

# Managing Strategies of Professional Football Clubs in Thailand for Increasing Fan Clubs

■ Sumeth Suwanphrom

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to study influencing factors of building fan clubs for professional football clubs in Thailand, and the making and implementing of strategies for increasing fan clubs for professional football clubs in Thailand. In this study, the researcher used an applied research method using mixed methodologies of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. In the quantitative research approach, a Likert scale questionnaire was used on a group of samples, who are 412 participants from a field of executives (club executives, club presidents, club managers) and a field of non-executives (supporters, players and football journalists) through an analysis of frequency and standard deviation. As for the qualitative research approach, 13 in-depth interviews were conducted. The result found that there were 3 factors influencing fan club management of professional football clubs, which are 1) motivation between the clubs and their attendances and fan clubs, 2) marketing, and 3) club loyalty. The result also finds that there are 10 factors in the managing strategies of professional football clubs for increasing fan clubs and attendances which are 1) strategies and concepts of increasing fan club management, 2) how high executive leaders manage increasing fan club strategies, 3) social responsibility strategies, 4) planning strategies for driving fan club management strategies, 5) communicating strategies into practice, 6) fan club and attendance focus, 7) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management to support fan club management strategies, 8) club personnel focus, 9) strategic management, and 10) strategic outcome in fan club management.*

**Keywords:** managing strategies, professional football, fan club

## Introduction

Football has been a popular sport for all levels of domestic and foreign viewers, estimately, around 3,429,871 total viewers for the world cup (World Cup, 2010). It began in Europe before becoming a popular sport in Asia. Football came to Thailand in the reign of King Chulalongkorn the Great or Rama V.

Football has been one of the important components of Thai society. For example, millions of citizens actively follow the World Cup all the time because it is an exciting and attractive tournament **to show new tactics, techniques, and great physical fitness. All of them made a football game to be always exciting and impressive (Boonyasatit, 2005).** Thailand has seen sports **as important** for careers, especially professional football, so the government put this topic **into the national policy** approved by the cabinet in the **Third (2002-2006) and the Fourth (2006-2011) National Sport Development Plan, and the Fourth Year Plan of National Sport Development (2005-2008).** In a part of national professional football development, the Football Association of Thailand collaborated with private sectors

to provide football tournaments. In 1990, the Football Association of Thailand and SS professional 88 Co., Ltd., under Thansettakij Co., Ltd. conducted the first semi-pro football tournament, Thailand Semi-Pro League, and it was the first step to be a professional football league. In 1996, the Johnnie Walker Thailand Soccer League was first formally formed by the Football Association of Thailand in collaboration with Richmond (Bangkok) Ltd. and IMG Services (Thailand) Ltd. For the league system, the 1996/97 Thai Premier League consisted of 18 teams. It might also be observed that there have been some problems in professional football development, such as under the association football in Asia, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), clubs have to be a corporate club with their own stadium and AFC Coaching Certificate coaches. In addition, their fan clubs and attendances were still a problem to handle.

Worawi Makudi, the President Football association of Thailand (interview, March 6, 2009) said that the main cause to turn football to professional football in 2009 was to rename the old Johnnie Walker Thailand League to the new official name, Thai Premier League, because of the arrival of AFC to strictly take control of Thai professional football. Asian Football Confederation (AFC) criteria that because most of Thai football clubs could not pass the AFC four main criteria as follows.

1. There were not enough attendances, so the clubs could not receive enough gate fees.
2. The clubs had no annual statement.
3. The budget and marketing of the operating division could not pass AFC criteria.
4. Clubs did not completely register as a corporate club or professional club.

Ronnarit Suewaja (2009), Marketing Director of Muang Tong United Football Club stated that Thai professional football clubs had been developing their operations, although there was a limitation of budget, club personnel, and support from the government sector. Not only do all clubs placed importance on their players who bring a win to their clubs, but the clubs also place importance on their fan clubs as attendances and a source of club revenue.

Ronnarit Suewaja (2009) added that fan club management extremely depended on knowledge management and marketing. In the part of management, clubs should have good skills of planning, club management, leadership, and evaluation in harmony with Kimio Kase et al. (2007) who found that successful management of the Real Madrid football club was as follows.

1. A number of attendances
2. Club's logo recognition
3. Economic and social characteristics of attendances
4. Increasing relationship of local attendances

According to this model, many club executives valued the importance of efficient fan club management under the 5 Ladders of Customer Loyalty in the highest step that was a customer could be a partner or a participant in a product or service. Pongsataporn and Laohapattanawong, 2007).

At the present, there has been no obvious paper about the fan club management of professional football clubs in Thailand, and there has also been no systematic integration (Worawi, 2009). In order to find the fact on fan club management, the researcher had inspiration to find out about this topic, and the result of this study is coming with the strategies for fan club management of professional football clubs which is appropriate in the

Thai social context. Besides, this upcoming result is going to be useful to any person who relates to Thai professional football management, such as the Sports Authority of Thailand, the Football Association of Thailand, football clubs, hosts and sponsors, and also to improve Thai professional sport in the future.

There were some researches relating to the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs. Richard (2000) said that the heart of football, in its historical and social background, was the heart of world sport. It came with spectator cultures of football attendances, especially in Europe and Latin America. While Richard and Armstrong (2000) collected 27 scholars' articles which were published in a book, and most of the papers in this book were about identity analysis and postmodern football culture. Hall (2003) studied the revenue of football business, and found that most of the economists in the US believed that football business could make huge revenue. Ozawa, Cross, and Henderson (2004) who studied the market orientation and financial performance of English football clubs and found that no financially successful club has a low market orientation score, however, suggesting that the marketing behaviors measured are necessary, but not sufficient conditions. This conclusion suggests that clubs would be ill advised to go beyond sound marketing operations to develop the full market orientation philosophy. Kern and Sussmuth (2005) studied the managerial efficiency in German top league soccer in case of an econometric analysis of club performances on and off the pitch with the stochastic technique in a pitch survey by the evaluation of club's sport products because it was a must to evaluate some factors before the coming of a new season. These factors were gate fee and the wage of players and coaches. Gerrard (2005) studied factor characteristics which were useful for professional sport club efficiency, and found that the basic factor to support club revenue was the money that the club received from a donation. problems of Thai national football

Tingsaphat (1997) studied "An Indicator of Thai Sport Development: Sport Development for Careers", and found that there were 10 indicators of sport development for careers and 43 important characteristics as follows: 1) 5 important characteristics of athlete's capability, 2) 2 important characteristics of popularity, 3) 6 important characteristics of sport organization, 4) 10 important characteristics of club personnel, 5) 7 important characteristics of revenue, 6) 3 important characteristics of pitches, 7) 4 important characteristics of sport laws, 8) 2 important characteristics of competition operation, 9) 2 important characteristics of media and advertisements, and 10) 2 important characteristics of professional athlete welfare.

Rattanasri (1997) studied "A Study of Professional Football Sport in Thailand", and the result was as follows. 1) Professional football in Thailand could achieve its goals at a high level. 2) There was advertisement tracking on its environment and competition operation at 95.42 percent 3) Equipment and facilities were not enough at 92.95 percent. 4) Training grounds were not in a standard condition at 68.94 percent. And 5) Referees could not control a game and run a match properly at 93.31 percent.

## Purpose of the Study

1. To study influencing factors in building fan clubs for professional football clubs in Thailand.
2. To study the making of implementing strategies for increasing fan clubs for professional football clubs in Thailand.

## Methodology

The researcher designed the research methodology as follows.

### **Step 1: Conceptual framework**

The researcher analyzed the content through the concept of content analysis from an in-depth interview of professional football experts, mass media, football managers, coaches, and fan clubs.

### **Step 2: Attendance and fan club survey**

The researcher took a survey of attendances and fan clubs in Thai professional football league at the moment, and also successful leagues such as, J League (Japan) and K League (Korea).

### **Step 3: Interviews**

The researcher interviewed the fans and experts in order to get some information to create a research tool. These people were representative samples, experts, sponsors, hosts, and related person.

### **Step 4: The making of research tool**

The researcher presented the tool that was created from the interview information to 5 experts in order that the tool could be matched with reliability and found the item-objective congruence index.

### **Step 5: Data collection**

There were 2 questionnaires for data collection from 20 official football clubs. The first one was for 400 fan clubs and the second one was for 30 related people: experts, club executives, mass media, competition operation boards, sponsors, and fan clubs. This step was to ask for some information about the making of implementing of strategies for increasing fan clubs for professional football clubs in Thailand.

### **Step 6: Result and discussion**

After information analysis, the result was in the progress of discussion and public hearing. Some related person: football experts, football executives, competition operation boards, football journalists, supporters and fans were invited to listen and discuss.

### **Step 7: Conclusion**

In this step, the result was proposed to be the implementing strategies for increasing fan clubs for professional football clubs in Thailand.

### **Sample**

The representative sample was divided into 2 groups. The first one was some experts who consisted of sport experts, sponsors, and football journalists. The second one was some football experienced attendees consisted of attendees, members of fan clubs, and others, who were interested in professional football in an organization related to professional football following the number of samples in each step of the methodology with purposive sampling.

The population and sample were as follows.

1. The representative sample for verifying the quality of the tool

Related population	Quantity
Experts and a scholar	3
Football journalists	2
Total	5

2. The representative sample for data collection of influencing factors in building a fan club for professional football clubs in Thailand

Related population	Quantity
Fan club members and others who are related with the fan clubs	400
Total	400

3. The representative sample for data collection on the making of implementing strategies for increasing fan clubs for professional football clubs in Thailand

Related population	Quantity
Experts and scholars	5
Executives and managers of football clubs	6
Competition operation boards	2
Football journalists	5
Marketing sponsors	2
Fan of football clubs	10
Total	30

4. The representative sample of public hearing

Related population	Quantity
Experts	2
Professional football clubs	2
Competition operation organization	2
Football journalists	2
Marketing sponsors	2
Fans of football clubs	10
Total	20

## Data Collection Tools

This research consisted of 2 data collection tools, questionnaire and in-depth interview form.

### 1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was created by the researcher in order to interview a group of executives, scholars, football journalists, and football experienced persons for their attitudes about the present conditions, problems, and needs of Thai professional football development. The questionnaire was created by these 3 steps below.

a. The researcher specified the main topics of data collection through the research concept in order to get the whole of the influencing factors that are the government's policy and support, capability of athletes and club personnel, attendance's favorite, club personnel, club management, competition operation, exploitation and privilege, and mass media.

b. The researcher created the questionnaire and the lists of the influencing factors. This questionnaire was a rating scale questionnaire with 5 Likert scales that were 5,4,3,2, and 1 respectively.

c. The questionnaire was presented to the 5 experts for quality checking of validity until matched the item-objective congruence Index.

### 2. In-depth interview form

The form was an in-depth interview about professional football in Thailand with the patterns that consisted of current conditions, problems, and the building of attendances and fan clubs which related to the government's policy and support, capability of athletes and club personnel, attendance's favorite, club personnel, club management, competition operation, exploitation and privilege, mass media, laws, and welfare.

## Results

This result found that the main topic of the influencing factors in managing fan clubs of professional football clubs in Thailand consisted of 1) the motivation between the clubs and their attendances and fan clubs, 2) marketing mix, and 3) club loyalty. The details are as follows.

The overall picture of attitudes on the motivation factors which influenced the management of fan clubs of professional football clubs in Thailand was at a highest level at the average 3.56. The highest average factor was the privilege of the club members at the average 3.96 if considered of each item. Club activities, such as club anthem rehearsal and fan club friendly match, came second at the average 3.94.

The overall picture of attitudes on the marketing mix which influenced the motivation of fan clubs to be a professional football club member was at a high level at the average 3.55. The highest average factor was the performance of the teams at the average 4.04 if considered of each item. The standard of a football match operation came second at the average 4.02.

The overall picture of attitudes on the club loyalty was at a high level at the average 3.71. The highest average factor was the reinforcement of belonging feelings and emotions to drive their clubs to be a successful club at the average 4.02 if considered of each item. The reinforcement of feelings and emotions against club gossip and calumny came second at the average 4.00.

## Motivation

### 1) Club and fan club interaction

The interaction between clubs and their attendances and fan clubs were an exchange, product or souvenir buying at the club's booths, an opinion exchange through communication channels, such as the club's leaflet, website, and web board, participation on the club's activities, such as club anthem rehearsal and fan club friendly match, and the privilege of the club members.

### 2) Personal relations between clubs and fan clubs

The reinforcement of personal feelings and emotions to be familiar with club executives, players, and club personnel, the provision of employment related to the clubs, the building of fan clubs around the club's region, and continuous participation of the club assembled activities were attendances and fan club personal relation to the clubs.

### 3) Attendance and fan club confidence in club's board

The confidence in the club's board of the attendances and fan clubs was built from clear club policies and a method that the board managed the club. The executive board should be the same team to manage the club continuously. The board should have leadership and emphasized on participatory management. There must be a proper club restructuring and management. The executives should be reinforced to have experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities of club management, communication, and public relations. Moreover, the club should be advertised through media in order to get more fan clubs, this was including of the club, player, and staff reputation management, and sponsor management.

## Marketing mix

### 1) Products

The products consisted of good team performance, club advertisement to be in a leading level, big name and skillful player signing, local player development and scouting, club academy player development, big name and famous coach approach, attractive team performance development, management development, notified and easy to remember club kits, excited and fun cheering environment, various and famous souvenir management, and fan club facilities, such as fan club free coach and fan club meeting point.

### 2) Gate fee

Gate fee management was proper. The club member fee was proper. Club souvenir management accorded with its quality. Food and beverage prices were proper. Club service was worth enough to be a fan club or club member.

### 3) Place

The clubs had to expand their stadiums to be big enough for attendances and fan clubs and to match the AFC standard with good security system and enough car parks. The clubs had to provide comfortable travel with many gateways and well traffic management on a match day in order to **reduce** the traffic jam problem. There should have **food and beverage** stalls near the stadium. **Besides**, a match should be held in proper time for a comfortable travel of attendances and fan clubs.

### 4) Match quality

A football match should be fun with its quality, player's discipline, and the standard of referees.

### **5) Social and family interaction**

Understanding and relation reinforcement for a family member influenced fan club decision. There was relationship reinforcement through friends in order to influence an attendance to be a fan club (added more fan clubs through their friends). More than that, to be a fan club reinforced the fan clubs to spend their time together to interact with others and let them get the feeling of acceptance.

### **6) Entertainment**

Not only the attendances and fan clubs were reinforced to watch a football match professionally in order to get the real match feeling, there also was cheering activities that were developed to hold between the match or on a half time.

### **7) Sales promotion**

There were match advertisements and public relations on attendances and fan clubs as well as regular participatory activities and social responsibilities. There also were annual souvenir activities and travel discounts for away matches with the live important match on free TV, cable TV, local cable TV, or on the internet. Clubs had their journals for advertising their news and updates through Facebook, Hi5, and Twitter. Moreover, there was a special discount for fan clubs to get a cheaper gate fee, and live score SMS.

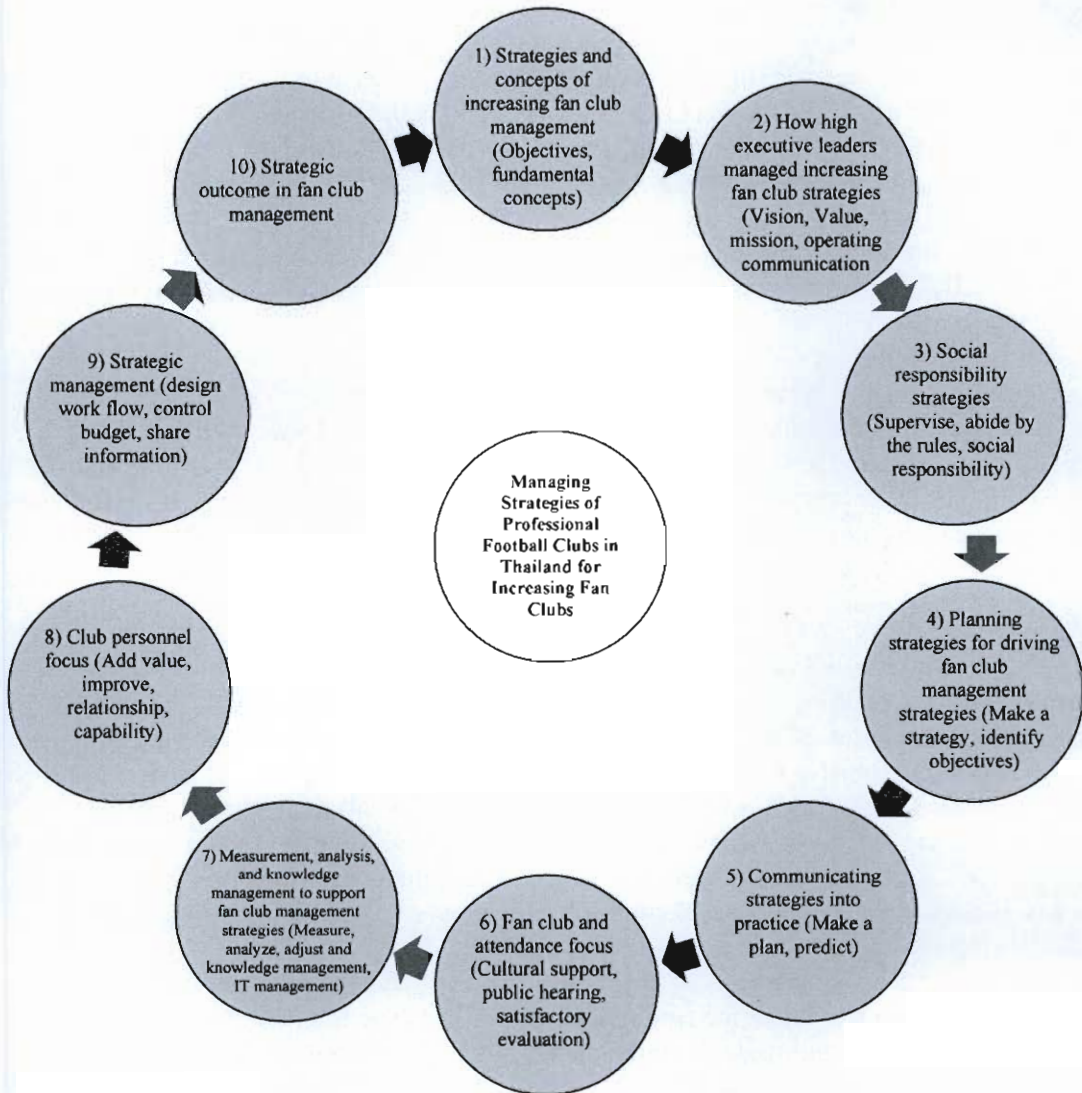
### **Club Loyalty**

Club loyalty was the factors that influenced attendances and fan club's attitude and participatory feelings on professional football. These factors consisted of attention reinforcement to watch all the games of their favorite club, participatory feeling reinforcement, supportive feeling reinforcement, concerning feeling reinforcement, dedicated feeling reinforcement to dedicate self-happiness for the club success, unhappy feeling reinforcement to club gossip and calumny, constant and honest feeling reinforcement to be a real fan club even unimpressive team performance, club maintenance feeling reinforcement to be a lifelong member, club's goal confidence and trust reinforcement, and sacrifice reinforcement for club's success.

After the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs were adjusted under the recommendation of the experts and football journalists, the researcher divided the strategies into 2 parts, suitability and possibility, and found that the proper and possible strategic factors consisted of 10 factors which were 1) strategies and concepts of increasing fan club management, 2) how high executive leaders managed increasing fan club strategies, 3) social responsibility strategies, 4) planning strategies for driving fan club management strategies, 5) communicating strategies into practice, 6) fan club and attendance focus, 7) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management to support fan club management strategies, 8) club personnel focus, 9) strategic management, and 10) strategic outcome in fan club management.

It could be concluded that the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs were proper and possible as follows.





**Figure 1** The managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The study of the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs had some interested topics to discuss as follows.

**1) Strategies and concepts of increasing fan club management**

The managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs must stick with its important fundamental concepts and identify objectives which accord with its strategic management because the objective and strategic management identification which the clubs identify are such a compass and concept to lead the clubs to succeed. This concept conforms to the finding of Ozawa, Cross, and Henderson (2004) who

studied the market orientation and financial performance of English football clubs and found that no financially successful club has a low market orientation score, however, suggesting that the marketing behaviors measured are **necessary**, but not **sufficient** conditions. This conclusion suggests that clubs would be ill advised to go beyond sound marketing operations to develop the full market orientation philosophy.

## **2) How high executive leaders managed increasing fan club strategies**

A method that high executive leaders manage the increasing of fan club strategies can make changes and sustainability to the clubs. This is including of the overall operation achievement through laws, ethics, and social responsibilities. Moreover, it's about social support, which the high executive leaders must pay attention to if they want their clubs sustainability. Club and fan club management means the club mission responsible which harmonizes with Pitter (1993), who discussed some influential effects of the parliament on Alberta sport development that key person, organization factors, and Alberta's social and politic characteristics influenced events leading to the establishment of Alberta Sports. That is the managing strategies for fan club management depended on the high executive leaders to specify club's vision and value in increasing fan clubs.

## **3) Social responsibility strategies**

The clubs, with social and local responsibilities, must pay attention to social happiness and benefit as a part of the strategies. So the operation is brought into this level that is the clubs' strategies must bring the local good life and affluent environment, or support and build the sustainable community. Moreover, the clubs have to pay their attention on social responsibilities as a professional football club. This concept supported Chulalongkorn University study (2004) that the roadmap of professional football depended on the continuous athlete development from youth level to national level, and there must have a competition of all levels, such as youth league, in order for continuous development through professional club operations.

## **4) Planning strategies for driving fan club management strategies**

Planning strategies for driving fan club management strategies is a method to lead fan club management to a new level of management to the wanted vision in the future. So the plan must cover all factors in order to be a framework of the future management, and it must cover all potential factors to achieve maximum benefits. Fan club strategic planning must specify its vision, mission, objective, strategy, plan, and project to drive through practical level. However, the clubs should consider fan club integration and participation in which the strategies are made. This concept harmonizes with the finding of Voravit Patanaitikul (1996). The finding showed that a great popular football program at that time had clear marketing orientation, operation, and management. Moreover, Kern and Sussmuth (2005) found that a football league could be run efficiently through strong techniques, and efficient fundamental factor evaluation had an influence on its economic affairs.

## **5) Communicating strategies into practice**

The clubs must realize how the strategies can be transferred for practicing efficiently under a proper method in the same way. So the strategic transferring from organization level to practice level is very important. Although the clubs have good fan club building strategies, the strategies still cannot be evaluated if they cannot be used. The unmindful personnel in this participatory method also wastes their club budget and time, this is in harmony with the study of Faculty of Sport Science, Chulalongkorn University (2004). The study found that

the operating division had to coordinate with all of mass media when there was a competition in order to support in advertising or persuading more attendances, and both government and private sectors should get involved in the advertisement, public relations, and propagation support.

#### **6) Fan club and attendance focus**

The managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs must focus on fan clubs. It is a method that the clubs can make the relationship with their fan clubs focused on their fan club's need. Relation building and loyalty expression through the fan club support also focused on relationship as one of the answers in the total strategies with continuous development and evaluation. The clubs must create their cultural cheering and watching that bases on their fan clubs with efficient satisfaction evaluation, since it means their sustainable survival and progress if they can deal with that feedback. This model accords with the study of Faculty of Sport Science, Chulalongkorn University (2004). The study concluded that the methods of professional football development were to advertise football a lot and exaggerate its good qualities in order to get a lot of public attention for it included of serious fan club or local attendance building and professional sport culture making.

#### **7) Measurement, analysis, and knowledge management to support fan club management strategies**

The managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs in the factor of measurement, analysis, and knowledge management to support fan club management strategies is the club main factor. This factor acts as the club's brain or center of harmonizing between practice and club strategic objectives in order to drive the club to improve and increase the efficiency of the sustainable fan club making in all factors. The important topic is that the clubs must rely on facts, knowledge research and management to lead them to be an efficient strategy management club. In addition, the clubs must continually review their strategic achievement for lessons learned, systematic reproduction, and complete development system.

#### **8) Club personnel focus**

The managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs must stick with the strategies that focus on their personnel. The clubs can keep their good overall operation through their strategies with their personnel's capability and their attitude to the club strategies. Then the clubs must make their personnel to be familiar with their strategies in order that the personnel can be familiar with changes and can drive the club's objectives. However, the clubs must realize of the correlation between strategic operation and personnel's works. This model harmonizes with the operation concept that emphasized on the strategies of Rattanasri (1997). The concept showed that the problem of Thailand league professional football operation in 1996 with a part of competition operation, place, training equipments and facilities, and personnel was at high level. In a part of its referees, the problem that the referees couldn't control the game properly was at 93.31. So the main factor was personnel's capability in management.

#### **9) Strategic management**

The managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs must have main managing strategies in fan club management. So the clubs can focus on importance, protection, exploitation from their personnel's capability for the club success,

sustainability, and especially emergency preparation in order to be confident that the clubs can operate the strategies continuously. This model harmonizes with Richard's words (2000). He stated that the key of football in the historical and social way was the evolution to lead football to the world sport and lead to be spectacular cultures. In Europe and Latin America, football stadium was the special thing that can be touched with mood and the players and attendances social control, and this phenomenon also expanded to the management of finance, marketing, and broadcasting. In the other hand, players can promote themselves from the local hero to be a sport or a national hero. Moreover, football can show attendance's ethnic characteristics, sexual characteristics, and their attitudes.

#### **10) Strategic outcome in fan club management**

The managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs focus on strategic management. Its result pays attention on sustainable management. In the issue of fan clubs, its result must consist of products, attendances, finance and marketing, personnel, operation efficiency, club's management, and overall social responsibility in order to develop and improve the club's unsuccessful objectives. This model harmonizes with the study of Kosinka (2005) on a success factor of Thailand league professional football. The result of the study showed that there consisted of 7 factors as follows: 1) budget and politics, 2) players, 3) coaches, 4) public relations, 5) referees, 6) fan clubs, and 7) club and competition operation.

### **Recommendations**

There are important recommendations for research and development through the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs as follows.

1. There should have a study of the problem under the real situation practicing of the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs.
2. Football is one of the important factors in bringing about happiness of Thai society. So the government should have a policy about professional football in order to support it to be matched the AFC's standard.
3. There should have club's personnel improvement to be responsible for their works and full-time fan club strategies.
4. The government sector and the Football Association of Thailand should commission research in order to bring about cheering culture of professional football in Thai social context.

In the end, the researcher would recommend the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs in order to be a key for success of Thai professional football, which is going forward to the well-known and successful league in the future at an international level. For the clubs, the executives must pay their attention on the strategies in order to increase attendances and fan clubs every match while they can also keep their royal fan club not to be less. Moreover, the clubs should study and make their fan club strategy seriously with the fan club database and systematic fan club management because the money in professional football business comes from fan club's support and regular attendance. Then the clubs should run the managing strategies of professional football clubs in Thailand for increasing fan clubs through a participatory method between the clubs and their fan clubs in all of the steps.

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