

# FOOTBALL BUSINESS

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# DEVELOPING THE BELGIAN PRO LEAGUE



Photos: Pro League

Earlier this year the Pro League got a face lifting with a new visual identity. Beside that, the organization responsible for the professional football leagues in Belgium, announced some new partnerships and projects. FOOTBALL BUSINESS INSIDE spoke with Stijn van Bever (Head of Communication) and Leander Monbaliu (Chief Business Officer).

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By Thomas Maurer

**Regarding the re-branding of the Pro League: You created a new visual identity, for me, from the outside I can see the new logo and a new CI. What happened actually? Is it just the visual identity or did you do more?**

Stijn van Bever: Let's say the visual identity is like the end-face of a new strategy, a digital strategy. We have come a long way talking about a digital communication strategy at Pro League. Since a few years we have a young dynamic team in the management and we have seen that we don't have any main identity for the league and for the organization. The logo was grey and this was a symbol that our identity was grey, it is vague. Last year, in a few evolutions that were happening, we brought up our whole new digital strategy. We have now our own channels for media and it was the moment to build up a proper, new visual identity. You will see this on our social media channels and on TV channels, so this will be one unity.

Leander Monbaliu: The new visual identity is only one – be it important- element in the deployment of the business strategy of the Pro League Stijn refers to. A strategy that is focusing on three pillars: media, communication & marketing and club servicing. A threat through this strategy is our ambition to take control over our product more, building a direct relationship and bringing football closer to the fans through innovation. In COVID-times, this gets a whole new dimension of course.

**When did you start to work on that identity?**

Stijn van Bever: One year ago it started. We did a benchmark, analysis, and market research, where we found out that we have a weak identity and different competitions with different logos. We did a benchmark and see how the other leagues do it. How do they expose their identity? What are their strong points? Then we did a call for our identity. We had like 10 to 15 agencies, that were interested. First they

did a presentation, then we invited three of them for a pitch. Before the pitch we gave the information that it should give us a strong identity but on the other side it should be the heart-beat of football.

**You have some kind of bright and shiny colours. That is something that seems to be en vogue now. The Premier League and the League 1 have those colours, why did you choose to go along with them in the colour scheme?**

Stijn van Bever: One thing is that we like the combination. The other thing is also that in some leagues you have some dominant teams with dominant colours. I just speak for ourselves, but this is a colour scheme that is not seen at any of our teams.

Leander Monbaliu: I think it is not a question of going along with them. It's more about that the colours are a combination of dark and light and should be seen well on screens and paper. Of course, a more corporate approach, with Juventus FC as a great example and more vivid colours, as seen in the Premier League, are noticeable evolutions in sports branding.

**I can read your baselines in two different languages. Was it difficult to work with two different languages as a league?**

Stijn van Bever: It will be much easier to work with one language, of course even in time matters. There are only two sports associations that are national and we are one of them. It is important for our clubs and our fans. We



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**Stijn Van Bever**  
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thought about if it is an option just to communicate in English, but it would be difficult.

Leander Monbaliu: It would be a bit strange to use the baseline “closer to fans” not in the language of the people watching.

**You presented the project some months ago. How did Corona affect the project?**

Stijn van Bever: Corona didn't affect it in matter of time issues. Preparations and all things were done. We wanted to present it first in July as start of the new competition. Then we have issues with the ending of the competition, because it ended before the final date.

**Are there any other projects affected by Corona?**

Leander Monbaliu: The day to day business is affected by Corona for sure. It's a daily subject to find solutions or deals with partners where it is necessary. It's a cliché, but we also very much see at as an opportunity. To accelerate our digital transformation, to improve our clubs servicing, to be more creative with partners and to maintain a close relationship with our fans.

**You started a new cooperation with eleven-sports. Are there any other new big things or are they postponed due to the situation?**

Leander Monbaliu: as mentioned, we were very much working towards the summer of 2020 in the light of our business strategy. And given our unique partnership with Eleven Sports, we were able to even accelerate our implementation: we've identified common needs of our clubs, Pro League and Eleven Sports: data, clipping, content...In August, we have announced Pro League Forward, the overarching brand for our innovation projects, and with it some big projects and deals we had been working on: new website, collective deal with WSC Sports, STATSPerform and a fantasy football cooperation with Sorare to name just a few.

Corona didn't really affect the timing I think. There was no deal or partnership that didn't go through because of Corona. But I would be lying if I'd be saying it wasn't challenging. We are very lucky to have a great team that showed to be extremely dedicated and resilient.



**Concerning your TV deal with elevensports, is there a Free-TV-Deal as well?**

Leander Monbaliu: For the Cup, yes, but not for the first and second division. For such live premium content, the move towards pay-platforms is irreversible. For the Weekend Highlights Magazine, our tender requires free-to-air distribution, and many Delayed Clips are distributed free as well.

But although our competitions are behind pay-wall, our reach is bigger than ever before. One of the reasons we choose the deal with Eleven Sports is also because they want to distribute the content as broad as they can. And they succeeded: not only did they sign distribution deals with the previous live rightsholders Telenet, Proximus and Voo, they also signed a deal with Orange and TV Vlaanderen/TéléSat. Besides, for the Near-live Clips, they have entered into a unique cooperation with KBC, a bank that is looking to expand their banking platform to more services. Internationally we are also expanding our reach and recently we have signed a partnership with 433 to boost our international presence. We are reaching more fans than ever before, but there is still a big opportunity to reach more.

**Is there any highlight show on TV for free in Belgium?**

Leander Monbaliu: Yes, equal to the previous cycle in Flanders on Vier and in Wallonia on RTBF.

**Does the second league also belong to the Pro League and what about the lower leagues are they regional?**

Stijn van Bever: Yes the second league belongs to us, the first league of amateur level is national and all others are regional.

**What are the goals for the Pro League for this season?**

Stijn van Bever: I think we are very happy that we have now the proper management of all

our own communication channels. It will be great if we can develop the identity of the Pro League as strong as possible. And try to be seen maybe as small, but one of the most innovative European leagues.

Leander Monbaliu: the next couple of years we need to leverage the unique ecosystem we have created with Eleven Sports, Pro League, the Clubs and our partners. Especially in these difficult times, this should help us and the clubs to prepare for the uncertain future.

**How many people are working for the league?**

Leander Monbaliu: We have about ten, I think. It's small in terms of how many people work for it. But if you look at the overall revenues, we compete with the dutch league or the portuguese league. We need to aim to be just below the Big 5 Leagues. More general, we need to see ourselves as part of the entertainment sector rather than only looking at our peer leagues or sports. It's a battle to gain attention, so we need to be innovative and creative.

**Do you have a sales team or do you have a marketing agency who is doing the sales for you?**

Leander Monbaliu: For the moment we do not, but we are currently developing a sales strategy together with partners. More than ever we now have interesting assets and packages to offer to potential partners, but of course, the context is challenging.

**Do you have any centralized sponsorships?**

Leander Monbaliu: We have centralized partnerships like our naming partnership, we have a betting partner and so on. We don't have a shirt sponsorship like some other leagues. By having taken control over our communication and our strong collaboration with Eleven Sports, we are now able to offer 360° packages that do not require to impact the individual marketing strategy of clubs too much. ■