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# Accusations of racist language in Norwegian football: stakeholder management of whistleblowing

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study analyses whistleblowing in relation to incidents of racism in one Norwegian Premier Division FC. Focused on stakeholder management, the paper examines: (1) the management of the whistleblowing case and its impact on stakeholders; and (2) how the stakeholders' roles changed over time. Main findings: a) the failure by the board to act effectively on the original complaint allowed the dispute to escalate; b) the actions of the whistleblower's colleagues were crucial in forcing a reopening of the case; c) some stakeholders were conflicted by being both stakeholders and stakeowners; d) the inaction by regulatory organisations (stakekeepers); e) the extent to which power, urgency, legitimacy and homogeneity of interests were crucial in determining the management of the incident; and f) the requirement for stakeholders to reinforce their de jure ownership with effective, de facto, leadership.

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## Introduction

In recent years there has been growing evidence of the extent of racism in sport yet those who experience its damaging effects or witness its occurrence often find it very difficult to come forward and whistleblow. Recent research has found evidence of racism in coaching across a range of sports (BBC 2021; Bradbury, Lusted, and van Sterkenburg 2020; Cunningham 2020; McPherson 2007), in the media reporting of sport (Farrington et al. 2017; Foster and Chaplin 2017) in team cultures (Farquharson et al. 2019; Hassan 2017) and fan behaviour (Arnold and Veth 2018; Cleland and Cashmore 2016). Many studies have taken football as the focus for research (Bradbury 2011; Burdsey 2021; Cleland and Cashmore 2016). However, while the research into the intersection of football and racism is extensive there has been relatively little analysis of how football authorities (clubs, FAs and leagues) and other stakeholders respond to incidents of whistleblowing in relation

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to racism (notable recent exceptions include Hickey and Roderick 2022; Newman, Warburton, and Russell 2022; Moriconi and De Cima 2020). Recent research highlights the challenges surrounding whistleblowing in organizational settings and also the problems that stakeholders face in responding effectively to the consequences of whistleblowing (Abazi 2020; Doberstein and Charbonneau 2020; West and Bowman 2020). However, there is relatively little analysis of stakeholder management as a result of whistleblowing in relation to accusations of racism in football. This study seeks to address this gap and the purpose is to examine: (1) the response of management and other stakeholders to the whistleblowing case; (2) the different stakeholders' roles and how those roles evolved as the case developed and (3) the factors that influenced stakeholder action, especially the action by the board.

Whistleblowing has to do with ethics and what one perceives as harmful or unfair and has been defined by Nadler and Schulman (2015, para. 2) as 'calling attention to wrongdoing that is occurring within an organization'. In the context of sport a mechanism for whistleblowing has been defined as 'A system designed to receive and handle reports' (UNODC-IOC 2019, p. vii, quoted in Verschuuren 2021). While there is broad agreement regarding the definition of whistleblowing there is less agreement on the factors that facilitate or inhibit whistleblowing. Barkoukis et al. (2022, 14) summarise the requirements for an effective whistleblowing system as follows: '(a) the benefits of whistleblowing outweigh the personal (e.g. fear of retaliation) and social costs (sport disrepute; negative social stigma of whistleblowers as 'snitches'); (b) reassurances are in place to protect the integrity, anonymity, and privacy of informants/whistleblowers; (c) robust reporting systems are in place that offer protection to whistleblowers [and] a transparent investigation process' (see also Geeraert, Alm, and Groll 2014; Verschuuren 2020).

Much of the explanation for the reluctance to whistleblow is the absence of the factors mentioned by Barkoukis et al. and fall into three broad categories: personal; organizational; and social. At the personal level research by Beller and Stoll (1995) suggested that the quality of moral reasoning among athletes was weaker than among non-athletes indicating that the sports environment fostered a higher degree of moral disengagement (see also Boardley and Kavussanu 2011). Other research (Erickson, Backhouse, and Carless 2017; Teo and Caspersz 2011) suggests that concerns for career progression led to a reluctance to whistleblow. Personal hesitancy is often reinforced by organizational factors that are of two overlapping types: cultural and structural. Cultural barriers include the existence of strong normative values against voicing concerns about breaching ethical standards – a culture of silence founded on fear of reprisals and/or of a sense of loyalty. As Moriconi and De Cima (2020, 17) conclude 'In short, the idea that if someone blows the whistle, then reprisals are taken for granted is embedded into sport institutions'. Consequently, the formal norms that support the duty to report any abuses are undermined (Hardie et al. 2012; Verschuuren 2020; Whitaker, Backhouse, and Long 2014). Structural factors include the absence of reporting policies, procedures and mechanisms associated with the concept of good governance (Geeraert, Alm, and Groll 2014). Both personal and organisational inhibiting factors can be reinforced by broader political and social values. For example, where abusive behaviour is politically sanctioned, as in Russia regarding doping (Harris, Dowling, and Houlihan 2021; Rodchenkov 2020), or socially sanctioned, as in Japan regarding bullying (Human Rights Watch 2020; Japan Today 2013), whistleblowing is almost impossible.

## Ethical and safe sport – and the challenge of whistleblowing

Norway exhibits many of the requirements for a positive attitude towards whistleblowing. Norwegian sport has a zero tolerance policy for all forms of discrimination and harassment with NIF defining *racism* as the subjective experience of a racist statement or action, regardless of intent (NIF 2020). Government regulations also make it clear that everyone involved in sports, has a responsibility to intervene and notify the relevant authorities in the event of breaches of that policy. In addition, it is expected that everyone is aware of the guidelines and knows how to act when the guidelines are broken. For elite athletes and their coaches, sport is a job, and the sports clubs are their employers and must follow guidelines for employees in connection with notification of cases of breaches of behavioural guidelines. The employer should handle the notification of cases by investigating – and then resolving the matters worthy of criticism (Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority 2021). The employer is also responsible for taking care of those who give notice (whistleblowers) and others involved. However, the processes associated with whistleblowing are not straightforward, and even the national federations revealed a lack of knowledge as only 36 out of 55 national federations indicated that they had a reporting system that dealt explicitly with racism (Kristiansen and Sonne 2021). 2021 turned out to be a year when many Norwegian federations and clubs updated their systems for whistleblowing due to new NIF<sup>1</sup> regulations and the growing volume of incidents and media attention (Article 11-4, NIF 2021). In addition to NIF's laws and regulations, all federations have their own regulations and have the opportunity to impose their own sanctions individually or in combination with NIF's. Most sports organization have a link on their website that connects with a platform for reporting incidents. As a result, individuals or teams who have experienced or are aware of breaches of the regulations can make anonymous reports. Once a report is made it is the responsibility of the relevant organization (club or event organizer for example) to respond. NIF provides advice to all who apply, but it is expected that the issue will be dealt with at a lower level with the consequence that there can often be a large number of, sometimes inexperienced, stakeholders involved.

## Stakeholder theory

One of the most insightful theories used to analyse the interaction between actors in responding to a crisis is stakeholder theory which has been widely applied in the study of sport (Hanstad, Parent, and Kristiansen 2013; Houlihan, Strittmatter, and Fahlén 2022; Kristiansen et al. 2021; Parent 2008). Fassin (2012) provides a valuable typology of stakeholders based generally on the intensity/value of their stake i.e. what they stand to lose and/or what they seek to protect (such as financial investment, status, ethical standards or influence). He defines stakeowners as those that have a 'genuine' stake, thus 'stakeowners' as those who 'own and deserve a stake' (Fassin 2012, p. 89). Leaving aside the major problem of distinguishing a 'genuine' from a 'false', and a 'deserving' from an 'undeserving' stake Fassin identifies a further set of stakeholders. He identifies three other groups in addition to stakeowners based on the nature of their legitimacy: stakewatchers (interest/pressure groups that seek to influence the focal organization), stakekeepers (regulators who impose external controls and regulations) and stakeseekers (less organized stakewatchers, but who may seek a voice in decision-making (see Table 1 and cf. Holzer 2008 for further discussion).



**Table 1.** Categories of stakeholder.

Category	Stakeowner	Primary stakeholder	Stakewatcher (interest/ pressure group)	Stakekeeper (regulator)	Stakeseeker (activists)
<b>Example</b>	Board	Team, support staff	Media, sponsors	Football Association, NIF	Equality rights organisations (NISO)
<b>Attribute</b>					
Legitimacy	Legal/ contractual	Legal/ contractual	Derivative (of sectional interests)	Mixed (legal, political/public relations)	Self-proclaimed
Degree of autonomy	High	Low	Modest for media (vulnerable to actions by stakeholders e.g. loss of access) but greater for sponsors	High	High
Loyalty to primary stakeowner	High	High	Modest to high	Neutral	Variable/ opportunistic
Degree of responsibility for achievement of organisational objectives	High	High	Modest to low	Modest (depends on remit of regulator)	None
Reciprocity	Assumed and high	Assumed and high	Variable and inconsistent	Neutral	Opportunistic/arbitrary

Adapted from Fassim 2012.

Adapting this typology to the complexity of the sport environment a distinction is drawn between stakeowners and primary stakeholders with the former having legal ownership of the business/club and the latter being essential to the functioning of the business/club (Kristiansen et al. 2021). The distinction between the different types of stakeholder is based on: a) their legal responsibilities towards the club; b) their extent of responsibility for the success of the business; and c) the damage that failures in the business might do to their interests (measured, for example, in loss of finance, status or public esteem).

In an important refinement of the concept Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) observe that stakeholder activism depends on the possession of three characteristics: urgency (a motive for action); power (control over resources, such as financial, administrative and expertise, needed by the focal organisation) and legitimacy (derived, for example, from election or membership). A fourth characteristic for effective stakeholder activism is a high degree of homogeneity of interests and objectives – a characteristic that is often missing from groups such as athletes, sports fans and sports media. A further refinement is provided by Carroll and Buchholtz (2008) who note that actors may be members of more than one stakeholder group.

Mitchell et al.'s refinement is important as it helps move stakeholder theory from a primarily normative and descriptive theory to one that is more clearly analytical and explanatory. The concept of power is especially valuable in explaining action and outcomes. The contractual relationship between the club/board and coaches and players is an example of Lukes (2004) first dimension of power where the board has power over the coaches and players due legal contract and financial dependence. However, Lukes noted two further dimensions of power that are relevant to this study. Power can also be manifest in the control of the agenda (within board meetings for example) with the result that issues can be sidelined and ignored. A more subtle form of the exercise of power, and one frequently ignored in studies of stakeholder behaviour, is through the control of ideas. Such ideological control can affect stakeholders to the extent that they accept the definitions of behaviour imposed by more powerful stakeholders. For example, racist abuse might be accepted as 'harmless banter' (Hickey and Roderick 2022) or that issues of coach behaviour are matters only for the board. As will be demonstrated examples of all three dimensions of power can be found in the present case.

## Methodology

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data approved the qualitative case study, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The case under scrutiny is an organization, a Premier League Football Club in Norway, and we undertook in-depth data collection involving multiple sources such as interviews, observation, informal conversations, media reports and documents (Creswell and Poth 2018).

### *Data collection, participants, and procedures*

A purposeful and convenience sampling procedure (Bauer and Gaskell 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1998) was adopted. Interviewees were keypersons from different stakeholder groups at different levels in the club, and from the federation, media and sponsors which were identified in the research process. Six formal interviews were conducted, one of them was with the whistleblower. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were informed

that the information they provided would, should they wish, remain confidential, and it was stressed that they could terminate the interview at any time. Often an informal conversation was conducted before the formal interview, and the interviewees chose where the face-to-face, semi-structured interview would take place. Interviews lasted between 45 and 105 min.

Additionally, 13 informal conversations were conducted during the research process as one author had the opportunity to observe the team closely for the entire season. This opportunity was important in developing trust and was also one factor that secured the more formal interviews as there was an atmosphere of scepticism towards talking about the whistleblowing case and the incidents leading up to it. These conversations were not recorded, but fieldnotes were taken. The research purpose was always explained initially. Some of the stakeholders were more comfortable participating in this type of knowledge sharing than a more formal and recorded interview. Documentary sources included: local and national newspapers; media webpages; and the webpages of NIF and the Football federation.

### **Data analysis**

A detailed chronology of the case is presented (see Appendix, [Supplementary material](#)) before an analysis of the case and its themes and three phases is provided (Stake 1995). As writing a case description involves a reflective process (Creswell and Poth 2018), the first author committed to weekly reporting where experiences, observations and media reports were summarized (Stake 1995). The regular analysis of data contributed positively to an understanding of shifts in the team's morale and culture throughout the season. The regular analysis of data and the discussion of preliminary findings also contributed to the identification and access to key actors. This approach to research data collection, analysis, and presentation was informed by Richardson's (1994) discussion of writing as a method of inquiry, where different forms of writing lead to different forms of knowing that can add depth to the analysis of a sensitive issue.

The use of multiple sources of data gave us the opportunity to draw more accurate inferences (Creswell et al. 2003). Emerging findings were compared and discussed among the researchers (investigator triangulation, Patton 2014) and rigor was demonstrated by use of *member reflection* in order to generate additional data and facilitate enriched understanding by interviewees reading the first drafts of the article (Smith and McGannon 2018). The process of sending the first draft to interviewees enabled confirmation of accuracy and also generated additional data.

### **Confidentiality**

There are several ethical concerns to address when the topics are whistleblowing and racism, particularly concerning respecting the anonymity of those interviewed as well as those stakeholders who were observed in the research process (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The opportunity for season-long observation revealed how some stakeholder's attitudes changed and enabled them to reflect on their early responses to the whistleblowing and explain how their views had changed. As anonymity was promised, only the interviewee's stakeholder group is mentioned and extra measures are taken to keep individuals and the



team anonymous. Similarly, newspaper articles are not included with full reference, even though these documents are in the public domain. In summary, several measures have been taken to protect the confidentiality of the individuals and the team, and this concern constrained data presentation (Kristiansen et al. 2012).

## Results: a drama in three phases

The appendix provides a timeline from February 2021 when the whistleblowing led to the initiation of action within the club. Based on the timeline we have identified three phases: 1) the accusations, their denial and rejection; 2) the players' revolt and the involvement of other stakeholders; and, 3) the second external review.

### Phase 1: accusations, denial and rejection

#### The accusation

It took a year from the first incident of the use of racist language before the complaint was made. The whistleblower, had experienced this type of language in the top leagues in several European countries. When talking about what made him finally complain, it was related to the clubs 'zero-tolerance' towards racism:

I was hoping for less harassment and a fresh start in this new club. On the fifth day in the club, the head coach dropped the N-word when we were riding a car together. The other passengers and colleagues in the car did not say anything when it happened, but when getting out of the car, they asked me if I was okay. After, I confronted the head coach the same day, and he was clueless that he had been offensive ... His response was simply that he had just tried to be funny. I told him it was nothing funny about using that word ...

Four other incidents of racist language towards players occurred in 2020-2021 with comments such as *this isn't African time* when late, *idiot monkey* and opinions on typical African traits.

From informal conversations with other stakeholders, it seems that there was an unspoken norm that sport is tough, and the people involved need to learn how to cope with some tough language which apparently included the use of racist language. Confirmation of the use of abusive language was provided by a female journalist who reported that the head coach said that she probably wanted to talk to some players because of their 'fine N-bodies'. Another journalist commented upon this story a year later and explained that 'the question is whether it is bad language or whether he is racist'. The journalist left the answer open, but he also explained that the newspaper started to refer to the incident as a 'racism case, and after a week or so, we were told to refer to it as a whistleblowing case as the [racism case] could not be proven'.

The role of media stakeholders is significant in this case as it demonstrates their role in framing an issue (Jarvie 2006) through the selection of, and emphasis given to, information (Carragee and Roefs 2004; Entman 1993). Entman further argues that framing can promote how problems are defined (trivial or significant) and evaluated (a private matter or a public issue) and the specific moral context in which they are placed (for example, player rights or organizational autonomy). As will become evident the role of the media moved from being that of a passive to an active stakeholder. The media's redefinition of the issue as 'a



racism case' was an early indication of activism by this stakeholder prompted in part by the seriousness of the issue (a degree of urgency, Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997). As will be seen the relatively muted activism (exercise of power) by the media also reflected the lack of homogeneity of interests as the local media had a complex relationship with the club.

### *Denial and rejection*

In most organisations loyalty to the organization, the strength of the norms that have developed or a concern with one's career results in a general reluctance to report incidents related to safety, sexism and racism (Çıdık and Phillips 2021; Tate and Page 2018; Verge 2022). Often serious incidents are downplayed: as was the case with one member of the support staff who said with a laugh: 'we are friends with everyone.' For him, being friends meant not to take a side in matters concerning racism, so what happened next was not a surprise for the whistleblower who wanted to challenge the coach's use of racist language:

I went to the sporting director who promised to deal with this, but nothing happened. But of course, the head coach knew what I had done now, so a more tense relationship with arguments in front of the players, followed the next weeks. Then I decided to go to the general manager ... [and the] next day I was called into a meeting with the head coach in his office – probably so we could "kiss and make up". I know the drill, then I realized it was time to lawyer up because this was about to get real. A few days later I met the manager accompanied with my lawyer ... The meeting ended in some sort of demotion to avoid direct contact between me and head coach.

One member of the support staff with HSE responsibility assisted the whistleblower to arrange a meeting with the sporting director and accompanied him to the meeting. He commented:

To my surprise, they did not take the whistleblower seriously, as nothing happened ... What you do not do ... [is] sit tight and hope that the shitstorm blows over! Of course, I knew it would just get bigger if nothing was done about it. Eventually, someone would leak it to the media.

The actions (or inactions) by the sporting director and the general manager are strong examples of Lukes' second dimension of power – that is the power to keep an issue off the agenda of the board. However, rather than the issue being forgotten the conflict escalated. The players had a meeting a few days later, and two players, one of whom was the captain, were sent to the Board to ask that the allegations be taken seriously and a thorough investigation conducted. However, the initial report from the player group, presented by the captain, did not support the whistleblowers claims. Simultaneously, it was arranged that players could anonymously report incidents of racism involving the head coach to the Norwegian Athletes' Central Organization (NISO), and seven players did this the next day. NISO would then be responsible for contacting the club. As one player expressed: 'The players would not support the result of the first investigation, and by reporting to NISO we also supported the whistleblower'. Unexpectedly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the report from the captain was the one the Board chose to emphasize. At this stage the leverage of the players, as primary stakeholders, was weakened by the lack of homogeneity of interests. The degree of urgency, such as it was, seemed more concerned to downplay the accusations rather than pursue the allegations. Consequently, the power that the captain possessed due to the legitimacy of his position was used to minimise the seriousness of the issue.

The turmoil in the club first hit the news during Easter 2021, a few days after the player meeting (see Appendix, [Supplementary material](#)), when the head coach was accused in the media of using racist expressions towards a team member on several occasions. The Board, which had previously declined to take action, undertook an ‘investigation’, but it was quick and informal and concluded that there was ‘no sign of racist attitudes’ in the club. The whistleblower was very disappointed by this conclusion because ‘the head coach had admitted to a lot of people that he had used this words but meant nothing wrong by using them, but not to the media.’ When a statement that the head coach would continue with the team, one newspaper dryly commented that the club’s handling of the racism accusation against the head coach ‘is so hasty, hazardous and untrustworthy, that if you would put a grade on it; it would be an F’.

The head coach used this moment of acquittal and quickly released a statement. Not only did he write in the statement that he knew his name would be ‘cleared of the accusations and that they were baseless’, he also stated that he had the full backing of the players which prompted one member of the coaching team to remark that this was not a ‘thoughtful action’ as it prompted a player revolt.

The issue had at last been forced on to the agenda of the Board, but it was clear that the Board wanted to maintain the fiction of the club as a ‘family’ and the issue of racism as an overblown complaint. As such the actions of the Board echo Lukes’ third dimension of power – that of ideological manipulation – designed to delegitimise the actions of the whistleblower and his supporters.

## ***Phase 2: the players’ revolt and the involvement of other stakeholders***

### ***The players’ revolt***

Two player representatives took the lead and organised the group to press for a more thorough and formal investigation of the allegations. In particular, they wanted a new investigation of the allegations based on the number of players who had filed reports with NISO: for them, ‘it was enough evidence to act’. When reflecting upon this, the whistleblower became very emotional, ‘it is hard to unite a group, I have never experienced anything like this before’. He added:

One of the players revealed some real leadership qualities. Usually, the group of players consist of three-four subgroups, but when told what was going on, this player united them into one group with a common cause.

As indicated the players were emerging as a stakeholder group that had many of the attributes identified by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) – urgency (a concern for prompt action), power (as being essential to the operation of the club) and legitimacy (stakeholders with direct experience of the behaviour of the coach). The players, despite the earlier behaviour of the captain, also had a high degree of homogeneity regarding their definition of the central issue (racist language) and the need for action by the Board.

On April 6 four meetings took place. In the player-meeting (meeting 1), one member of the support staff was put under some pressure by the players to take part and tell them what he had heard and seen in each incident. He commented:

I was asked if I could support the conclusions in the report... and also who had admitted hearing any abusive language ... Two persons that had been present in the car during the first incident a year ago, had now left the team, so they also had to be called to confirm. Also, one could not confirm that he had heard racist language ...

Anger and frustration were adjectives used by several to describe the atmosphere in the room during this meeting, but the players' persistence in persuading people to come forward and report what they had heard, paid off.

After the players meeting, the support staff met (meeting 2), where participants who had been present at one or more incident, confirmed the use of racist language. With so much backing for the whistleblower, the Board (meeting 3) was expected to undertake a more thorough investigation, though one Board member continued to feel that there was insufficient evidence. Consequently, the two player-representatives followed the correct chain of command and took the case to the Board (meeting 4). However, it did not go as they had expected. As one interviewee elaborated:

People had previously reported to them about the use of racist language, nevertheless, we had to double check everything in a meeting with the Board, it was totally unprofessional. That meeting deprived me of respect for them and the approach they took on the case and the process we had had. How was it possible not to follow up all the material that we provided them with [from meetings 1 and 2 that day]?

As it became clear to internal stakeholders (players and support staff) that the allegations against the head coach had been substantiated the other members of the coaching team realized that they had to address the players in order to avoid a 'locker-room mutiny'. In retrospect one member of the coaching team reflected: 'When things become so common [i.e. to hear these racist expressions], then you do not easily remember different incidents. I should have handled it differently, but it is not so easy when you are in the middle of it'. By this phase it was clear that the initiative rested with the players and with the coaching team, as primary stakeholders, who eventually realized that they had to take a stand because the players did not accept the outcome of the first investigation. In this phase it was clear that the legitimacy possessed by the players was complemented by a growing sense of urgency and a recognition of the power they possessed.

As media interest increased, former players came forward with their stories of similar incidents. Obtaining confirmation of the use of racist language was easier to get from former than current employees. Clearly, loyalty to the organization for a long time outweighed moral obligations until the momentum behind the complaint reached a point when and the Board could no longer 'sweep it under the carpet'.

### *The involvement of other stakeholders*

The role of the media, particularly the local media, as a stakeholder is especially interesting. The role of the local media (the town's newspaper) is complicated by the fact that it is also one of the major sponsors of the team – giving the newspaper a dual and potentially conflicting stakeholder role. The newspaper provided thorough daily updates on the racism accusations and later the whistleblowing case. After two weeks of turmoil, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper argued that the real crisis was less the accusations of racism and more that the club failed to take the first accusations seriously and instead 'closed the doors when they got some critical questions'. Together with another stakeholder, a financial institution, it was emphasized that the club needed to put 'all the cards on the table so that we can move on'. In reviewing the media role as a stakeholder one needs to take into account the fact that in the new online world of social media a whistleblowing story increases the traffic on the newspaper's webpage as well as selling

more paper copies – a consideration that blurs its motive for intervention. Nevertheless, the journalists argued that they ‘handled the case as any other stories’ although the intervention of the editor altered the focus from one of racism to one of management processes and competence.

The financial institution stakeholder, an organization with publicly stated policy of zero-tolerance for racism, argued that they expected the same from their partners. This sponsor was the one that, according to newspaper reports, ordered the club management to an emergency meeting and told them to ‘clean up or risk losing million [NOK] agreements’. The financial sponsor had a representative on the Board making it part stakeowner as well as stakeholder and they were unhappy to learn about the incident from the media. With the media’s extensive questioning, the club affairs could not be seen as an internal matter anymore, and among the stakeholders, the media was in an influential position as a stakeholder. After the first phase the allegations of racism had been significantly downplayed, and the narrative was now framed around the problems arising from a negative culture within the team and a coach who did not contribute to the positive development of players. As the editor-in-chief of the local newspaper put it: ‘There are several versions of what is right and wrong, depending on who you are talking to ... The warnings - as we know them today – are too vague and unclear to paint any picture of racism’. The editor-in-chief ended his comment by pointing to the paradox that the head coach would probably have had his job if ‘the club had handled the warnings when they appeared’.

As a result of the increased media questioning the head coach’s position became untenable. Following his departure the media reports started to reframe the issue by taking racism out of the narrative and referring to the general problems at the club. When the terms of the head coach’s departure were agreed, the sporting director stated on the club website that the former head coach was ‘an eminent and tactically skilled football coach ... with a tremendous commitment, enormous energy and a clear playing style’ prompting the whistleblower to comment that it was fascinating to read the ‘wonderful reviews they wrote about each other’. Following the second, more thorough investigation and the departure of the coach, four other members of the administration or the Board chose to leave the club with some blaming stress arising from the intense media attention. One of the player representatives was told by one senior administrator that ‘now that everyone is gone – do you think that it is you who run the club?’, which illustrates the different sentiments among the stakeholders.

### ***Phase 3: the second investigation***

According to the whistleblower, the sponsors who were also members of the former Board, ‘knew what was going on and pushed for a more formal and external review’. He added: ‘It was decided that everyone should be interviewed, anonymously, and they [i.e. a law firm] should write a report. That was what I initially wanted ...’

As the club had been through a massive number of resignations, it was a new Board with a temporary Chair that was in charge of this process, and one board member elaborated upon some of the difficulties with this process:

There were so many opinions, but we tried to stick to the racism case, because that was what we were set to do, and such a case must first be resolved internally... but it was the media that accelerated this process. The media gave the case to us, so to speak.

The new Board started working, and the club's notification (whistleblowing) protocols were updated with the help of a law firm. A second report on the case was finalized and this time the conclusion was that there was 'reason to conclude that the club's former coach has used unacceptable words and expressions that are contrary to the sport's zero tolerance for any form of discrimination and harassment'.

The National Football Federation (NFF), a stakekeeper, also wanted an investigation. According to one of our interviewees, the Board was told that 'If we did not do something about the incidents, then the football federation would act. They wanted a second investigation'. As the club did not have a disciplinary body to deal with such cases, the next natural step was to send the law firm report to the federation and its Judgment and Sanctions Committee. However, in the end NFF gave a brief statement that the evidence was insufficient to prosecute the former head coach who, by the time this happened, had a new job with another football team in Scandinavia.

Several of the interviewees expressed disappointment with the NFF's decision. A former Board member commented that the conclusion they reached was surprising: 'I am surprised that they could not support the club a bit, and maybe said something about it was not racist, but that the zero-tolerance line at least had been crossed'. The players also felt betrayed for the second time: 'How is it possible to say that it is not enough to prompt an investigation. Every incident that the whistleblower reported has been confirmed. What else is needed?'. The lack of action by the NFF was seen as an abdication of responsibility as a stakekeeper and also an further example of a powerful organization exerting its control over the policy agenda and successfully pushing the issue to the 'back burner'.

It is hard to be convicted for racist language. When discussing the result of this case with a NIF representative, he stressed that it is of major importance 'that the first incident is documented and reported'. Next, 'it must be followed up'. According to the NIF interviewee the threshold for action needed to be lowered as 'you cannot continue to call a player a monkey, if it results in a reaction, then you realize that this is not okay'. While this view was supported by a lawyer involved in the external investigation he commented 'a club's [policy of] zero tolerance of racism and the threshold of proof for conviction is far apart, it should be much clearer what is considered unacceptable language in football'. The NIF representative also argued strongly for the fact that 'it is not a human right to be a sports coach', an employee should be clear regarding expected standard of behaviour and work in an environment based on trust.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this case study we have analysed an example of whistleblowing in a case involving the use of racist language that took place in one Norwegian Premier Division Football Club and how the various stakeholders responded to the incident. The aims of the paper were: to examine: (1) the response of management and other stakeholders to the whistleblowing case; (2) the different stakeholders' roles and how those roles evolved as the case developed and (3) the factors that influenced stakeholder action, especially the action by the Board. Three phases were identified in the development of the case: first, the nature of the accusations and subsequent denial and rejection; second, the player's revolt; and third, the involvement of other stakeholders and the second internal review. The inadequacy of the management response is clearly evident. If the case had been dealt with properly in the first phase, if some of the staff or players had come forward sooner to support the whistleblower

the complaint could have been resolved (or at least have been less damaging) and the club would not have lost control of the narrative and had to manage the intense media interest and difficult relationships with sponsors. The *de jure* status of the Board as the stakeowner was steadily eroded due to the failure to take control of the issue and the unfolding narrative and thus reinforce their *de jure* stakeownership with *de facto* leadership (Abazi 2020; Doberstein and Charbonneau 2020; West and Bowman 2020).

In the first phase (see Table 2) the Board failed to act on the original complaint which allowed the dispute to escalate (Ravishankar 2003). In this messy phase, it is interesting to note that what started out as accusations of racism or the use of racist language, soon become an issue of harassment and a full-scale whistleblowing case in the media due to the lack of proof of racist language. However, the blurring of the local media's role as both a stakeowner (by virtue of closeness to the administration) and stakewatcher (the traditional media role) meant that when the sponsor expressed concern at the handling of the issue it placed considerable additional pressure on the Board to retreat from their initial attempt to dismiss the complaint. The media's pressure to reopen the case came only after it had been prepared to frame the issue as one of club morale rather than racism. It may be that the dual role of stakewatcher and part stakeowner posed an awkward dilemma for the sponsor as a severely critical approach would be damaging the business in which they had a direct stake.

The inaction by regulatory organisations (stakekeepers) contributed to the escalation of the dispute in the second and the third phases. During these two phases the Board failed to exercise effectively any of Lukes' three dimensions of power. Early in the dispute the subordinate contractual position of the players inhibited collective action and led the captain to accept the Board interpretation of the nature and seriousness of the issue. Initially, the management was able to control the agenda and stop the issue being brought to the full Board and to the attention of the club's main sponsors. However, the senior management's control of the agenda was undermined by the growing assertiveness of the players and the increasing interest (albeit muted) by the local media. Finally, the attempt to incorporate and normalize racist behaviour as culturally acceptable banter within a football club failed as it contradicted not only the collective identity of the players, but also the publicly stated positions of key stakewatchers (sponsor) and stakekeepers (NFF), even if the latter's involvement was slight. Not only did the club fail to control the narrative, they were forced to react to a narrative framed by the media and major sponsors. The case reveals the lack of clear protocols and systems and the inactivity of the management who only acknowledged the seriousness of the situation when it was too late. The lack of both these requirements resulted in damage to the organization's relationships with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders (Ravishankar 2003). It was not only an effective systems for dealing with whistleblowing that was lacking it was also the unwillingness of the management to address the issue, either through a hope that the issue would fade away or through a failure to recognize its seriousness and the damage it could do to the club if left unresolved.

Some stakeholders were conflicted by being both stakeowners and stakewatchers, but the failure to keep the Board informed before the issue became public simply led to a deeper crisis. In this case, the main sponsor pushed for a second investigation to get a better understanding of what had actually happened and within twelve months the sponsor had cancelled its relationship with the club.



**Table 2.** Stakeholders and event phases.

Category	Stakeowner	Primary stakeholder	Stakewatcher (interest/ pressure group)	Stakekeeper (regulator)	Stakeseeker (activists)
<b>Stakeholders</b>					
	The board	Players, support staff	Local media; sponsors	NIF; NFF	NISO
Phase 1: Accusations, denial and rejection	Informal investigation; rejection/ downplaying of complaint and supportive of coach	Critical of club decision; beginning to organise; contact made with NISO	Local media: <i>increased interest but still largely neutral</i> Sponsors: <i>neutral, but aware of risk/damage to reputation</i>	NIF: <i>non-interventionist culture; monitoring situation</i> NFF: <i>non-interventionist culture; did not open an investigation</i>	NISO: <i>activist culture; supportive of players/ whistleblower; contacted by seven players, but not asked to intervene</i>
Phase 2: Players' revolt and other stakeholder involvement	Formal investigation; attempt to redefine issue as team culture rather than racism; series of resignations from board	Increasingly active in support of whistleblower	Media: <i>more interested, but downplaying the allegations of racism</i> Sponsors: <i>passive: increasing concern regarding reputational damage and poor club handling of issue</i>	NIF: <i>monitoring situation, but expecting issue to be dealt with locally</i> NFF: <i>monitoring situation, expressed concern</i>	NISO: <i>alerted to the issue, but not called on to intervene</i>
Phase 3: Second investigation	Second, highly critical, report by law firm; club reports case to NFF	Players and whistleblower satisfied with second report	Media: <i>reporting events at the club but still down-playing racism aspect</i> Sponsors: <i>as under Phase 2, but major sponsor eventually severs link with club</i>	NIF: <i>monitoring situation, but expecting issue to be dealt with locally</i> NFF: <i>received report from club, but took no action</i>	NISO: <i>alerted by players, but no intervention</i>



In addition to the insights into the deficiencies of the main stakeowner, the Board, the case also highlights the role of the players and the support staff – stakeholder groups that should have been closely aligned with the Board. As the case progressed these two stakeholder groups moved from alignment with the Board to a position as active and critical stakeholders. Members of the team also involved an external stakeholder, NISO, which added to the pressure on the Board. Despite the hierarchical relationship between the players and the Board, the Board was forced to respond to their demands that the case be re-opened and that the issue of racist language be taken seriously. The position of the players was reinforced by that of the sponsors, especially one of the main sponsors – the local media which should have been in close alignment with the Board, not only because of the financial relationship, but because the sponsor had a seat on the Board and was, or at least should have been, close to the decision-making of the club.

The actions of the team and the impact that they had on the Board was, using Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) terminology, a reflection of the growing sense of urgency that justice had not been done, a reflection also of the legitimacy of their intervention and a realization of the power that they possessed collectively (in marked contrast to the weakness of the individual whistleblower). The actions of the media sponsor are equally complex as the media clearly possessed power as a stakeholder and both power and legitimacy as a sponsor. What was slow to develop was a sense of urgency which only developed when the issue of racism was gaining more attention both inside (from the team) and outside the club. The possession of both power and legitimacy characterize the role of NFF and NIF, but as with the media sponsor, the sense of urgency was slow to develop. In mitigation it might be claimed by both organisations that issues such as racist language should be dealt with at the club level and that intervention by national organisations should be a last resort. However, both organisations became involved in the case too late to avoid damage to the club and at a time when the case had become more acrimonious and complex. Perhaps both organisations were hoping, as the club had hoped, that the whistleblower and the issue would go away.

In conclusion, the case illustrates the vulnerability of stakeowners to challenge from other stakeholders if they fail to demonstrate their ownership through effective leadership. The Board had considerable resources at its disposal, but its response lacked urgency and failed to demonstrate legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders. By contrast, the players developed a high degree of homogeneity of interest and sense of urgency over time which, when added to their legitimacy as primary stakeholders, gave them sufficient power to shape the response of the Board. Most importantly, the case illustrates the particular challenge of whistleblowing in an organization characterized by a hierarchical and often authoritarian culture, particularly between coach and athlete.

## Note

1. Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) is an umbrella organization for sport and elite sport in Norway.

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