

Private Equity in Global Football

With the 2026 FIFA World Cup ending this summer, a quieter trend is reshaping the sport: the influx of institutional capital. Football has long been dominated by local owners, wealthy benefactors, and member associations. In these models, sporting success often outweighs financial returns. Today, private equity firms, sovereign wealth funds, and institutional investors are treating clubs and leagues as investable assets. This shift has been especially pronounced in Europe, where relatively permissive ownership regimes in many leagues and a fragmented club landscape have created attractive opportunities for institutional investors.

Largest Football Club Deals Since 2023

Football club	Deal date	Deal value (EURm)	Deal type	Financing status	League
Manchester United	20-Feb-24	1,450.00	PIPE	Corporate	Premier League
Everton FC	19-Dec-24	474.50	M&A	Corporate	Premier League
Udinese Calcio	25-May-25	150.00	Buyout/LBO	PE backed	Serie A
RCD Espanyol de Barcelona	14-Jul-25	130.00	Buyout/LBO	PE backed	La Liga
Hellas Verona FC	15-Jan-25	125.00	Buyout/LBO	PE backed	Serie A
Leeds United FC	17-Jul-23	106.00	M&A	VC backed	Premier League
Sheffield United FC	23-Dec-24	105.00	M&A	Private debt financed	Championship
Paris FC	9-Oct-24	90.00	Buyout/LBO	PE backed	Ligue 1

Source: Pitchbook

1. What prompted the entry of private capital into football?

Intrinsic Attractiveness: How Football Makes Money

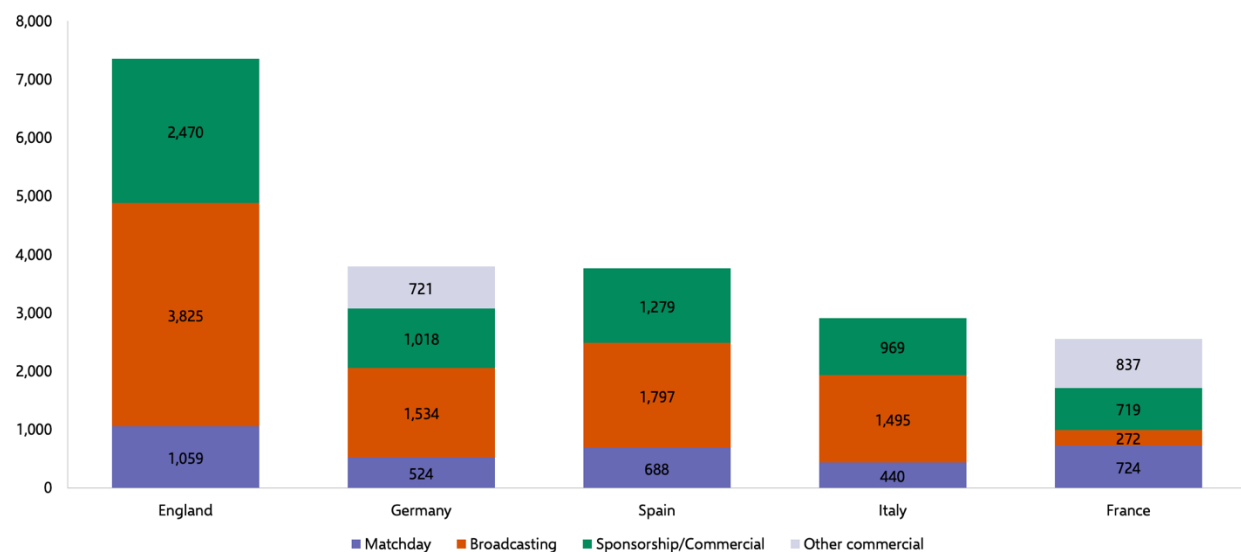
At its core, elite football clubs function as hybrid media, consumer, and talent monetisation platforms that offer multiple recurring and scalable revenue streams. This underlying business model drives institutional interest by combining contracted cash flows with significant upside potential across several dimensions.

Core Football Revenue Streams

Revenue Stream Category	Strategic Significance in the PE Thesis
Commercial Revenue	The largest and most scalable revenue stream, driven by sponsorships, merchandising, and brand licensing. Elite clubs increasingly operate as global media brands, monetising international fanbases far beyond matchday attendance.
Broadcasting Revenue	Provides highly lucrative, multi-year contracted cash flows. Represents a significantly higher proportional reliance for lower-ranked and mid-tier clubs.
Matchday & Hospitality	Generated through ticket sales, hospitality, and stadium-related spending. While capacity-constrained, leading clubs can drive growth through pricing power, premium experiences, and stadium enhancements.
Player Trading	Player transfers act as a form of capital allocation, where clubs acquire, develop, and sell talent at a profit. For many mid-tier clubs, this creates a recurring buy-develop-sell model that resembles capital gains generation.

Big five European league clubs' revenue

FY2023-FY2024 (EUR m)



Source: Deloitte

In particular, broadcasting revenue relies on the unique economics of live sports consumption. Live football reliably aggregates large-scale, simultaneous global audiences. Its value is also inherently time sensitive, as the full emotional and commercial impact is only realised in real time, which makes it resistant to the shift toward on-demand viewing that has disrupted traditional television and film. Consequently, sports media rights command significant and sustained value, estimated at over \$60 billion annually¹.

Across all revenue streams, elite clubs possess global brand equity and fan engagement, yet they remain

¹ <https://www.apollo.com/insights-news/insights/2025/12/the-financing-gap-in-sports-unlocking-a-dollar-2-5-trillion-opportunity?>

under-monetised relative to comparable entertainment assets. This gap between current and potential monetisation is the value creation opportunity that institutional capital targets.

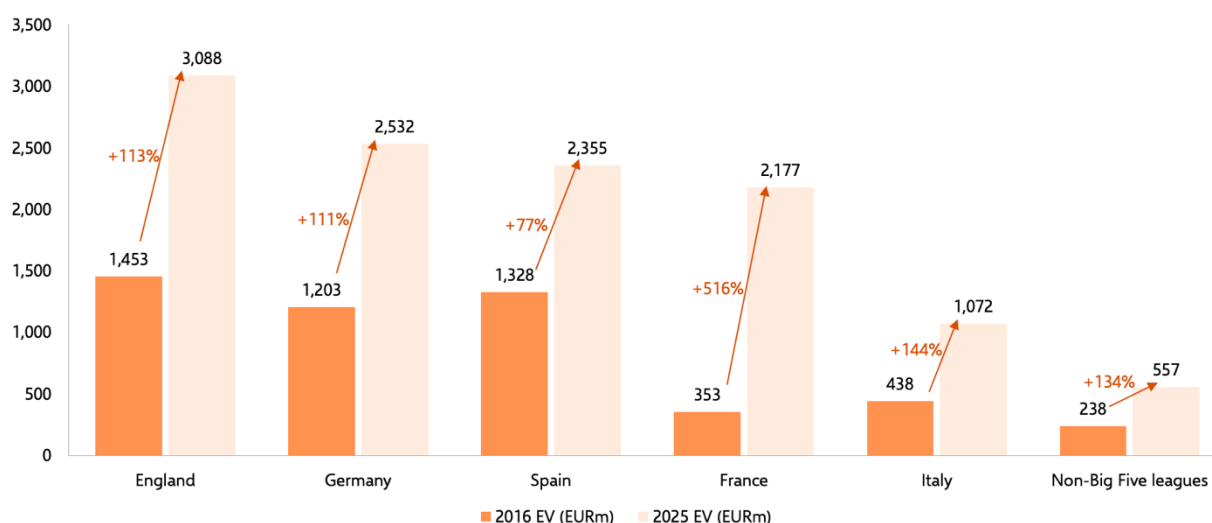
The Economics of Absolute Demand and Scarce Supply

The investment appeal of elite football clubs is reinforced by structural imbalances in supply and demand which create a highly defensible trophy asset market. On the supply side, elite clubs are scarce and non-replicable. Data shows the European elite has comprised roughly 45 clubs across nine countries over the past decade², and this concentration is expected to tighten to seven countries by FY2025. Demand is global and inelastic, as consumption stems from identity and affiliation rather than price sensitivity. This creates the winner-takes-most dynamic, where a small subset of clubs capture most of the attention and commercial value.

Consequently, the financial value of these scarce assets has expanded significantly. The number of European clubs with enterprise values exceeding €1 billion doubled since 2016 to 17 institutions², which reflects improved financials and the recognition that these historic assets cannot be replicated.

Average Enterprise Value By League for Top European Football Clubs

FY2016 vs FY2025 (EUR m)



No of Clubs: England (2016: 7, 2025: 9), Germany (2016: 3, 2025: 3), Spain (2016: 5, 2025: 6), France (2016: 4, 2025: 2), Italy (2016: 7, 2025: 8), Non-Big Five (2016: 8, 2025: 4)

Source: PartnerCap Securities, Football Benchmark

Catalysts for Institutional Entry: Distress, Mismanagement, and Regulatory Arbitrage

While football's attractiveness is clear, widespread private capital deployment is recent. COVID-19 was the immediate trigger, as the pandemic eliminated matchday income and disrupted broadcasting cash flows. This pushed fragile, over-leveraged clubs into liquidity crises. This is when sponsors who moved faster than banks or strategic buyers found an ideal entry point.

² <https://footballbenchmark.com/ca/w/football-clubs-valuation-the-european-elite-2025?>

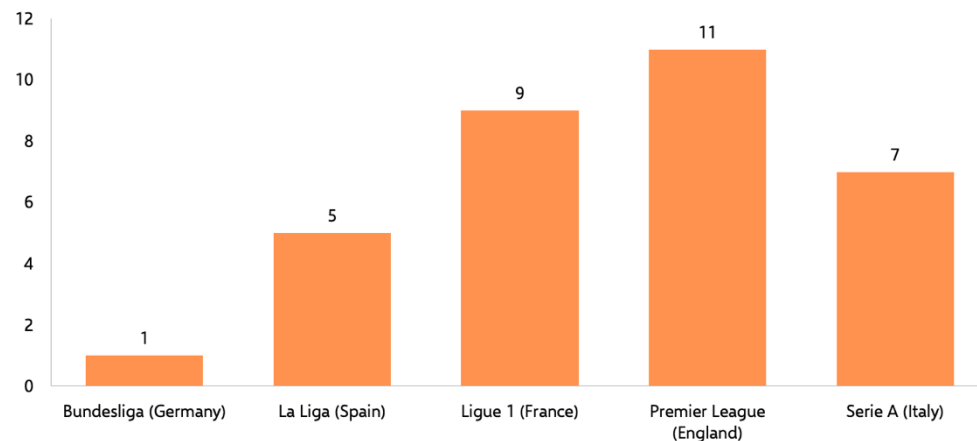
Football's distress cycle was unique as it allowed sponsors to acquire distressed but emotionally invaluable assets. These institutions boast decades of brand equity, global relevance, and unyielding loyalty, alongside weak financial discipline. Transactions such as Oaktree's acquisition of Inter Milan³ following Suning's loan default and Ares Management's financing of Olympique Lyonnais⁴ illustrate this.

However, the more important driver is structural. Football suffers from a chronic passion-discipline conflict. Historically, owners tolerated losses because sporting success and prestige mattered more than cash returns. This is somewhat rational. Cutting costs can cause the very on-pitch failure it sought to prevent. A club cutting wages risks relegation, which destroys the broadcasting and sponsorship revenue those cuts aimed to protect. This entangled circularity makes football's under-management unique, and private equity believes it can professionalise this away.

Geography also matters. European football's ownership rules are far looser than North America's closed-league franchise model⁵, with its vetting processes, holding periods, and supply constraints. Europe's open promotion-and-relegation system instead produces fragmented ownership and recurring capital needs, which makes it far easier for PE to acquire control and deploy capital quickly. Since 2023, 13 of 19 European club ownership changes have involved PE or VC, evidence this is a sustained trend⁶.

Count of PE-backed and VC-backed clubs by Big Five league

FY2025



Source: Pitchbook, Company Filings

Valuation Paradigms

The private equity thesis is straightforward. Clubs were chronically mispriced because they operated as sporting institutions, not commercial businesses. Modern clubs possess a hybrid asset profile as they combine contracted media cash flows, stadium real estate yield, and scalable global branding which offer distinct levers for optimisation.

³ <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/football/oaktree-takes-ownership-of-inter-milan-after-missed-payment>

⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-06-16/ares-said-close-to-deal-to-take-control-of-lyon-football-club>

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/soccer-american-european-clubs-b2992746.html>

⁶ Pitchbook: Private Capital in European Football: Part III

Clubs are valued primarily on revenue potential, brand strength, and the probability of sporting success, not near-term profitability. The top 20 Money League clubs are projected to generate €12.4 billion in aggregate revenue for 2024-25, up 11% year-on-year⁷. This is the opposite of how traditional PE evaluates targets, where EBITDA and free cash flow dominate. Many premier clubs are not profitable at all — Europe's 32 largest clubs frequently post a net loss in aggregate, driven largely by wage inflation, as player salaries and transfer fees grow faster than commercial revenue. Despite this, enterprise values have appreciated sharply. The aggregate EV of Europe's top 32 clubs reached €64.7 billion in 2025 — a 146% increase, or a 10.5% CAGR. Real Madrid leads at €6.3 billion, followed by Manchester United and Manchester City². This combination of falling profitability and rising valuations is the gap financial sponsors target. The thesis relies on bridging inefficiently managed revenues to optimised, disciplined revenues.

⁷ <https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/assets-shared/docs/industries/technology-media-telecommunications/2025/deloitte-annual-review-of-football-finance-2025.pdf>

2. Modalities of Capital Deployment

	Risk Profile	Source of Return	Example	Main Vulnerability
Private Credit	Lowest	Yield + collateral, occasional loan-to-own	Apollo/Nottingham Forest, Oaktree/Inter Milan	Distress can convert debt to equity exposure
Minority Stakes	Low-Medium	Multiple expansion on scarce assets	Man United, Liverpool, Chelsea	No operational control
League-Level Rights	Medium	Diversified top-line yield	CVC/La Liga, CVC/Ligue 1	Sensitive to broadcast pricing collapse
MCO Platforms	Medium-High	Operational efficiency + optionality	City Football Group, BlueCo/Strasbourg	Regulatory/governance risk, contagion
Majority Buyouts (Lower Tier)	Highest	Turnaround + promotion re-rating	Elliott/AC Milan, Wrexham	Outcome-dependent

Private Credit and Loan-to-Own Strategies

Private credit represents a comparatively defensible strategy. Elite football has become more capital-intensive: clubs require outlays for stadiums, training facilities, and transfer fees. As a result, many accumulate large liabilities and sub-optimal capital structures.

Debt is now one of the preferred routes for investors seeking exposure while limiting downside. Debt sits senior to equity, and lenders can structure collateral, enforce covenants, and lock in yield while tracking an appreciating asset class. Apollo's €93 million July 2025 loan to Nottingham Forest (8.75%, secured against the stadium) is a clean example of this strategy⁶. Oaktree's Inter Milan loan-to-own is the aggressive version of this strategy. A €275 million facility in 2021 was secured against equity converted into ownership of a ~€1 billion club upon default⁶. This highlights how private credit can also capture equity-like upside in distressed scenarios.

Minority Stakes in Premium Institutions

Minority stakes in elite clubs offer defensiveness through scarcity. Top owners hesitate to relinquish control of trophy assets, and hence private equity firms deploy capital via minority positions instead. Acquisitions of minority stakes in Manchester United, Liverpool, Juventus, Chelsea, and Atlético Madrid are prominent examples of this.

These investors remain passive or semi-passive. Their capital funds major capex like stadium renovations and high-profile signings. Simultaneously, private equity firms benefit from structural expansion in global franchise valuations. In such cases, returns rely more on scarce assets re-rating upward rather than operational improvements.

League-Level Commercial Rights Monetisation

A third approach bypasses individual club risk, as investors fund the centralised commercial and media arms of entire leagues. This avoids the localised risks of single club relegation. For example, CVC redirected capital from a stalled €300 million Bundesliga proposal and bought a 8.2% stake in La Liga's broadcasting vehicle for 50 years (~€2 billion). They also invested €1.5 billion for 13% of Ligue 1's commercial arm⁶.

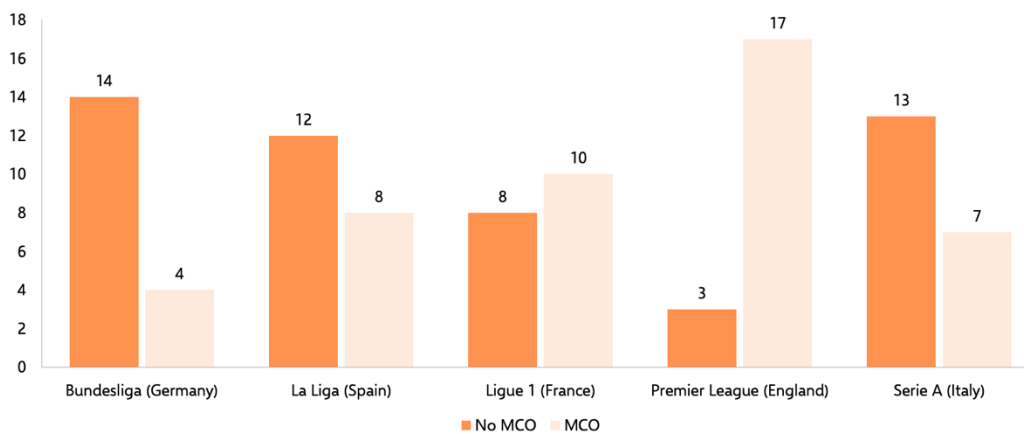
While this approach theoretically offers diversified top-line yield, in reality it remains exposed to global broadcast pricing shifts.

Multi-Club Ownership (MCO) Platforms

MCOs represent a novel structure where investors build interconnected club platforms across geographies and divisions. MCOs have become widespread across Europe's Big Five leagues (47.9% penetration), with adoption being more concentrated in the Premier League, where 17 of 20 clubs (85%) are part of an MCO network⁶.

Count of MCO-operated clubs by Big Five League

FY2025



Source: Pitchbook, Company Filings

MCOs enable a portfolio approach to player development: prospects can be loaned internally to preserve value while ensuring playing time, and finance, scouting, and commercial functions are centralised at the holding-company level.

Some investors use MCOs to target lower-division clubs with large fanbases, treating promotion as a leveraged option. They buy a discounted asset, invest in management, and capture a valuation jump on promotion. City Football Group, BlueCo's acquisition of RC Strasbourg, and Wrexham all illustrate this. Wrexham was acquired for €2.1 million in 2020 and is now valued above €400 million⁶.

But MCO growth brings governance risk. The 777 Partners collapse⁸ showed how opaque ownership can create cross-border contagion, with distress at the holding-company level affecting multiple clubs at once. MCOs can also create conflicts of interest, where smaller clubs end up serving as development platforms rather than pursuing their own competitive goals. UEFA's exclusion of Crystal Palace from the 2025-26 Europa League⁹, over ownership links to Olympique Lyonnais, is the clearest example of regulators struggling to keep pace with MCO complexity.

Majority Buyouts and Operational Turnarounds

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cevy7z0d9gwo>

⁹ <https://www.premierleague.com/en/news/4357212/crystal-palace-react-to-uefa-decision-on-european-competition>

Majority buyouts sit at the speculative end. These are common in distressed or lower-tier clubs, where control is acquired at depressed valuations. Investors gain full authority to run the traditional private equity turnaround playbook, which includes cost control, governance overhaul, data recruitment, and targeted promotion. Elliott Management's AC Milan turnaround is the standard blueprint as it culminated in a league title and profitable exit¹⁰. However, success demands alignment between financial discipline and sporting performance. Therefore, this entry point offers the highest potential return but the least predictable path.

¹⁰ <https://www.fnlonon.com/articles/why-elliotts-turnaround-of-ac-milan-is-a-blueprint-deal-for-pe-bosses-piling-into-football-20230310>

3. Value Creation: Institutionalizing the Passion Asset

PE investors actively deploy operational playbooks to institutionalise emotional assets. Value creation depends heavily on the entry point. For majority buyouts, this playbook prevents negative outcomes.

Real Estate, Infrastructure, and the Hybrid Profile

Modern football is capital-intensive, and private equity views the stadium differently than clubs traditionally have — not just a matchday venue used 30 times a year, but an under-monetised, multi-use entertainment asset. Capital deployed to modernise stadiums and training facilities pushes the club toward becoming a hybrid real estate and commercial holding company. These investments tend to be welcomed by fans, framed as club-building rather than extraction, while opening up new revenue: hospitality, naming rights, concerts, retail. Done well, this can fracture a club into distinct, profitable subcategories (e.g. real estate, media content, player trading), turning a team into a diversified conglomerate.

Institutionalizing Sporting Decisions and Data-Driven Recruitment

The most critical lever is reducing randomness and emotionality in decision-making. Football has long been driven by reactive, manager-led calls; PE replaces this with data-driven recruitment and centralised scouting. This is no longer just a preference, it is becoming an operational necessity. UEFA's Financial Sustainability Regulations cap squad costs at 70% of revenue and limit losses to €60 million over three years⁶. Chelsea's record €31.1 million fine in July 2025 shows enforcement is real¹¹. Such regulations actively benefit disciplined operators, as hard caps neutralise the advantage of reckless, deep-pocketed owners.

¹¹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/football/chelsea-given-46m-fine-for-breach-of-financial-rules>

4. Exit Horizons

The private equity investment lifecycle demands a clearly defined exit, typically a 5-to-7-year horizon driven by revenue growth and valuation expansion. The 2026 World Cup in North America could act as a macro catalyst, boosting fan engagement and commercial monetisation in a way that aligns well with exit timelines from the 2020-2022 investment wave.

But macro tailwinds cannot fix structurally weak clubs. Fundamental business viability still determines whether an asset commands a premium, and that depends on strategy as much as timing. A private credit position secured against a stadium does not need sporting success to deliver its return. A majority buyout betting on promotion does. The exit horizon, in other words, is not just a timing question. It is a question of how much of the return was ever actually contingent on football itself.

5. Systemic Tensions and Execution Risks

Financial sponsors prioritise margin expansion and exit multiples, whereas fans demand emotional stewardship and sporting success, creating a structural tension between financial optimisation and cultural ownership. Backlash tends to emerge when perceived extraction outweighs merit on the pitch. The Glazer family's leveraged buyout of Manchester United is a key example, where debt servicing constrained reinvestment and weakened competitive performance¹². This mismatch is structural rather than incidental, as seen in Germany where mobilised fan culture has blocked roughly €1 billion in private equity-linked proposals tied to media rights monetisation¹³.

Sports investments often rely on the assumption of continuously expanding broadcasting revenues, yet Ligue 1 challenges this. After the collapse of major media deals with MEDIAPRO and DAZN^{14 15}, the league launched its own streaming platform, with broadcast income falling to around half of its previous peak. This highlights the downside risk of underwriting valuations on perpetual media rights growth, where shifts in market pricing can materially compress returns.

Regulation further shapes capital outcomes by defining hard constraints on ownership and control. Germany's 50+1 rule requires member-majority voting control, effectively blocking external governance regardless of capital deployed¹⁶. This has led to repeated rejection of major private equity proposals in the Bundesliga, underscoring that in structurally closed markets and regulatory design, not capital availability, ultimately determines investment feasibility.

Every structure is a bet on engineering away football's unpredictability. In reality, less can be engineered than assumed. Returns must therefore compensate for unbalance-sheeted risk, and the best investors price this risk rather than ignore it.

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/articles/cd9lwdegxvxo>

¹³ <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/football/bundesliga-investor-deal-collapses-after-fan-protests>

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/4229378/2020/12/11/french-footballs-3bn-tv-deal-to-be-terminated-heres-how-it-impacts-clubs/>

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6281404/2025/04/15/ligue-1-tv-rights-dazn-contract/>

¹⁶ <https://www.bundesliga.com/en/faq/50plus1>