

Press release

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Belgian professional football: Strengthened social commitment despite negative financial balance sheet

Lorin Parys: *"Our clubs are taking their social commitment more than ever, despite the blows of the Covid crisis. Social investment increased by 28% compared to the pre-Covid level of 18/19. In 20/21 our clubs contributed almost € 2.3 million to around 300 local projects, reaching approximately 47.000 vulnerable people. We've invested € 2.4 million in women's football, a growth of 65%. Another € 50 million was committed to our youth academies. These numbers prove that - despite economic challenges in the sector-, we keep increasing our efforts to become the societal engine that can make a difference. And with the approval of the global plan 'Football First', our clubs are stepping up a gear in terms of mandatory investments in G-football teams for players with disabilities, women's soccer and youth training. As the biggest sport in the country, we also take on the responsibility that goes with that."*

Brussels – 19 July 2022 - Deloitte and the Pro League today issued the annual "Socio-economic impact study of the Pro League on the Belgian economy", a report that quantitatively and qualitatively measures the socio-economic impact generated by Belgian professional football. Although revenues dropped 22% in 20/21 in comparison to 19/20, partly induced by the plummeting ticket and fewer commercial revenues, Belgian professional football made an economic contribution of €962 million to our economy. The Belgian football industry created almost 4.500 jobs, 954 more than in the previous season. Despite the revenue drop, the clubs have kept investing in society through increased job creation as well as through social and sustainable projects.

Despite a serious fall in the clubs' operational revenues as well as profitability, the number of social projects is back to pre-COVID. In 2021, our clubs supported a total of 296 projects, in line with the 300 projects organised and supported in 2019. For example, in 20/21 18 G- football teams were active at Pro League clubs. Next to that, clubs have invested € 2,4 million in professional women's football in 2021, an increase of 65% compared to last year. The investments enhance the growing importance of women's football. The national investment and increased visibility of the Scoore Super League through the Pro League agreement with Eleven matches the increasing awareness and momentum of this month's 2022 European Football Championship.

Furthermore, investments in youth academies have remained stable in comparison to 19/20, underlining the strategic value of youth identification/development in the clubs' operating model. As a result, they are providing more young players (294) with a professional contract (+7%). More younger players also require more support. In 20/21, the clubs employed a total of 795 people who worked exclusively for the youth academies.

Even though very few matches were played in front of spectators, the clubs have maintained a strong relationship with their fanbase by developing their digital strategy allowing them to customize their content and messaging according to the targeted audience. These efforts have resulted in accelerated growth of social media followers to 7,9 million. The number of fan clubs has also grown, to 466.

Tackling climate change and discrimination

Sustainability is an emerging trend in (European) football and is also gaining importance in Belgium. Royale Union SG is one of the clubs that has made its mark by embedding sustainability in its operating model. It became the first Belgian sports organisation to join the United Nations Sports for Climate Action Programme. This means R. Union SG commits to halving its CO2 emissions by 2030 and becoming climate neutral by 2040.

To improve the dialogue and collaboration between fans and clubs, initiatives have been set in place to stimulate positive fan behaviour in Belgian football both in a proactive and reactive way. A good example of this is the Pro League's strategic partnership with Kazerne Dossin. This museum, memorial, and research centre in Mechelen strives to raise awareness of racism, exclusion, and discrimination because of origin, faith, conviction, skin color, gender or orientation.

Financial losses, yet big economic impact

Financially, Belgian football clubs have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Overall operating revenue decreased by a staggering 22% or €82,8 million in the 20/21 season compared to 19/20. This revenue drop falls well within the range of 21% to 33% that was predicted in last year's Deloitte report.

Ticketing and commercial revenues plummeted, down 64% and 58% respectively, due to nearly all matches being played behind closed doors. The slowdown in the global transfer market led to a significantly lower, but yet still positive, net transfer result, decreasing from €109,2 million in 19/20 to €38,1 million in 20/21.

Payroll costs rose in 20/21. This was caused in the first place by a surge in the number of football players, and a raise of the gross average yearly salary, which rose from €249.000 to €266.000. This resulted in a 6,2% higher salary cost for players compared to last year, amounting to €327,7 million. Furthermore, we've noticed an increase of almost 70% of the direct job growth (+ 461) The payroll cost for staff increased from €84 million last year to €87,8 million. It shows that the clubs, despite the pandemic, continued investing in their staff and programmes on a long-term basis.

Sam Sluismans, Partner at Deloitte Belgium: *"As predicted last year, Belgian clubs were dealt a blow by the pandemic. Revenues are down and costs are up. Yet, they play an important part in our economy, have successfully engaged their fanbase, and kept investing in their people. The dependency of our clubs on traditional revenue streams, ticketing and commercial revenues, highlights the need for business model innovation in the sports industry. Revenue streams need to be diversified to ultimately develop sustainable and resilient business models."*

Despite the pandemic, Belgian professional football has made an economic contribution of €962 million to Belgium's economy thereby creating 4.493 jobs. In last year's report, the economic contribution reached €1.25 billion. This drop is due to the plunge in both operating revenues and net transfer results, which whipped out the growth of the previous three seasons. In addition, for the season 20/21, €89 million was transferred to the state treasury through the various tax mechanisms, driven by a growing contribution to both payroll taxes and social security charges.

The impending consequences of falling out of the UEFA ranking

By falling out of the Top 10 UEFA country ranking, Belgian teams risk losing the fastest-growing revenue stream in European football (i.e. UEFA prize money). The number of entrance places is in danger of decreasing and our clubs will also have to participate in European competitions earlier and earlier, against weaker opponents. The most striking risk is the loss of the direct qualifying ticket for the 23/24 UEFA Champions League group stage.

About the survey

Numbers in the report are based on data from the annual reports of the Pro League and its 25 clubs (in the 20/21 season) unless stated otherwise to describe the revenue and cost evolution. Using economic indicators made available by the Belgian Federal Planning Bureau, Deloitte has quantified the economic impact of the clubs. The case studies are based on qualitative interviews performed with the selected clubs. [You can find the full report here.](#)

Deloitte in Belgium

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About Pro League Football & Community

Building on its social role, the Pro League supports the professional football clubs in the development of their community and social programs. The support comes through bi-monthly meetings, continuous exchange of best practices and yearly training programmes for the clubs in collaboration with the academic world.

The purpose of this support is to ensure that there is a strong and sustainable local community program for all clubs. These professional clubs, together with local authorities and social partners, offer a social program for target groups in the area, both local and supra-local .

Furthermore, the Pro League organises several national awareness-raising initiatives in collaboration with governments: the Christmas initiative, an action to collect funds for social partner YOUNITED Belgium, a national school tournament for primary schools. Next to this, in collaboration with its partners, the Pro League is currently investigating the possibility to launch an initiative supporting refugee minors.

The Pro League and its partners are the driving force behind the Football Kick Off, an annual football tournament for youth with a disability.