaces, un pouvoir de marché monopolistique et un plus grand contrôle des décisions par le conseil exécutif.

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1. Introduction

During the 2011/2012 season, Udinese, an Italian soccer team, reached the leading position of the competitive Serie A in the 14th match. Because the Italian league hosts 38 matches, this achievement was significant for a team that did not belong to one of the exclusive Big Ones of Italian calcio (Juventus, which won that season's title, Inter Milan and A.C. Milan). Udinese was founded in 1896 and has a mean stadium attendance of 17,000 (approximately 50% of the stadium's capacity). Therefore, reaching first place in the 14th match of the 2011/2012 season was one of the greatest achievements that Udinese's fans had experienced in a decade.

Similar achievements were accomplished by teams such as Auxerre (first place at the 29th match of the French League in the 2009/2010 season), TSG 1899 Hoffenheim (first place at the 21st match of the German League in the 2008/2009 season), and Leixoes (first place at the 10th match of the Portuguese League in the 2008/2009 season). These teams' budgets are much lower than those of the usual champions of their national leagues. Nevertheless, the supporters of Auxerre (founded at 1905), Hoffenheim (founded at 1899) and Leixoes (founded at 1907) had the opportunity to celebrate as their teams overtook first place at matches

played in the middle or at the end of the season. Although these teams did not succeed in keeping first place until the season's end, they reached the top of the standings, which is rare for teams with similar histories and endowments.

Why is it so difficult for most soccer teams to maintain first place? After the first third of the season, the top 3 ranks are typically held exclusively by the "Big Ones", whose teams are difficult to dislodge. However, if there is no written rule forbidding the occupation of first place by a "not-Big" team, there must be a robust reason explaining the low probability that a team with a small stadium, a modest budget and a humble history will be able to maintain first place. The search for this explanation is the purpose of this study.

The literature review focuses on one major explanation — the age hypothesis. Older clubs are more likely to maintain the top places because of factors such as the value of their assets, their organizational structure, their monopolistic power and the number of generations of fans and supporters. Several dimensions control the age hypothesis:

- the transfer cycle;
- the presence of the team at UEFA competitions;
- stadium attendance.

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