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Teamwork 2, Big Bucks 0



THE JOY OF VICTORY: The Ironi Kiryat Shmona soccer team celebrates another win

IN AN ERA WHEN RUSSIAN, ARABIAN GULF AND American billionaires bankroll soccer teams, big bucks buy the best players. The 10 European soccer teams with the biggest budgets have won 43 of 50 league titles in the past decade in England, France, Italy, Germany and Spain, according to management consultants Deloitte.

That is why a modest soccer team from Kiryat Shmona is creating a stir in Israel and getting noticed abroad.

On January 24, Ironi Kiryat Shmona defeated Hapoel Tel Aviv to win the Toto Cup – the second straight year the team from the country's northernmost city has taken the trophy. By mid-February, the Kiryat Shmona team was 12 points clear at the top of the Israeli Premier League, after 26 matches. The “New York Times” marveled at how this team from “a hardscrabble place with a population of 23,000... only a few kilometers from the Lebanese border, repeatedly in the crossfire of Arab-Israeli strife” could become “the runaway leader of Israel’s top league.”

Kiryat Shmona spends 17 million shekels (\$4.6 m.) a year, most of it on salaries, while Hapoel Tel Aviv, second in the league, spends nearly three times more.

What is Kiryat Shmona’s secret? Apparently its owner, millionaire entrepreneur Izzy Sheratzky. He made a fortune found-

ing Ituran, a company that helps locate stolen cars with Global Positioning System technology. Thirteen years ago Sheratzky was moved by TV images of Katyusha rockets pounding Kiryat Shmona and decided to do something for the long-suffering city. He bought two moribund local soccer teams, merged them, and instead of buying star players – though he does invest eight million shekels of his own money yearly – patiently invested in an academy for young players, which now has a roster of over 500.

Sheratzky predicted that his team would one day win the Premier League. Team manager Ran Ben-Shimon has built a solid defensive formation and, as a result, it has conceded just 12 goals this season, the lowest in the league by far, against 35 goals scored. Ben-Shimon has welded a selfless team spirit from

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a group of journeymen, foreigners and youngsters, including six Israeli Arab players.

I calculated the correlation coefficient between the number of points gained this year by each of the 16 Premier League teams and the size of their budgets. The correlation is zero. Why, then, do the wealthy team owners continue to sink big sums in their teams, hiring overpaid stars?

These owners are clever businesspeople. Maccabi Tel Aviv owner Mitch Goldhaber is a billionaire Canadian real estate developer. The team budget, much of it from Goldhaber’s own pockets, tops the league at 88 million shekels (\$23.7 m.), five times Kiryat Shmona. Yet Maccabi languishes in eighth place.

Kiryat Shmona is not the only low-budget high-achieving team. Third-place Ashdod spends even less (15 million shekels or \$4.04 m.) than Kiryat Shmona. Bnei Sakhnin and Bnei Yehuda spend a minuscule 12 m.-12.5 m. shekels (\$3.23-\$3.26 m.), close to the permitted minimum, yet are in fourth and fifth place.

The ability to defeat big bucks through teamwork is not confined to Israeli soccer. “In Germany and England right now, the clubs with the money are having their reputations burned by the competitive spirit of opponents who simply refuse to roll over and be beaten,” notes Rob Hughes in the “New York Times.”

I am pulling for Kiryat Shmona to win the Israeli premiership. If they do, they will qualify to play in Europe’s Championship League, with possible matches against giants like Barcelona and Manchester United. Kiryat Shmona are unlikely to win, but they will play hard, without fear or inferiority, proving that sport is still about team spirit, teamwork, pride and passion, and not just about big bucks. ●

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