

Avant Garde by Name, Avant-Garde by Nature: French Football Federation Ruling Threatens to Stop Real-Life Fantasy Team

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When French sixth-tier side Avant Garde Caennaise (“**AG Caen**”) was founded in 1902, even the most forward-thinking supporters could not have imagined that the club would become the pioneers that they are today.

The Project

[Two thousand fans currently manage the team, making decisions such as the team’s line up and substitutions, via a third party app called ‘United Managers’.](#) The virtual managers, called ‘Umans’, decide on pre-game line-ups and in-game tactics. They have access to Opta Pro statistics and live streaming of training sessions and games and vote on the app to make strategy-critical decisions. The app delivers the tactics digitally for the dugout duo of Julien Le Pen and assistant Karim Ahmed Yahia to implement.

The United Managers project is based on a subscription model where users vote with coins on the app. Umans can pay for a premium subscription or earn greater voting rights with their increased use of the app. Fans can spend hours watching their team train, considering player selection, formations and suggesting substitutions. If Le Pen wants to make a substitution, the Umans also have the right to vote against his choice. This is fantasy football in reality.

But does it work? Are the Umans the next Guardiola? Well, the team’s performance seems to speak for itself in this regard. The team is currently top of Regional 1, one of the regional leagues at the sixth tier of French football, and is on course for promotion to the Championnat National 3 (the fifth division) if they keep up their current form.

FFF ruling

The French Football Federation (“**FFF**”) have now moved to shut down the United Managers concept.

When the AG Caen project started in July 2017, the Normandy Football League reportedly approved the idea, allowing United Managers to implement the collaborative coaching concept.

However, nine clubs in AG Caen’s league have raised issues with the project. It has now transpired from recently published minutes that the FFF outlined changes to the regulations in an assembly meeting on 8 December 2018.

The new rules prescribe:

1. Clubs cannot enter into contracts or partnerships that allow third parties to influence the performance of its team;
2. Third parties cannot question the responsibility of the team held by the head coach by influencing his choices in relation to team management; and
3. Clubs cannot broadcast live matches without the prior consent of the league (in accordance with Article



Article By
[Sports & Entertainment - Squire Patton Boggs](#)
[Squire Patton Boggs \(US\) LLP](#)
[Sports Shorts](#)[Entertainment, Art & Sports](#)
[France](#)

L333-1 of the French 'Code du sport').

This new guidance does not appear to be the end of the matter, at least as far as United Managers are concerned. The company have released a [statement](#) and have signaled their intent to challenge the decision. They say that preparations will continue as normal for AG Caen's next game in two weeks' time.

Comment

With the advancement of technology in sport and the popularity of fantasy football games, it is inevitable that we will see more projects of this kind launching around the world. The app-based concept may prove more popular and successful than similar projects have fared in the past. A recent example is [the takeover of English Conference side Ebbsfleet United by MyFootballClub in 2007](#). Although similar to United Managers' partnership with AG Caen in that members could pick the team, MyFootballClub was not a subscription service but rather a crowd-funding take-over of a business. Ultimately, the take-over failed because of declining membership and investment.

It remains to be seen if other governing bodies will take the same approach as the FFF or instead seek to embrace the concept.

The benefits could be great in terms of community engagement, performance levels, and commercialization. However, there are clearly also issues to address, not least in relation to the ownership of image and broadcasting rights. Furthermore, the concept could threaten the sanctity of team independence and could obviate the need for a traditional 'manager' altogether.

There are a number of questions: How can the concept prevent a group of hostile rival fans - or even hackers - taking over to sabotage the team? Should the virtual managers be subject to coaching license requirements? How will rules on betting be applied and enforced?

Governing Bodies and Sports Clubs will need to stay ahead of the game as current regulations may not be sufficient to cover such tech-based projects.

Authored by Katie Smith

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