**Case study of a National Sports League: The English Football League**

**Brief introduction: Why is it an important sport for the country/who plays?**

* England is the origin of nearly all first accounts of features of football and its roots in England can be found in Medieval times.
* When the Football Association was founded in 1863 **blue collar workers** found they could earn more playing football than working in factories. The game has therefore had a more traditionally **working class** following.
* However, sociologists state that times are changing and the children of blue collar workers who have grown up supporting a team, however, they have become white collar workers themselves. Therefore, the social class of people watching football in England has diversified.

**Explain the organisation and hierarchy of the league.**

* **The English football league** (or football pyramid) is a series of interconnected leagues for association football.
* The system is **hierarchical** and **linked by promotion and relegation.**
* The **Barclays Premier League** is at the top of the pyramid. There are more than 140 individual leagues, containing over 480 divisions.
* Each division contains somewhere between 20-24 clubs, there are over 7,000 registered football teams. This number can vary as new clubs are created, old ones go bankrupt or others merge.
* **The top four leagues are often referred to as the league clubs** and are almost entirely played by **fully professional players.**
* The league system is overseen by the **Football Association (FA)** which is the oldest football association in the world being founded in 1863. Its headquarters are in Soho in London.
* As well as the football leagues, the FA also oversees a number of cup competitions including the **world famous FA Cup.**
* The lower half of the hierarchy is comprised of those in the National League. These clubs are divided into National League North National League South. These clubs are typically founder in smaller English towns and are comprised of semi-professional and amateur players.

Explain the relationship between **team location** and the **residence of its supporters.**

**Location of the teams:**

* Many of the teams at the top of the English Football Hierarchy (i.e. those in the Premier League) are located in large cities of over 250,000. In particular, many large formerly industrial cities in the Midlands and the north of England have produced some of the most successful teams e.g. Liverpool and Manchester. However, smaller towns in the north such as Wigan, Hull, Burnley have also produced successful clubs and so are exceptions to that rule.
* Many of the successful teams are located in large cities as there is more money for investment in sport e.g. to create facilities for training and to invest in stadia to enable large numbers of supporters to come and watch. Large cities provide the large threshold populations required to keep a club profitable i.e. they need a plentiful supply of supporters who are willing to pay to come and watch.
* Historical and social factors can be used to explain why many formerly industrial areas have produced successful teams e.g. Liverpool, Manchester, Wigan and Burnley. When the professional football league was established in England in 1863 it was dominated by blue collar players who found they could earn more money playing football than in factories.
* London is England’s capital city and by far the largest city in the country (approx. 10 million). London therefore supports several successful football clubs e.g. Chelsea, Tottenham and West Ham). The home location is mostly within the borough of London to which the club has its name e.g. Chelsea play in the London borough of Chelsea. However, West Ham’s home location has moved to the London Olympic stadium. They moved their home location in order to take advantage of the new state of the art stadium that was built for the 2012 Olympic Games.
* In some cases, the location of a team’s stadium in an urban area has changed over-time. For example, in the city of Oxford the original Oxford United ground was situated in an inner suburb of the city. However, when the club decided they wanted to redevelop their stadium, they chose to close the old stadium and build a new ground on the rural-urban fringe. This is because land prices were cheaper, there was more room for development and the site could be easily reached via the Oxford ring-road.
* Teams closer to the bottom of the hierarchy tend to be found in smaller English towns and cities. Less successful clubs typically have fewer supporters and so require lower threshold populations to support them.

**Residence of supporters:**

* The most successful teams, at the top of the hierarchy, have the largest fan-bases and capture an international audience, as well as sizeable audiences at the national level.
* The increasing prevalence of ICT and televisions and the development of transport infrastructure have resulted in reduced friction of distance. This has enabled more people to watch and even visit matches, causing the exponential growth of its supporters. Furthermore, many people from newly industrialised countries (NICs) have gained this viewing access, leading to an increasingly large number of supporters. For example, whilst there are thought to be only a few million Liverpool FC supporters in England, there are currently over 200 million supporters in Malaysia, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries.
* Foreign investment into the league has also increased the power of the Premier League and has garnered further international supporters. For example, the purchasing of Chelsea FC for £2.3 billion in 2003 by the Russian Roman Abramovich has increased the prevalence of Chelsea supporters in Eastern Europe, and also enabled more money to be spent on promoting Chelsea FC as a global brand.
* Smaller clubs, closer to the bottom of the English Football league, are more likely to have smaller and more local audiences. These clubs are comprised of semi-professional and amateur players and so appeal less to a wider audience. Their matches are not featured on TV or in the national press which limits their fan-bases.

**Model answer essay:**

**For one national sports league you have studied, examine the relationship between the location of the teams and the residence of its supporters (10 marks).**

The English Football League is the national football league of England; it is comprised of is a series of interconnected leagues for association football. The Barclays Premier League is at the top of the hierarchy and there are more than 140 individual leagues, containing over 480 divisions. The Premier League contains 20 teams and draws in the largest viewership of any football league in the world. The locations of the teams are important in the residence of the supporters for any given team, however, the international prevalence also contributes to the locations of its supporters.

The majority of Premier League teams are located in London, the Midlands and the Northeast of England. Football was traditionally a sport played and viewed by blue-collar factory workers, factory workers often found they could earn extra money by playing football on a Saturday. Thus teams were established in the late 19th and early 20th century in industrial towns and cities. Although most Premier League clubs today are located in cities of more than 250,000 people, football’s origins as a working class sport, in industrial areas, also helps us to understand why there are highly successful clubs in some smaller towns and cities e.g. Wigan and Burnley. These clubs have continued to be successful due to the important cultural significance of football in these areas. Premier league clubs are usually found in cities with populations of more than 250,000 people, these large cities provide the large numbers of supporters required to keep the industry profitable. In large cities there is enough money in the area to invest in stadia and training facilities, as well as a large local fan-base to attend the weekly games during the football season.

Whilst the location of teams in the English Premier League has stayed roughly constant, the location of supporters has also developed over time. The increasing prevalence of ICT and televisions and the development of transport infrastructure has resulted in reduced friction of distance, enabling more people to watch and even visit matches, causing the exponential growth of its supporters. Furthermore, many people from newly industrialised countries (NICs) have gained this viewing access, leading to an increasingly large number of supporters. For example, whilst there are thought to be only a few million Liverpool FC supporters in England, there are currently over 200 million supporters in Malaysia, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries.

Foreign investment into the league has also increased the magnitude of the Premier League and the international supporters. For example, the purchasing of Chelsea FC for £2.3 billion in 2003 by the Russian Roman Abramovich has increased the prevalence of Chelsea supporters in Eastern Europe, and also enabled more money to be spent on promoting Chelsea FC as a global brand.

Towards the bottom of the football hierarchy, the lower tier teams tend to be located in smaller English towns and are more likely to have smaller, local audience. These clubs are comprised of semi-professional and amateur players and so appeal less to a wider audience. Their matches are not featured on TV or in the national press which limits their fan-bases. These clubs lack big sponsorship deals and investment and so sometimes they close due to going bankrupt, others may merge to pool resources.

In conclusion, whilst the location of teams at the top of the football hierarchy, in the English Premier League, have mostly remained in previously industrial cities, the location of the residence supporters has shifted with time. Whilst blue-collar workers were the original demographic of supporters, the number of national and international supporters has increased exponentially. Increasing ICT and television prevalence has resulted in reduced friction of distance, enabling more people to watch matches. Foreign investment into the league has increased the appeal of the Premier League to the global level, such that enormous numbers of supporters are now found worldwide. For those teams in the lower leagues, the location of teams may sometimes change due to a club going bankrupt or merging with another team. The residence of the supporters tends to remain local, due to limited national exposure.