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Controlling a Top Soccer Team Without Actually Buying One

It's because of soccer's laissez-faire regulations that Mendes enjoys huge influence over Real Madrid.

BY GABRIELE MARCOTTI

Jorge Mendes is an agent who doesn't live in Madrid. But it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why the former semi-professional soccer player, DJ and nightclub owner might feel that the Spanish capital is very much his town.

Mendes represents three important players at Atletico Madrid: Tiago, Diego Costa and Radamel Falcao. He also has Ruben Micael, currently on loan at Braga. And it is across town at Real Madrid where his presence is really felt. Cristiano Ronaldo, the man challenging Lionel Messi for the unofficial crown of world's greatest player, is a Mendes client. So are two more regulars, Pepe and Angel di Maria, and two reserves, Fabio Coentrao and Ricardo Carvalho. Even Real Madrid's manager, Jose Mourinho, is a Mendes man.

It isn't unheard of for a single superagent to represent a big chunk of one team. But it is extremely rare for him to also manage the manager.

What this means is that Mendes's role at Real Madrid may be unprecedented at the highest level of soccer—and possibly all of sports.

In some other sports leagues, such as the NBA, Mendes's situation is expressly forbidden because of the potential for conflicts of interest. Imagine if the same agent represented Kobe Bryant, Pau Gasol and Metta World Peace, plus Los Angeles Lakers coach Mike D'Antoni, and you begin to understand why. Soccer, however, remains largely unregulated in this regard.

With Mendes, it isn't just the quantity of clients, but also the

quality. Then there is the fact that Real Madrid is among the biggest clubs in the world by any metric.

Placing a transfer value on players is tricky and subjective, but it isn't a stretch to suggest that his Real Madrid clients alone approach the \$500 million mark. The Atletico crew is less lucrative, but Falcao also has a buyout clause in his contract of about \$78 million.

Indeed, the recent [Globe Soccer Awards](#) in Dubai were an ode to Mendes's hegemony. Falcao won Player of the Year; Atletico Madrid won Team of the Year; Mourinho won both Coach of the Year and an award for being the biggest media attraction in soccer. And Mendes himself won Agent of the Year—for the third straight year.

These awards aren't the oldest or most prestigious in the game—it sometimes feels as if baubles are handed out based on whoever shows up—but they're still a decent bellwether of soccer clout.

And there is little question that Mendes's influence is outsize and unmatched. At Real Madrid, it is becoming an issue that could turn messy as contractual and personnel issues come to the fore. Further complicating matters is the club's unusual structure.

At most clubs, the coach works with a general-manager figure to decide personnel matters. Usually, the general manager gets his way, pending final approval from the chief executive and/or president. But Real Madrid hasn't had a traditional general manager since Jorge Valdano, who often failed to see eye-to-eye with Mourinho, left the club in 2011. Mourinho now answers directly to Jose Angel Sanchez, the club's de facto CEO.

So what does this mean? Take



Ronaldo, who has expressed interest in extending and revising his contract, which expires in June 2015. There is no question that he deserves a new deal and a raise. The questions are how much, and who makes that decision. Ordinarily, the CEO, general manager and manager would huddle together, with the chief executive consulting the bean-counters and having ultimate say. But here, there is no general manager, and the manager and player share the same agent. It isn't an untenable situation, of course, but it is far from ideal.

Such is Mendes's status as a superagent that there seems to be no limit to what he might do.

The most fanciful—but theoretically possible—theory is that one day he'll package a bunch of his clients with Mourinho and offer a giant bulk deal to one lucky club, perhaps some nouveau-riche entity with a billionaire owner looking to make an instant splash. With a bit of foresight, he could assemble an impressive Mendes United team (managed by Mourinho, of course) without breaking the bank in transfer fees.

Mendes rose to the top of the soccer world because he's good at what he does. But it's because of soccer's existing laissez-faire regulations that Mendes now enjoys huge influence over Real Madrid's affairs.

—Gabriele Marcotti is the world soccer columnist for the Times of London and a regular broadcaster for the BBC.