



**HAIL THE CHAMPS:** Diego Costa of Atletico Madrid celebrates winning the La Liga with team-mates after the 1-1 draw with Barcelona at the Camp Nou on Saturday  
Picture: GETTY IMAGES

# Atletico prove sceptics wrong

But such achievers are an endangered species

THE beauty of sport is that occasionally it does not follow the rules. The converse is that, usually, it does. And one of the “rules” is that money brings trophies. Professionalism and capitalism have created the sporting version of income inequality, separating teams into “haves” and “have nots”.

But every once in a while, we can celebrate the team that punches way above its weight. This season has provided such a case in Atletico Madrid, champions of Spain and aspirant champions of Europe.

Theirs is a remarkable achievement, highlighted when comparing their annual player salary bill — only £54-million — to that of Queen’s Park Rangers, a club who plied their trade in England’s second tier league this season, and who spent £78-million on player salaries. Or compared to Manchester City, who spent £233-million (or £639,000 per day!) on wages.

QPR and Atletico are exceptions, but they don’t disprove the general rule — winning costs money, and studies consistently show a tight relationship between the money invested and the ultimate outcome, finishing position. That is, the more teams spend, the better they do.

This is hardly a revelation. The best players cost the most money, and so building a team capable of challenging for honours requires, first, large capital outlay (preferably bankrolled by oil billions, as a few teams have demonstrated), and, second, high ongoing costs of player retention.

The consequence of this obvious equation is that if you rank teams by their salaries prior to the start of the season, you’ll be guessing their finishing positions on the log with around 85% accuracy. This is true for all the European football leagues and all major US sports.

The exceptions are either big spenders or thrifty survivors, and occasionally, a relatively thrifty champion, such as Atletico Madrid. The former are usually clubs who get trapped in a “bubble” because they want players quickly, and are forced by supply and demand into big spending on relatively mediocre players, as happened with QPR.

The latter, like Atletico, have managed to leverage limited resources into success. This takes incredible motivation and intelligence, first to identify players that others have undervalued, and then to pull the right strings so the team becomes worth more than the sum of its parts.

**DOCTOR KNOW**

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It’s also a matter of timing — future superstars must be kept together just long enough to win, before their talents can be snatched up by those with bigger wallets.

Sadly, this is the inevitable result. Players who win league titles and play in Champions League finals can no longer be undervalued, and they are scarce.

Scarcity is value, and so the relatively meagre salaries offered by clubs like Atletico can no longer keep the superstars at the club as their market value rises. We’ve already seen one of their stars, Diego Costa, linked with a move to Chelsea, whose average salary of £4-million is a big jump from the £1.7-million of Atletico.

In other words, the Cinderella stories are wonderful, and we celebrate them as proof that it is possible for the underdog to triumph. But the clock will always tick, and when it strikes 12, it’s not so much that the carriage turns into a pumpkin as it is that the team just can’t afford the running costs any longer. Success therefore forces rebuilding, while those with the fat chequebooks feed off the success of those without.

The concern is that cases like Atletico will become increasingly rare, and, unless more stringent salary caps are introduced, the gap will become ever larger.

Strict salary caps are one reason, for example, that the richest NFL team spends only twice what the poorest does. In European football, the ratio is between 5:1 and 14:1, with the Manchester clubs, Spanish giants and Bayern Munich all spending more than £4-million per player per year. Unless someone intervenes, the “have nots” will, unfortunately, become more common.

Until then, we celebrate the Atletico Madriids of sport, as they may be an endangered species.