



## THIS IS RUSSIA

Can Russian football bridge the social, economic and talent divide between the Asian east and European west?



### PEPI BICAN

The unforgettable tale of football's unknown hero



### PIRLO

We chart the bearded genius' remarkable career



### THE MAGYARS

Magnificent Magyars and Hungarian football



### FUTURO

Our most comprehensive edition to date

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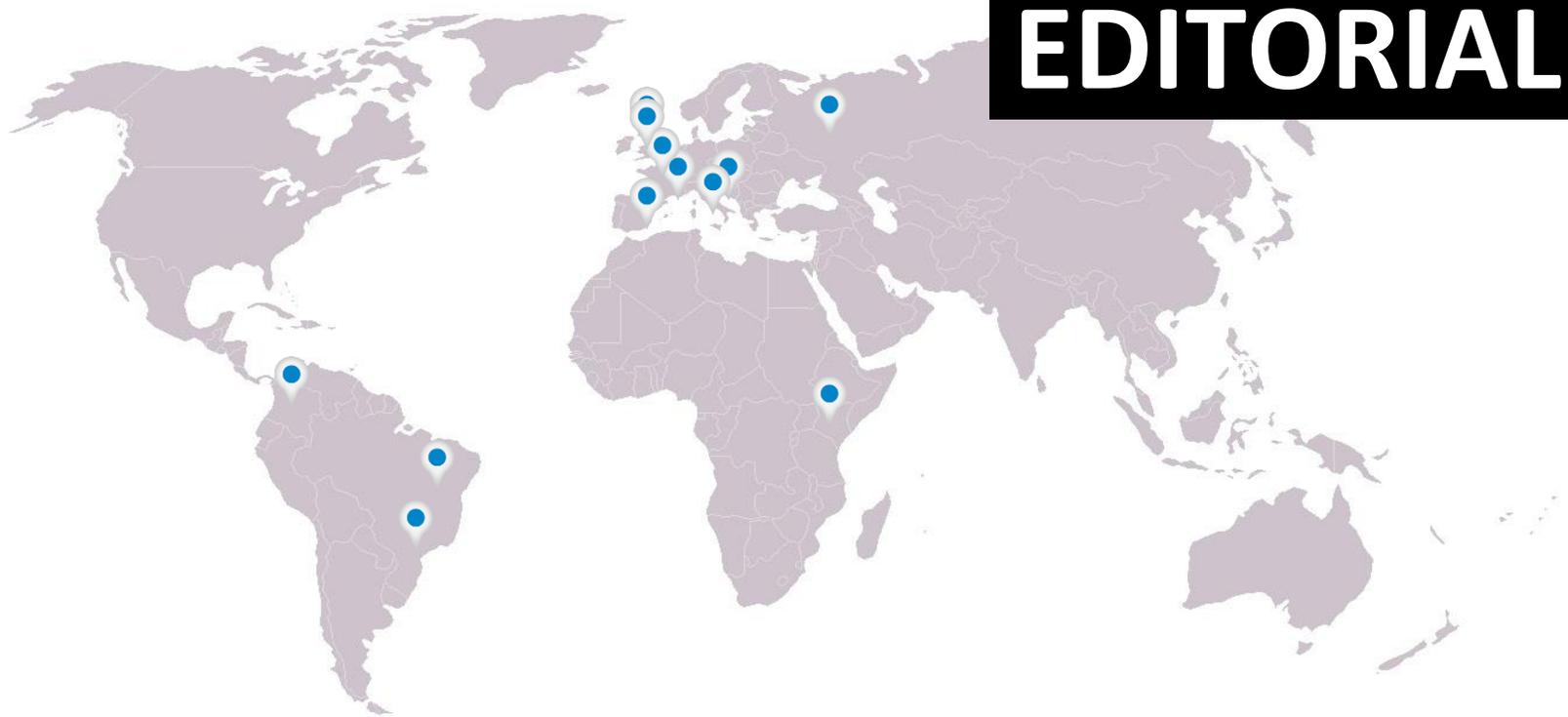
## THIS IS RUSSIA

We analyse the great divide in Russian football.



## SPONSORSHIP

Why should businesses invest in their local football team?



# EDITORIAL

**W**elcome to Issue 4 of tFtZINE; the monthly magazine by these Football times.

It's a new month and with it comes the endless possibilities at both club and international level.

This month out cover feature is on the great divide in Russian football; east and west. Will the powerhouse clubs of Western Russia ever need to compete against the minnows of the East?

We examine why the divide is so great and what it means for Russian, and Asian, football.

Further to the Russian divide, sub-editor George Pitts returns with a scintillating look at the life and career of Italy's original bearded genius, Andrea Pirlo.

From his early years growing up on a picturesque wine farm to his heroics at World Cup 2006 and recent success with Juventus, we examine what makes the former Milan player such a prized asset.

With the World Cup fast approaching, we consider the teams that have qualified for Rio 2014 and those in the playoffs.

In addition to aforementioned articles, we also have a range of other features including: The New Boys Futuro, Hungarian Football; Past and Present, The Unknown Hero; Pepi Bican, The Key To Possession Football, The State of English Football, The Re-resurrection of Wilder Medina and Grassroots Sponsorship.

Having recently been featured in the Guardian for our piece on the Hillsborough Tragedy, we'd like to take this opportunity to promote the Hillsborough Justice Campaign. Follow their progress at <http://www.contrast.org/hillsborough/index.shtml>.

Enjoy the magazine and as ever feel free to contact us with thoughts, feedback and contributions at [support@thesefootballtimes.net](mailto:support@thesefootballtimes.net). Many thanks for your continued support.

**Omar Saleem, Editor.**  
**George Pitts, Sub-Editor.**

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# PIRLO

“Pirlo has always put himself forward as a reference point for seeking ever more beautiful football. I always liked Pirlo, because he never wanted to be a protagonist off the field, so ended up being one for what he does on the pitch.” Xabi Alonso

At 34, you would think an outfield footballer's professional career would be in decline. Not Andrea Pirlo's. He's still going from strength to strength; a key ingredient to the recent success of La Vecchia Signora, so too with the Azzurri.

But what has made a young player from Brescia develop into Italy's bearded genius? Will his recent impact in football as the current generation's finest string puller be remembered in the long-term future?

Here's the story of the great number 21's rise to stardom in a career that will total nearly 20 years at the end of the current season.

Pirlo was born into a family of winemakers in Lombardia, a region in Northern Italy, in 1979 and grew up on the site of a vineyard where he one day hopes to spend his retirement.

He came through the ranks at local club Brescia where his junior teammates' parents heckled him, due to his raw ability which made him stand-out, head and shoulders above the rest of the team. This jealousy was carried onto the pitch and his team would often avoid passing to the young talent, frustrating the boy who would grow into a Serie A legend, a Scudetto winner, a World Cup winner; a man.

After three seasons in the first-team fold at Brescia, Serie A giants Inter Milan came calling for his services but after three years of loan spells and failing to make an

Andrea Pirlo



impact for the Nerazzurri, he switched to the red and black of city rivals AC.

The pressure of the €18million price tag, a considerable amount at the beginning of the 21st century, wasn't felt on the shoulders of this young Italian, who spent a decade successfully pulling the strings for club and country.

With Milan he was part of that famous night in Istanbul, when his side surrendered a 3-0 lead in the 2005 Champions League final against Liverpool. But he helped them get revenge two years later to beat the Reds to the biggest trophy in club football, a second Champions League winners' medal for Pirlo.

When he started out, he was often deployed as an attacking midfielder, supporting strikers; a number ten. At AC Milan, he was frequently used on the left of midfield. "I still thought I could give my best there," says the man himself in his book, followed by an analogy only someone of his stature could conjure:

"A fish breathes when it is in deep water. It makes do when near the surface, but it's not the same thing."

Maybe you could argue that playing him out wide was a waste of a player, as Pirlo isn't, and has never been, blessed with pace but he has adapted to this with age by making up in other areas of his game.

At AC, he won the Italian domestic cup, Serie A, UEFA Champions League and UEFA Super Cup twice and the FIFA Club World Cup.

In 2011, the Rossoneri decided against renewing the contract of Italy's chief architect and new Juventus boss Antonio Conte signed him up on a three-year deal. When the Old Lady signed him, they had just finished in 7th place in Serie A; the following year they finished as champions.

Although they drafted in a raft of new signings, Pirlo, 32 at the time, was hugely influential in bringing two successive titles back to Turin; he was the final piece in the Old

Andrea Pirlo



Lady's jigsaw.

If anything, the latter stages of his career have been his best. He has been recognised across the world of football, praised for his ability to dictate a game on any stage.

His passing capabilities are arguably the best in world football. He can find a man when his options look limited, as well as picking a 50 yard pass equally as well as Paul Scholes. He can make space in a packed midfield and is always a step ahead of the game.

The set-pieces Pirlo has in his locker put him among Europe's best at this moment in time; be it corners, free-kicks - which he hits with power and accuracy from various ranges - or penalties-such as his outrageous Panenka against England at Euro 2012, now known as 'a Pirlo' when modern-day football fans describe a penalty which is chipped down the middle.

The boy from Brescia is key for his country and has been for the last decade; following his rise through the ranks with the junior Azzurri

from under-15 level through to the under-21 team.

He captained the latter to success in the 2000 European Championships - where he was named as the tournament's golden player - before boasting man of the match performances in three (one of which was in the final against France) of Italy's games in Germany 2006 as they won the World Cup. He was rightly named in the team of the tournament, as well as FIFA's Team of the Year.

He was also named in last year's European Championship's team of the tournament once again, following another three man of the match awards in Italy's road to the final.

A testament to Pirlo is his cap count. He became the first outfield Italian footballer to earn over 100 caps, a figure which will still rise beyond next year's Brazil World Cup; the current tally is 105.

His influence has seen him nominated for the ten-man shortlist for the Ballon d'Or and he

isn't finished yet.

Although he is out of contract in 2014, it remains to be seen whether he will be offered a new deal, with Juventus thought to be against renewing his deal, alerting clubs across Europe, including Tottenham, who have Italian Franco Baldini as their technical director which may be a lure for the man who is yet to conquer the Premier League.

There were whispers recently about Pirlo announcing his retirement from the game altogether, but nothing was confirmed - football fans can breathe a sigh of relief, for now. But you can't blame him for considering ending his career while he is at the top of his game.

Paul Pogba appears to be L'Architetto's natural replacement and he is already starting to show the Turin club that there may well be life after Pirlo at the Juventus Stadium. Who better for Pogba to learn his trade from? No wonder he swapped Manchester for northern Italy.

Six months before his departure from the San Siro two and a half years ago, Pirlo nearly joined Barcelona. Imagine how sickening yet deliciously mouth-watering that would have been; a midfield trio of Iniesta, Xavi and Pirlo. Unfortunately, AC owner Silvio Berlusconi put a stop to the move, after Pep Guardiola persuaded him to move to the Camp Nou and before he could put pen to paper to sign a contract.

This is one of many stories that can be found in Pirlo's amazing autobiography, where he also writes how he nearly joined Chelsea and Real Madrid, how "the PlayStation is one of the greatest inventions in history" and how he plays FIFA, the game he puts his footballing intelligence down to, four times more than he does in real life.

Although time is ticking on the career of the great Andrea Pirlo, he still plays and enjoys his football like a young star. Some say he gets younger with every game he plays.

He will go down as one of Italy's all-time greats - a true footballing genius - and whether his career stays in football or goes into the wine industry, he is sure to taste success.

Here's a select few tributes to Pirlo from fellow professionals in the game.

Inter Milan President, Massimo Moratti: "The biggest regret I have had in my career as Inter president was selling Pirlo to Milan. It was my decision to give him away and this was clearly a big mistake."

Italy and Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon: "When Andrea told me that he was joining us, the first thing I thought was 'It could be worse'. A player of his level and ability, not to mention that he was free, I think was the signing of the century."

Gabriele Orriali (ex-Inter Milan – Fiorentina player in the 70's and 80's): "You can't discuss Pirlo,

because maybe only Barcelona's players have his quality."

Luis Suárez (ex-Spanish footballer) on why the Italian is better than Xavi: "Andrea strokes the ball better, which is why he's also better with free kicks and scores a few goals"

Xabi Alonso: "Pirlo has always put himself forward as a reference point for seeking ever more beautiful football. I always liked Pirlo, because he never wanted to be a protagonist off the field, so ended up being one for what he does on the pitch."

Cesare Prandelli on Pirlo stepping up to take a cool penalty against England in 2012: "When Andrea Pirlo stepped up I was very calm - he's a star and knew what he needed to do; and he did it."

Roy Hodgson on that penalty: "The cool, calculated way Pirlo chipped it, that is something you have or you don't have as a player," he said.

Daniele De Rossi's verdict on the same penalty: "I'd not seen such a crazy shot as that since the days of Totti (for the Azzurri)."

**By George Pitts**

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George is the sub-editor of tFtZINE and regular contributor to the website.

George also does media work for Scunthorpe United.

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Mesut Özil has been in fine form for Arsenal since his summer move from Real Madrid. Can the German guide the Gunners to the Premier League crown?

# MOMENTS



Atlético Madrid's Diego Costa has been in scintillating form this season. Unplayable at times, will he make it to Brazil in a Spain shirt?





Stefan Kießling is another striker in fine domestic form. Fresh from his ghost goal, can the Bayer Leverkusen striker force his way into Germany's World Cup squad?



Superb for German giants Borussia Dortmund, is Henrikh Mkhitaryan one of Europe's best players?

Can the strike partnership of Luis Suárez and Daniel Sturridge provide the catalyst for a genuine Champions League push at Liverpool?



Impressive thus far for Napoli, Gonzalo Higuaín is proving his doubters wrong. Many will now be asking why Real Madrid opted to let the Argentinean striker leave in favour of the inconsistent Karim Benzema.





# THE ROAD TO RIO

# FIFA

The Game. For the World.

**W**ith the majority of plane tickets booked for participants at the FIFA World Cup in Brazil, we revise the sides that are on the road to Rio and the play-off fixtures that will decide the remaining qualifiers.

## Qualified

Asia: Australia, Iran, Japan, South Korea

Europe: Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, England, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Switzerland

The Americas: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, United States

## African Play-offs

2nd Leg to be played 19/11/2013

Burkina Faso 3-2 Algeria (1<sup>st</sup> Leg)  
Algeria vs. Burkina Faso

Ivory Coast 3-1 Senegal (1<sup>st</sup> Leg)  
Senegal vs. Ivory Coast

Ethiopia 1-2 Nigeria (1<sup>st</sup> Leg)  
Nigeria vs. Ethiopia

Tunisia 0-0 Cameroon (1<sup>st</sup> Leg)  
Cameroon vs Tunisia

Ghana 6-1 Egypt (1<sup>st</sup> Leg)  
Egypt vs. Ghana

## European Play-offs

1st Leg to be played 15/11/2013  
2nd Leg to be played 19/11/2013

Ukraine vs. France  
France vs. Ukraine

Greece vs. Romania  
Romania vs. Greece

Iceland vs. Croatia  
Croatia vs. Iceland

Portugal vs. Sweden  
Sweden vs. Portugal

## Intercontinental Play-offs

1st Leg to be played 13/11/2013

2nd Leg to be played 20/11/2013

Uruguay vs. Jordan

Jordan vs. Uruguay

Mexico vs. New Zealand

New Zealand vs. Mexico

With Ghana, Ivory Coast and Nigeria set to qualify, the African pool looks set to send the strongest teams possible.

Uruguay will be heavy favourites against surprise package Jordan and Mexico will be confident of ousting a New Zealand side devoid of quality in depth and strong leadership.

The European ties pit France against the talented yet unpredictable Ukrainian national side. Greece against Romania will be a tight affair, as will Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal against Zlatan Ibrahimović's Sweden.

Only Croatia will be confident in the European pool of qualifying for Rio.



The Edin Džeko-inspired Bosnia sealed their maiden spot at the finals. Losing only once, they look set to spring some surprises in Brazil.



Bayern Munich's Xherdan Shaqiri helped Switzerland qualify for the finals with an unbeaten record.



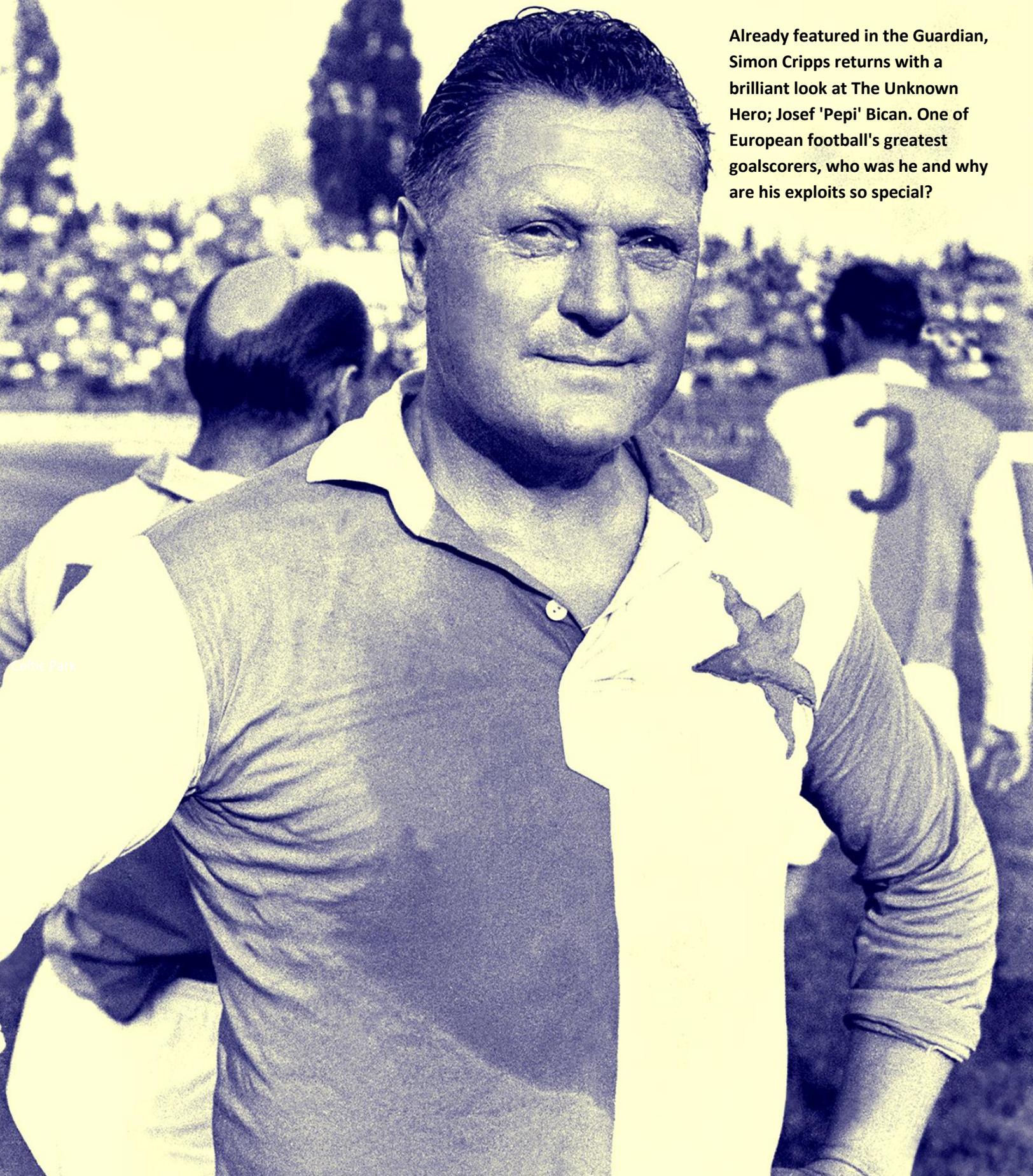
England qualified on the final match day. Can the Three Lions challenge for the title?



Only one of Cristiano Ronaldo or Zlatan Ibrahimović will be at Brazil 2014. But which one?

# THE UNKNOWN HERO

Already featured in the Guardian, Simon Cripps returns with a brilliant look at The Unknown Hero; Josef 'Pepi' Bican. One of European football's greatest goalscorers, who was he and why are his exploits so special?



Celtic Park

**P**elé. Di Stefano. Puskas. Romário.

If asked to name the greatest goalscorers of all time, these names would trip off the tongue of most knowledgeable football fans.

But as is often the case, a player with less of a reputation, playing for a club not considered amongst Europe's established elite, often seems to fall below the radar. For according to statistical organisation the IFFHS (International Federation of Football History & Statistics), the greatest goalscorer of the last century is not Pelé or Romário, but Josef 'Pepi' Bican; Slavia Prague's greatest ever player.

Born to a Viennese-Czech mother and Czech father in Vienna in 1913, Bican grew up with the consequences of World War I, which left the imperial city under an entente embargo, severely limiting supplies to the population, leaving many starving or in poverty.

Playing barefoot and using a bundle of rags known as a 'hadrak' for a ball as leather footballs were too expensive, Bican and friends from the neighbourhood would play football "all day, from morning to evening", while their parents lived on the breadline, plotting their way out of a life of poverty. In 1925, with Vienna only now emerging from the devastation of the war, Bican joined the junior ranks of his father's club, Hertha Vienna, earning a schilling for every goal he scored.

At the age of 18, his talents were spotted by the city's biggest club, Rapid Vienna, and it was there that

Bican was able to truly showcase his ability on the big stage. In his four years at the club, Bican scored 52 goals in 49 appearances and earned 30 caps for Austria, scoring an impressive 19 goals. In 1935, Bican made a controversial move to city rivals Admira, where he scored 18 goals in 26 appearances.

In 1937, with Hitler's Nazi party seizing control of Austria, Pepi decided to leave Vienna for his father's homeland of Czechoslovakia, joining the all-conquering Slavia Prague, winner of seven Czechoslovak league titles over the previous decade. It was here that Bican would truly establish his legend. In his 11 year stint at Slavia, Bican would play 217 games for 'Sešívani', scoring an extraordinary 395 goals, including an even more remarkable three 7 goal hauls.

As a result of his record breaking exploits, Bican was named Europe's leading marksman for five consecutive seasons from 1939 to 1944. While this is unquestionably an astonishing record, Bican's ability when compared with the likes of Pele and Di Stefano is called into question by those who believe that his achievements were artificially high due to the state of war across Europe during Bican's most prolific seasons weakening the Czechoslovak league, and removing some of the biggest stars from other leagues across Europe.

Indeed, while Bican was scoring at a rate of almost 2 goals per game, top players from some of Europe's strongest nations were otherwise engaged on the battlefield.



Pepi Bican

*"When I talk to young reporters, they always say, 'Mr. Bican, scoring was easier back in your day.' But I ask them, 'How come? Look, are there opportunities today?' And they tell me, 'Of course there are, many of them'. And I say, 'There you go. If there weren't opportunities, it would be difficult.'"*

Nevertheless, Bican's prolific finishing can never be called into question. Two-footed and with an unerring composure in front of goal, Bican's shooting ability was legendary, with it being said that Bican would only miss 1 out of every 20 opportunities which fell his way. During his time at Slavia, Bican's training sessions would be attended by thousands of spectators eager to witness his favourite party trick, whereby he would place empty bottles on top of the crossbar and aim to hit as many as he could from 20 yards.

Legend has it that at his best, Bican would manage to hit 9 of every 10 bottles he placed on the crossbar.



Bican Playing For Slavia Prague

When added to his ability to run the 100m in 10.8 seconds despite his very powerful frame, it becomes clear that in any league in any era, Pepi would be a formidable opponent for any defence.

Upon retirement in 1955, Bican had an official tally of 805 goals in 530 games in domestic football, and 31 in 44 for Austria and Czechoslovakia on the international stage.

But it was not only his prodigious ability on the field which made Bican a Slavia hero. Unsurprisingly, Pepi's feats on the football fields of Czechoslovakia did not go unnoticed by Prague's social elite. Ian Willoughby's excellent piece on Bican's life states that "he played tennis with the famous actor Vlasta Burian, dined with the actor Jan Werich and knew the film star Adina Mandlova" while the rest of Europe was at war.

Bican had become unquestionably one of the biggest names in Czechoslovakia, and a demi-God in the eyes of many Slavistas.

His ascent from the ruins of post war Vienna to fraternising with Prague's great and good was an inspiring tale for those enduring the instability of Central Europe during Bican's life. However, it was this ascent to fame which would ultimately lead to the end of his playing career at Slavia.

For in 1948, Communism came to Czechoslovakia. Having turned down a lucrative move to Italy due to the possibility of a similar uprising, Bican was dismayed by the rise of Communism in Czechoslovakia, and refused to be any part of Gottwald's KSC.

Faced with the prospect of losing everything he had earned during his career, Bican decided that he had to leave Slavia for his own safety, and joined steelworks club Železářny Vítkovice, before moving again to Hradec Kralove in 1953, where he scored 19 goals in just 9 appearances. It was here that Bican recalls an extraordinary event which threatened to end his career:

*"It was May Day and they persuaded me to take part in the May Day parade. From the loud speakers you could hear Long Live President Zapotocky, Long Live President Zapotocky. But people came out on the streets and shouted Long Live Bican, Long Live Bican! But you know, I myself wasn't responsible for that. The factory Communist Party committee called me in to the office and said these two comrades will escort you to the train station and in one hour you'll be out of Hradec Kralove.*

*I hadn't moved so fast in a while. I packed my suitcase and they really went all the way to the station with me and waited till the train had gone. It's a wonder they didn't wave!"*

Encountering a group of workers while being escorted to the station, Bican was asked if there was a problem, to which he said there was not. The workers said that they were glad, for otherwise they would have gone on strike, for which Bican could have faced a 20 year sentence for inciting a strike.

His exit from Hradec Kralove was to pave the way for his return to Slavia, now renamed Dynamo Prague in accordance with Communist naming laws, where he would score another 22 goals in 29 appearances before retiring in 1955 at the age of 42 as big a hero on the field as off it.

Despite his retirement, Bican's legend now preceded him wherever he went, and without realising it he had become a famous figurehead for the counter Communist movement in Czechoslovakia. Given his fame and refusal to join the Communist movement, the KRC government saw Bican as a potentially dangerous figure, and sought to defame Bican in any way they could.

Considering his fraternisation with Prague's social elite before the Communist coup d'état, Czechoslovak authorities decided that the most effective means of defamation would be to brand Bican a bourgeois Viennese,



Pepi Bican

despite his humble beginnings. Bican's situation was not helped by his legendary status at Slavia, a club traditionally supported by Prague's middle classes.

His reputation scarred and his career over, Bican was forced to work on the Holesovice railway until the 1989 Velvet Revolution, sliding into poverty in the process.

With the revolution ridding Czechoslovakia of Communist rule, Bican returned to public life as a hero, and was granted the Freedom of Prague by the city's mayor in 2001. Having been allowed to once again take his standing as one of the most

influential figures in the history of the Czechoslovak game, Bican was able to live out his remaining years in relative peace, content that his astonishing achievements had been recognised.

After suffering from heart problems for several months, Bican passed away on 12 December 2001 and was buried in Vysehrad cemetery, where he lies alongside some of Prague's most famous figures of centuries gone by.

With this year marking 100 years since Bican's birth, Slavia have made sure that they celebrate the life of the club's greatest ever player, marking it with a day of

celebration coinciding with the derby against deadly rivals Sparta.

Players from both sides of the city divide were invited to Eden to celebrate Pepi's life, before Slavia Ultras seized the mantle with 2 magnificent choreographic displays to honour his memory. The first of these displays unveiled a large banner accompanied by a drawing of Chuck Norris which declared 'Only Bican scored more goals than me!' Appropriate given the high on mythological status of the great striker.

The second display unveiled a huge poster of Bican, accompanied by a mosaic simply stating 'PEPI' in huge golden letters. This time the banner at the front of the stand unveiled a far more serious message. "Pepi Bican - the greatest Slavia man ever" it proclaimed. Rarely will a group of Ultras present a message more difficult to dispute.

**By Simon Cripps**

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Simon is Liverpool fan with the potential to spontaneously combust when watching his club. A profligate striker for world famous 6-a-side University team Linvoy Primus FC with a goals-to-games ratio that would shame Ali Dia.

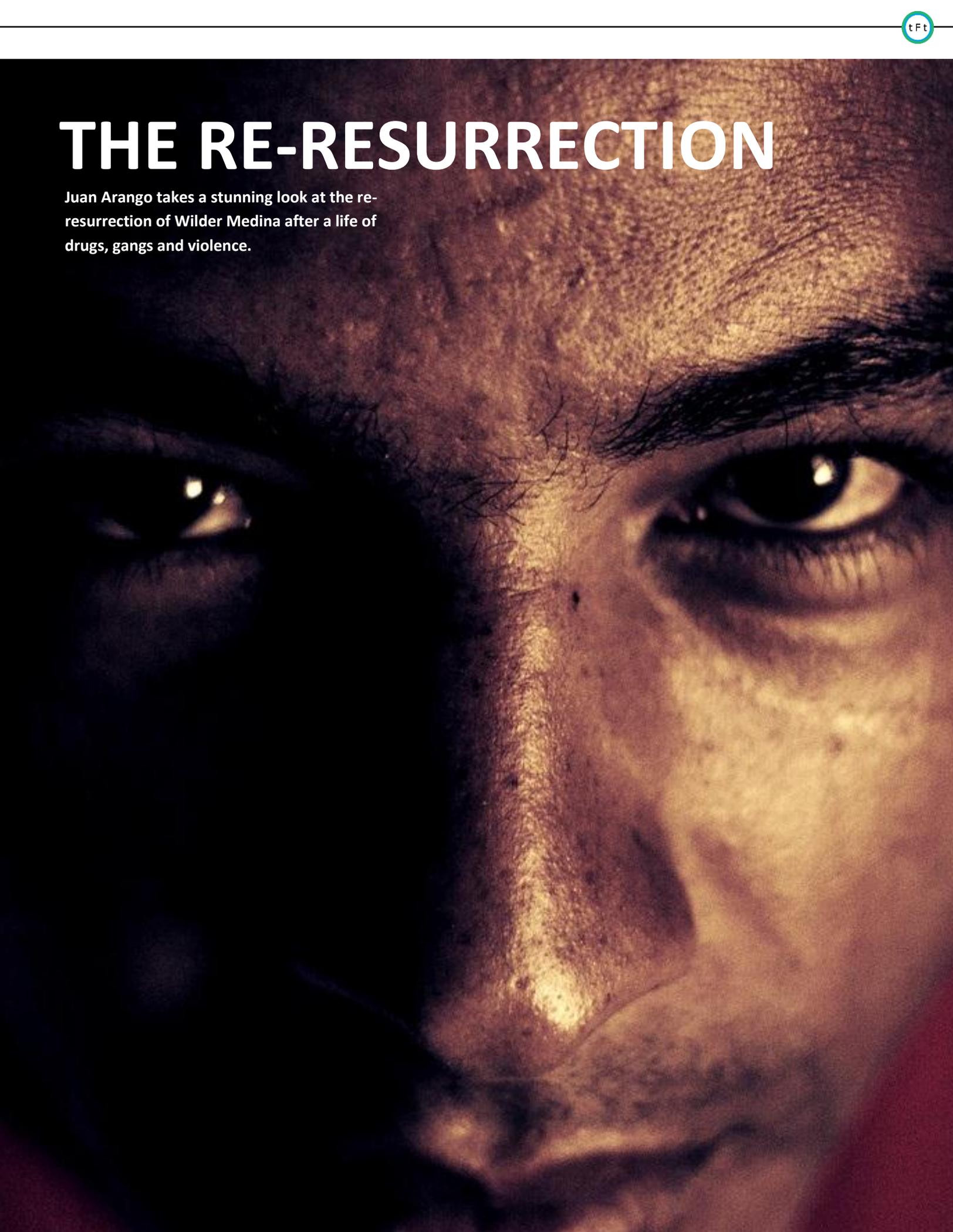
If not writing, Simon spends his time watching or talking about football, sleeping, watching The Simpsons, or having a feud with Paul Ince on FM.

Follow Simon on Twitter:

@AI\_Football

# THE RE-RESURRECTION

Juan Arango takes a stunning look at the resurrection of Wilder Medina after a life of drugs, gangs and violence.



In the 84<sup>th</sup> minute of a match between Santa Fe and Deportivo Cali, Wilder Medina brings down a deep ball with his chest. He fends off a defender with his body and strikes the ball from a narrow angle to beat Faryd Mondragón and kill off the match at 3-1.

The goal not only encapsulated his ability off the ball and with it at his feet, the sequence was a microcosm of what his life and career has been.

In the case of Barcelona SC's premier off-season acquisition, it's a matter of getting a second chance. Although when you throw in the name Wilder Medina, you are talking about a third or fourth chance.

The native of Puerto Nare in Antioquia was always known for his confident yet humble demeanour. His track record over at Deportes Tolima helped back up his confidence.

The only caveat in this story is his constant battle with his demons. This might be one of the major reasons why one of the most prolific goal scorers of the past few years in Colombian football has not been looked at by teams from abroad.

His own self-inflicted wounds trumped Wilder's scoring knack in the area and ability to emerge in key situations.

Medina didn't have the easiest of lives as a young man. A rough and tumble youth saw him involved in gangs where many of his close friends were killed.

"It was a very difficult past. I dealt with lots of weapons and drugs. I never killed anyone, but I used those weapons before," said the Liga Postobón's leading scorer in an interview with Colombian television a few years ago. "When I was a kid I had around thirty friends that were involved in gangs; right now I think there are only four left."

He would continue this lifestyle during early stages of his career when he admitted that he would take his weapons to practice. This was one of the several behavioral traits that saw a transfer to Argentina fall through.

"Hunger. It was a determining factor in my life. It's a determining factor in the lives of many," said Medina as tears streamed down his face.

He admits that being a young man from a single parent home was tough and if it wasn't for his mother, he would probably not be around. Yet through all of his hardships he continues to prevail and become one of the more high-profile poachers in the domestic league.

Still he fought his demons. The past life continued to gnaw at him; it seemed to find a way back and handcuff him. Wilder was reaching the apex of his career with Tolima, who at the time were perennial contenders for the title and had Medina as the guy up front.

There were a number of teams abroad asking for his services but once they knew about his marijuana addiction and eventual



suspension due to it, many backed away.

His first suspension would see him come back but only briefly as a second suspension was on the way. The biggest of several self-inflicted wounds on his career took place in September of 2011 where he was suspended for a year after a positive drug test.

Tolima then took it upon themselves to constantly monitor the player, but that would not prove enough. During his suspension he failed a drug test after it returned a positive result for cocaine. This was the last straw.

Los Pijaos and the player fell out. The club could not stand the excuses the player was making. If he was not helping his mother back home fixing her house, he would be lost in what could have been some of the binges he went through. Wilder in the meantime



Wilder Medina

From zenith to nadir; that was how far Wilder Medina's career fell. He was damaged goods. A liability. Could he be trusted? Many clubs in Colombian football agreed with Tolima, except Santa Fe.

As soon as his contract with Tolima was voided, Santa Fe president César Pastrana decided to bring him on board on one condition - he would undergo detox and rehabilitation. Wilder obliged and thus began a life-changing few months where he understood that failure was not an option for his career and his life.

"I'm very happy for the opportunity that was given to me

and I will take full advantage of it." Said a teary Medina the day he was signed. "I want to thank God and (president) César Pastrana for the chance I am being given and I hope to pay them back in goals".

Sixteen months since his last match and Wilder showed that a true goal scorer never loses his touch. He also began paying off his 'debt' to the club that gave him this chance.

On his debut he scored a brace and helped Santa Fe win their league opener against promoted Alianza. To many it would have seemed as if it was a one-off fluke; although after seven matches, Wilder continued at his relentless pace.

The Santa Fe man ran atop the goal scoring table with eight in the early stages of the season. While the future looked bright for the Colombian at Los Cardenales he eventually opted to switch to Barcelona SC. It was an unexpected move after impressing with 13 goals in 19 games for the Bogota-based club.

"If (José) Pekerman needs a goal scorer, I am here," said Medina a year ago. His desire is genuine, but the reality would not make it possible as his two previous positive drug tests would make him ineligible for international duty. It would also be incredibly tough to stand out with Colombia's current stable of forwards.

Whether he would play for the national team or not, at this stage, is irrelevant. His triumph over his demons has made him a player that is already a winner in life.

His reluctance to accept his mistakes and his zeal to correct him have made him one of the stories you would like to cheer for in Colombian football this season.

**By Juan Arango**

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# THIS IS RUSSIA

Can Russian football bridge the enormous social and talent gap between east and west? Can the 'Asian' east ever challenge the 'European' west?



“Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”  
Winston Churchill, 1939

Churchill’s famous words at the inception of World War Two ring out as strongly today as they did during the Soviet-Stalin reign. While communism and the original idea of Marxist Socialism have long since met their end, the autocratic feeling of ‘Mother Russia’ is as strong today as it’s ever been.

As Vladimir Putin continues to write his name in the long, glorious and often murky history of this wonderful nation, the disparity between east and west remains prevalent in a country which straddles two continents.

As the notion of Mother Russia continues to be a unifying influence over the 142 million people that occupy her land, the 5,500 miles that separate east from west ensure that ‘Home’ means very different things to people across the nation.

In Moscow, the feeling is that of Russia itself; many in the capital consider it to be the most active and secure identity in Russia. St Petersburg, in many ways, is the same. A trip to the city of Irkutsk, the historical Siberian trading centre, offers a telling difference.

In Jonathan Dimpleby’s outstanding BBC documentary series Russia, the people of Irkutsk identify with a very different feeling of home. Siberia is their Russia; the centuries old trading route where so many of the

natural resources that make up Russia’s wealth travel through today. Further east and the pacific city of Vladivostok is perhaps Asia trapped in Russia.

These palpable contrasts are a mirror to the nation’s football. In the Russian Premier League, no team graces the league from further east than Perm, a ‘mere’ 600 miles from Moscow. It leaves great cities like Vladivostok, Novosibirsk - the administrative capital of Siberia - and Irkutsk without any representation. Instead their teams are confined to yo-yoing between the first and second divisions.

It symbolises the wider divide in Russia. The easternmost team in the Russian professional football system is FC SKA-Energiya Khabarovsk, a team based in Khabarovsk, 500 miles north of Vladivostok.

While the city is 3,800 miles from Moscow, it’s only 19 miles from the China border. The 577,000 people of the city are largely unconcerned with Moscow, their loyalties lie to the Khabarovsk Krai people and their own concept of Mother Russia. The simple fact is Khabarovsk looks out to Asia, rather than over its shoulder to Moscow.

The divide is evident when teams from east and west meet. There are few, if any, away fans and the teams have to travel days in advance to negate the impact of jetlag and time difference. Perhaps this is why no Russian oligarch has yet considered it fit to plough substantial money into an eastern



Djibril Cissé

club. You would be forgiven for thinking it’s the economy of the region that holds back investment. In fact Khabarovsk placed first in the national award for the Most Comfortable and Developed City of Russia in 2006, 2008 and 2009. Since 2009 it has remained in the top five.

Similarly it ranked second behind Krasnodar as the Forbes magazine’s most suitable place for private business in Russia. It narrowly lost out to Krasnodar due to the western city’s major leisure and tourism appeal on the Black Sea. It’s no coincidence then that Kuban Krasnodar is a club on the up, bolster by signings such as Djibril Cissé, Charles Kaboré, Gonzalo Bueno and Ángel Dealbert.

The region is studied very little in Western Europe, indeed western Russia, yet it offers some of nation’s most impressive cultural diversity, architecture, academic possibilities and economic growth. The sheer distance makes it easy to understand why there’s such a

Zenit Fans



notable cultural gap; the vast expanse of Siberia and the Ural Mountains cannot be understated.

This gap in a nation's culture is straightforward to pinpoint elsewhere too. In England, for example, there remains a marked difference between the North and South. Finance is one, but the general speed and way of life, contrasts bluntly.

The north seems to better identify itself with old England – by no means a bad thing. Even in the US, the difference in mentality and way of life differ on the Eastern and Western seaboard. Even in a country that has experienced the greatest globalisation, its own people differ; none more so than north and south.

Having spent time living in New York and travelling through the Deep South, it's easy to see how geography alters perception.

Russia is the size of a large

continent. In that context, take Africa. The difference between the Arab, Muslim-oriented north contrasts wholly with the free spirited South Africa.

In Russia, the cultural gap is as ubiquitous. Many of the descendants in the east can trace their origins back to Mongolia and China. In spite of historical tensions along the Russia-China border, the past two decades have seen peace replace discord and tolerance replace racism. There's genuine reason to believe that the greatest region of cultural tolerance in Russia is the east. After all, it straddles Asia. While Khabarovsk is 3,800 miles from Moscow, it's only 1,000 miles from Tokyo and Beijing. It's immersed in Asia.

The potential for growth in eastern Russia and Siberia begs the questions why there hasn't been cogent investment in the regions football? Make no mistake; the game is played in schools and on streets.

Perhaps the wealthy oligarchs from Moscow and St. Petersburg prefer to identify themselves with Europe rather than Asia. Similarly they may also prefer to remain close to the economic heartbeat of the nation. As the wealth moves east this will inevitably change, but for now it's limited to the European half of Russia.

Could Russian football find itself encountering a new eastern power surge? It's difficult to imagine the likes of CSKA, Spartak and Zenit ever relinquishing hold on their vice-like grip of the nation's game but it's possible. It may even be that investment comes from Asian businessmen before it does Russian.

The Chinese game has experienced remarkable levels of private investment however the poor standard of league organisation and widespread corruption has tempered interest in recent months.

CSKA Moscow - Champions



The Russian league, generally well run and improving by the season, offers an interesting alternative. Within reasonable distance of Beijing and Shanghai, the economic hubs of China, Russia's pacific east may be the home of future investment.

The challenge, in sporting terms, is certainly a mouth-watering one. Can sustained, intelligent investment at youth level coupled with attracting a balance of Asian and Russian footballers work to dispel the western stranglehold on football? There's little to suggest it's impossible, even unlikely.

More Chinese migrants are moving to Russia than ever and their experiences contradict what the migrants suffered during the early years after the Soviet collapse. The original notion that they were invading Russia seems to have been replaced by genuine appreciation of their productivity and quality. An Asian businessman in eastern Russia would be welcomed with greater enthusiasm than in the west.

If the likes of Hulk and Axel Witsel, two outstanding talents brought in for a combined fee of £64m, can be booed from the stands in the west, an unknown foreign businessman is unlikely to be received well either.

The Russian game is a telling mirror of wider Russia. There's no denying that the economic power lays in the west, for now. The likes of Zenit, CSKA and Spartak are able to spend tens of millions each season in bolstering their respective squads. Consequently the gap between the top and bottom of Russian football grows ever larger. It's indicative of a wider problem in the global game.

However as wealth moves east and Siberia continues to harvest its considerable natural resources for exports along the pacific edge of Russia, the cities of that region will experience growth. Growth in Russia invariably leads to rapid growth in a short space of time.

Even Rubin Kazan, a small club with no major honours to their name until 2008, only grew alongside the

city's economic expansion. Just as Gazprom invested in Zenit when the country expanded its energy drive, there will inevitably be Russian, perhaps even Asian, businessmen interested in acquiring teams from the east. The challenge is undeniably exciting.

It was after a trip to the US in 1959, when Nikita Khrushchev famously said to the residents of Vladivostok to turn their city into "our San Francisco" – 54 years on and that dream may one day, in the not-too-distant future, become a reality.

And if it does, expect it to take football in the region with it. For when things grow economically in Russia, local football soon follows.

**By Omar Saleem**

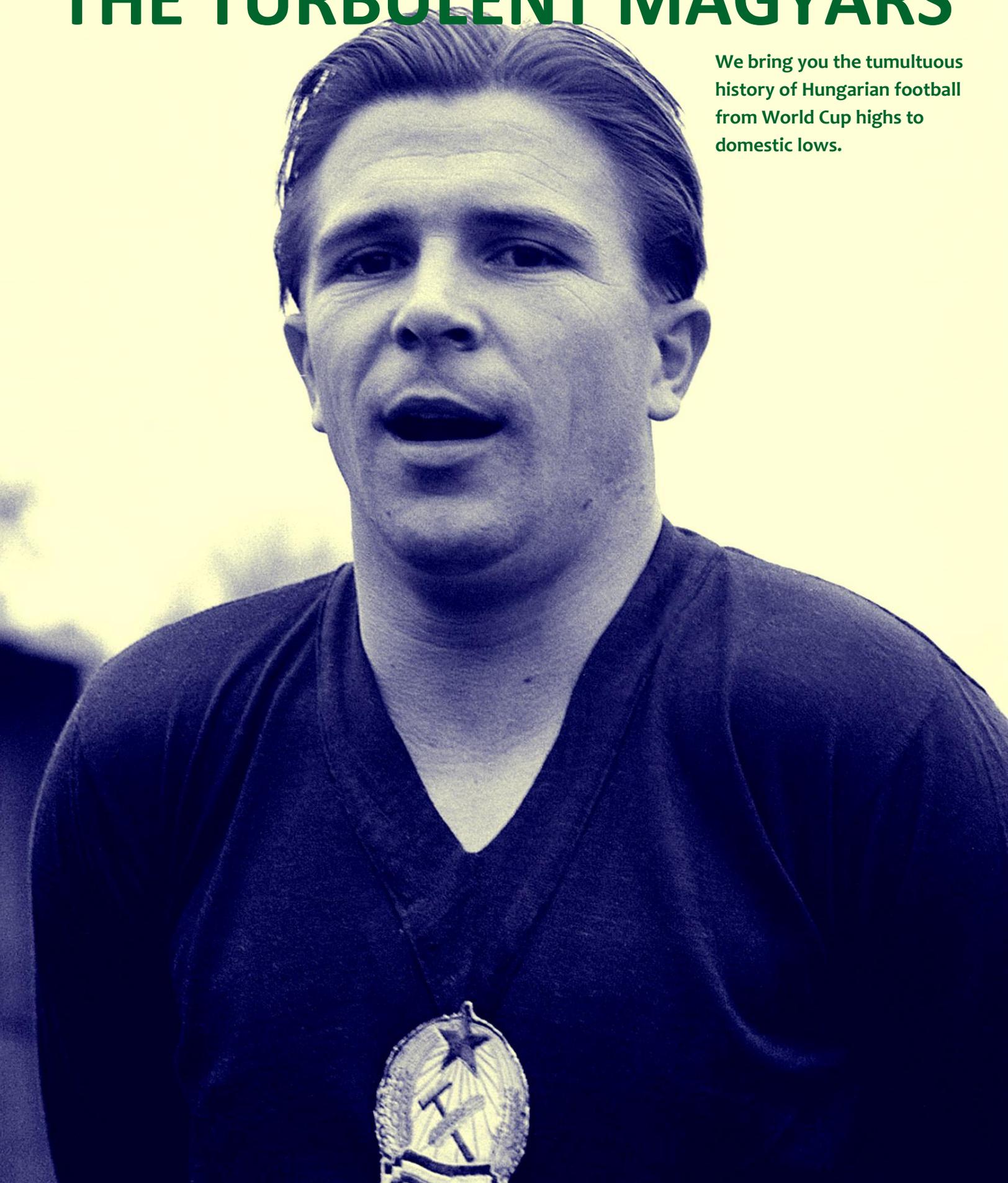
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# THE TURBULENT MAGYARS

We bring you the tumultuous history of Hungarian football from World Cup highs to domestic lows.



For the modern day football fan, unless you are well versed in the game's history, the mention of Hungary and 'The Magnificent Magyars' would not create much of a stir.

However, for those entering their retirement years and beyond the reaction would be a raise of the eyebrows and a nod of the head to a national team that were once considered the greatest team on earth and arguably a rival to the Brazil teams of 1970 and even the modern-day Spanish world beaters.

From a promising early history to the peak of their powers in the 1950s, ironically post revolution followed an ever so gradual decline to mediocrity and an extended absence from the elite of world football.

The domestic competition excelled on a similar timeline and pathway but with the fall of Communism in the 1990s came uncertainty and instability that has affected the national game but also seen largely continued dominance of a few clubs. Welcome to Hungarian football, where Ferenc Puskás may be the most popular figure but where many more legends were born.

At the turn of the century Hungary were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire along with Austria but the regions formed their own football associations, Hungary taking the lead. Their first official game would be a duel against their brother nation and ended in a heavy 5-0 defeat.



The Match of the Century

as their first decade was promising and by 1912 they could lay claim to hammering Russia 9-0 and 12-0 in consecutive games, the latter still their biggest victory in history.

Fate would derail momentum gained and it came in the shape of World War I; an obstacle that resulted in some of the world's strongest nations and competition withdrawing from FIFA and forcing friendlies against their former sibling. During the war years sixteen matches against Austria created the pinnacle of football boredom as their stars could not flex their might as they wished.

A mixture of fortunes followed as they were denied entry to the 1920 Olympics due to their role in the 'Central Power' along with Germany and an early exit at the 1924 Games prompted the sacking of their coach and the chief of the football association.

1927 saw the emergence of a free-scoring, adventurous Hungary. Buoyed by a revolutionary 2-3-5

formation, a complete reversal of a popular formation today, they destroyed France 13-1 in the Europa Cup and earned a runners-up medal in the game's first official international competition battled for along with several other nations.

With Hungary's invitation to the first 1930 World Cup lost in the post, they debuted at the 1934 finals and reached the quarter-finals followed by an incredible runners-up achievement four years later, losing out 4-2 to France.

War would once again paralyse the national team's development but when they emerged a decade later the result was phenomenal. The 'Golden Team' or 'Magnificent Magyars' would prompt so many gushing adjectives they would not fit on this page.

42 victories spanned a period from 1950 to 1956 with just one defeat in the game that could have elevated their place even more so in the game's folklore.

Florian Albert



West Germany conjured up the 'Miracle of Berne' and came from behind to snatch the World Cup trophy 3-2.

Regardless, the era saw a 31 game undefeated run with such highlights as the Match of the Century; a 6-3 defeat of England at Wembley and the next year coasting to a 7-1 win in a return fixture.

The team was blessed with incredible talent but the rightful poster-boys of the team were goal-machine Ferenc Puskás, Sándor Kocsis, Nándor Hidegkuti, Zoltán Czibor, József Bozsik and Gyula Grosics.

The first incarnation of Total Football saw a 2-3-3-2 formation that meant at the instant the ball was turned over from attack to defence and vice-versa, the team was fluid to change positions, a

feat made even more possible by a strict fitness regime.

Players floated between positions and had so much freedom that it would be akin to watching a modern-day team of ten Lionel Messi's in the outfield. Kocsis and Puskás benefitted the most and played together for the majority of their international careers scoring 75 goals in 68 games and 84 goals in 85 games respectively.

Throw in Hungarian Imre Scholsser with 59 goals in 68 games from 1906 to 1927 and combined you have three of the six top international scorers of all-time, rubbing shoulders with the great Pelé and Gerd Müller.

With the 1956 Hungarian Revolution came the break-up of the team. Despite the lack of superstars their Olympic Games record from 1960 to 1972 saw a Bronze, Silver and two Gold medals, adding to their previous Gold in 1952.

Their performances at major tournaments would start to subside in the 1970s and although regularly qualifying, the 1986 World Cup Finals in Mexico would be their last major appearance to date. Humbled by a 6-0 drubbing from the Soviet Union a period of wilderness followed and by the 1990s their slump to 87<sup>th</sup> in the FIFA rankings and the appointment of God-himself Puskás could not stop their descent.

When the year 2000 arrived and with nothing to lose the Hungarian FA experimented with foreign big-name coaches such as German

legend Lothar Matthaus and Dutchman Erwin Koeman.

These efforts were in vain as the senior team disappointed at every hurdle with the exception of an Under-20 team that clinched Bronze at the 2009 World Cup in Egypt. In contrast to the years of old the most recognised Hungarian player was and arguably still is veteran Zoltán Gera; certainly a capable Premier League but not in the mould of the former legend.

Furthermore the bulk of the rest of the national squad play either in the domestic league or at mid-level clubs across Europe. Currently their status shows no sign of abating with strong early efforts in qualifying for the 2012 European Championships and Brazil 2014 World Cup fading, culminating in a 8-1 defeat to the Netherlands just this month; the final nail in the coffin of hope and the final game of coach Sandor Egervari's reign.

The domestic top-flight competition, NBI or Nemzeti Bajnokság I, was founded along with the Hungarian Football Federation in 1901. The virgin season only featured teams from the capital Budapest and the first two seasons were taken by Budapesti TC.

Soon however Ferencváros would establish themselves early as a giant of Hungarian football winning five titles in the first decade and another five from 1908 to 1912. A legendary and fierce rivalry was born as MTK Budapest then won an astonishing ten consecutive titles from 1913 to 1924, adding to

the two they took in the first decade.

The pendulum of success would swing back for a short period to Ferencváros until a third suitor entered the battle.

Újpest would be the new kids on the block in the 1930s and 1940s winning five titles and the rest going to the other two heavyweights with little exception. Enter Ferenc Puskás and his team Honvéd to spoil the party and the threesome.

Honvéd boasted the core of the 1954 World Cup runner's-up national team and took five championships in the 1950s. This foursome would become an all-out football orgy as Vasas Budapest joined the party and shared most of the spoils with Ferencváros, taking four titles each in the 1960s.

Famously Honvéd were hugely affected by the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. While playing a European Cup game in Spain against Athletic Bilbao, the Revolution was starting back home. Instead of returning they played the second leg in Belgium and despite losing they embarked on a fundraising tour playing teams across Brazil, Italy, Portugal and Spain, their families joining them to tag along. When the adventure was over an exodus occurred with many of the stars joining teams such as Barcelona and Real Madrid in Spain.

At a time when the national team were mourning the retirement of their Magnificent Magyars, another gem would emerge.

Flórián Albert took the coveted European Footballer of the Year in 1967 and ensured Ferencváros excelled on the continent, only losing to Leeds United in the final of the 1968 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup, a forerunner for the UEFA Cup and what is now the Europa League.

Albert was almost as prolific as Puskás and was lauded as one of the most elegant footballers to ever play the game.

Thirty years after their first era of domination Újpest stormed into the 1970s with nine titles from 1960 to 1979, but would not take another trophy until 1998, their final one to date. Not to be outdone Honvéd surged forward in the next decade also with a second golden age and five titles but a key landmark was made when Győr became the first non-Budapest team to win the Hungarian League since World War Two.

With the national team's final appearance at a World Cup to date in 1986 the domestic league encountered problems of its own. Communism's demise brought economic instability, but success during the 1990s would return to the traditional powers chipping in with championship wins to ensure Ferencváros are still the most successful team with 28 wins, MTK Budapest following with 23 and Újpest with 20.

As the big three have only won three titles in the last ten years between them a new force has efficiently stamped its authority on the 21<sup>st</sup> century and put a temporary end to the Budapest dominance.

Debrecen won their first league in 2005 and now has six to their name. However the team has not performed as consistently in Europe and has been beaten comfortably and regularly, suggesting the gradual decline of ability on the domestic scene over the past fifty years.

The Loki have come under criticism along with other recently successful clubs, as has the league's authorities and government, for accepting money to stay competitive. This has been coupled with the constant change of league sponsorship every couple of years, a sign of instability and an unwanted distraction for a competition that once stood tall but now is considered the 29<sup>th</sup> best league in Europe.

Hungarian football has been dealt its fair share of setbacks and the majority of these came at the height of their powers. Despite these the nation will never forget this envied history.

It's scary to think how successful they could have been had they won one of their World Cup Final's and not had to deal with political instability, war and revolution. But as the years pass so does the hope that they will return anywhere near to former glories.

**By Terry Cornick**

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Terry is a freelance journalist who covers the weird and wonderful history of football from around the world.

Follow on Twitter @telthetourist

Ian Holloway



# SAY WHAT?

"I couldn't be more chuffed if I was a badger at the start of the mating season."

**Ian Holloway after beating Cardiff City**

**England manager Graham Taylor to the linesman:**

"I was just saying to your colleague, the referee has got me the sack, thank him ever so much for that, won't you?"

"When he plays on snow, he doesn't leave any footprints."

**Don Revie on winger Eddie Gray**

"Celtic jerseys are not for the second best. They don't shrink to fit inferior players."

**Jock Stein**

**Tottenham manager Terry Venables:**

"I had mixed feeling; a bit like my mother-in-law driving off a cliff in my car."

"I am not a perfectionist, but I like to feel that things are done well. More important than that, I feel an endless need to learn, to improve, to evolve, not only to please the coach and the fans, but also to feel satisfied with myself. It is my conviction that here are no limits to learning, and that it can never stop, no matter what our age."

**Cristiano Ronaldo**

"I was asked if I thought I was the right man for the job and I said, 'No, I think they should have got George Graham because I'm useless.'"

**Gordon Strachan at Southampton**

Gordon Strachan



'If you're a burglar, it's no good poncing about outside somebody's house, looking good with your swag bag ready. Just get in there, burgle them and come out. I don't advocate that obviously, it's just an analogy.'

**Ian Holloway after a controversial loss.**

**Brian Clough on his style of football:**

"If God had wanted us to play football in the sky, he'd have put grass up there."

"The problem with him having that great lump on top of his head is that I'm not sure he knows at which angle the ball will come off. It takes him so long to put it up I'm often waiting around to give the team talk."

**Frank Clark on Jason Lee**

# STATE OF THE GAME

With the naturalization debate gaining ever-more attention in England, Steffan Warren analyses why the FA are approaching the issue of English players' development from the wrong angle.



In the past few weeks, there have been two stories concerning English football that have really grabbed my attention. The first of these was the BBC study; *The State of the Game*, which found that only 30% of the minutes played in the Premier League belonged to English players, and that this has been a downward trend for the last 20 years.

The other story was the FA's announcement that they would revise FIFA's international eligibility rules in the hopes of being able to recruit Adnan Januzaj following his impressive performance against Sunderland.

These two stories are intimately linked in the sense that they are both related to the perceived inadequacy of the English national team. The BBC's study suggests that the lack of game time for English players is damaging to the national team if we compare the figures to more successful countries like Spain and Germany. The FA's pursuit of Januzaj, on the other hand, shows precisely the wrong kind of effort to solve such a problem.

Let us begin by looking a little bit further into the Januzaj case. It should first be noted that he is not English. Not by any stretch of the imagination. He could, however, be eligible to play for England if he acquires British nationality and spends five years living in England and playing in academy football.

In theory this should make it rather impractical for Januzaj to play for England, even if he wanted to, as

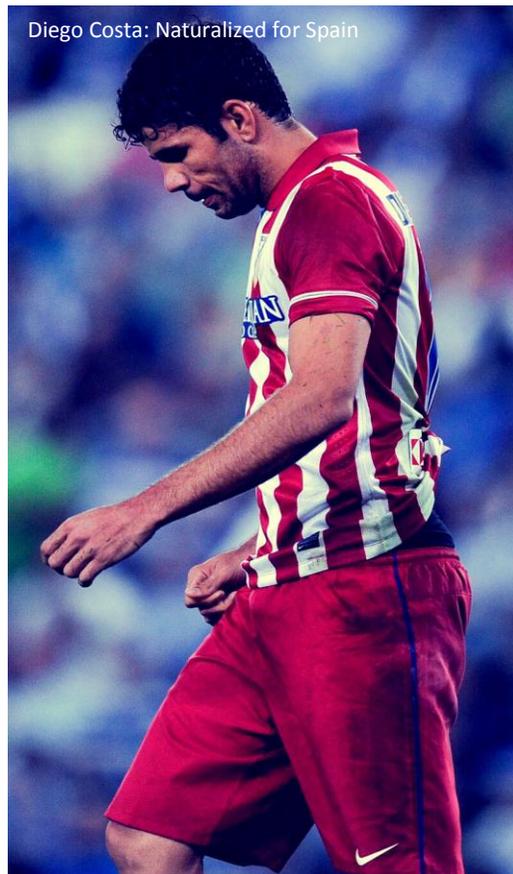
he would have to go through the motions of applying for British nationality, which under normal circumstances is a painful process.

In addition, he would have to abstain from international football altogether until the age of 23, which I doubt any professional footballer would want to do. It would certainly seem to be a waste of talent if he's as good a footballer as the FA thinks he is. The relevant FIFA legislation is strict and it looks like it will eventually prevent the FA from recruiting Januzaj, especially if he receives a call-up from Belgium in the next five years.

FIFA, surprisingly, probably have the best possible policy on matters of international eligibility. Permanent nationality is a prerequisite to representing any national team, and there is the five-year naturalisation rule, which accounts for people wishing to emigrate from their country of origin; an inevitability in our increasingly globalised world.

It is the individual governments of countries that are bending these rules – at the request of their respective football associations - in attempts to bolster their national squad in a way that clearly goes beyond the intention of the legislation.

Equatorial Guinea and Togo have come under scrutiny in recent years for fielding naturalised Brazilian players with no clear ties to the country. Eduardo da Silva is Brazilian born, yet had no problems in acquiring Croatian citizenship.



Diego Costa: Naturalized for Spain

Mario Balotelli, although he was born in Italy, has Ghanaian parents, and as such he was ineligible to apply for Italian citizenship until the age of 18. Nevertheless, the day after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he promptly received his Italian citizenship papers. Now there is nothing wrong with granting citizenship to people who happen to be footballers, however, they should not be exempt from the standard process of application that other people are subject to.

Applying for citizenship in the UK, for example, is an arduous process that can take up to five years. It simply isn't fair on regular people to relax these laws for professional athletes because the British government wants them to compete for them internationally.

To do so makes a mockery of the



best tactics and philosophy as well as who has best nurtured their indigenous talent. As such it is important to have measures in place that preserve the integrity of such competitions by preventing people from being able to transcend national boundaries.

While it can be difficult to legislate for this in a way that accounts for all eventualities, some cases are fairly clear-cut. Adnan Januzaj simply isn't English, and this brings me to my next point.

If the English FA were efficient enough at nurturing talent within their borders, they wouldn't be looking abroad to fill the void. Trying to hire players that have developed their talents in other countries isn't going to supplement the English national team's inadequacy, nor does it address the fact that there simply aren't enough world class English players for them to be taken seriously as competitors.

In response to the BBC's State of the Game study, the FA has set up a commission with the aim of improving the national team. While it can hardly be disputed that this is a good idea in principle the commission has already come under a lot of criticism from some prominent footballing figures.

It has been noted that the commission lacks the full representation of footballing society. There are no women for one thing, who are just as much a part of the national game as men, and there is no representation from local footballing authorities

or from schools.

If the FA is to provide a comprehensive solution to the national team's problems, they surely need to start from the ground up and that would entail consulting people who are involved at every stage of player development, from grassroots right up to the Premier League. If the aim is to improve the national team, then, fundamentally, this means producing better players.

While my contribution to such a discussion is limited, I can certainly see one key point that the FA would do well to consider. It is best to illustrate this point with an example.

Suppose that, in an attempt to increase the number of English players playing in the Premier League, they introduced a quota, stating that a minimum of x amount of English players must be fielded in every competitive match. While this would certainly increase the percentage of English players in the league, it doesn't necessarily do anything towards achieving their real goal, which is to improve the national team.

In other words, you get what you measure, but what you measure is only useful if you understand its implications. It might be argued that there are too many foreign players in the Premier League, and that this is preventing young English talent from breaking through; this may well be the case.

So, while we may all be able to agree that we want to see more

application process for citizenship and undermines the whole premise of international competition. It gives the idea that athletes are for hire and this certainly seems to be an idea that the UK has taken to historically.

One of the most famous examples is the case of Zola Budd, a South African middle distance runner in the 80s; one of the most promising of her generation. At the time, South Africa was banned from the Olympics because of apartheid and so Zola looked to other countries to take her on.

The UK jumped at the opportunity and she was granted citizenship virtually overnight. While one can sympathise with the fact that Zola was unable to represent her mother country, there is certainly no case to be made for her representing the UK.

The whole point of international competition in any discipline is to determine which country has the



English players getting game time, they should not do so because some quota mandates it, but because they are genuinely good enough to get into the team. If there are better players in the Premier League, then English players have no choice but to improve.

The Premier League is generally regarded as the best in the world, and while that is debatable, it should be seen as an opportunity rather than a hindrance to English players. The Premier League is supposedly the best because it is the most competitive, and it attracts most of the world's best talent.

English players have an opportunity to learn from, and play against the best players in the world and they should take

inspiration from this. What the FA should focus on is creating a structure from the bottom up that can match this competitiveness by producing players with enough talent to fight for a place in a top team.

The influx of foreign players is a challenge that should be met with enthusiasm. If the FA manages to get the percentage of minutes played by English players up to match the corresponding figures in Germany or Spain, they will have a competitive edge over other national teams and they could moonwalk their way to a World Cup.

Unfortunately the FA currently looks to be pursuing a top-down solution as always, given that everyone currently on its newly founded commission is involved in

the upper echelons of the game.

Any comprehensive, long-term solution needs to begin at grassroots. It is beyond me to suggest what such a solution might be, but one thing is clear; the answer is not to hire talent, but to nurture it.

**By Steffan Warren**

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Steffan is an aspiring sports journalist based in Moscow, Russia. Find more of his excellent work online at [www.thesefootballtimes.net](http://www.thesefootballtimes.net).

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# COACHING POSSESSION

UEFA A licensed coach Kieran Smith analyses how to coach possession-based football. What traps must a coach avoid when looking to implement this desirable modern system?





Over the last few years, elite teams, ordinary fans and youth coaches have become obsessed with possession style football and the notion of dominating the ball. After the success of teams like Barcelona, Swansea, Villarreal, Malaga and Spain it's understandable that youth coaches would want to implement this style. The big question for me is: do coaches understand what the possession style is and how to coach it?

I have had many discussions with coaches, seen many posts on forums and other social media platforms where coaches are saying that they are nurturing their team to 'pass, pass, pass' all the time. Players are even being told to pass when it's a detriment to other skills like dribbling or finishing. When some coaches are watching the matches of the aforementioned teams, all they see is passing and don't know what is actually happening.

What is a possession style of play?

The possession style is when a team aims to have more possession than the opposition, looking to control the game through retaining the ball and taking charge of their own destiny through attacking and not being reactive.

There are a couple of famous sayings by Johan Cruyff regarding possession, one of which is, "When you have the ball you have one problem, trying to score, but when we have the ball you have two problems, getting the ball and then trying to score." Now Cruyff is sometimes known for being a complicated genius but this philosophy is almost as simple as it gets. If you don't have the ball, you can't score.

So when this is the basis of your philosophy does that mean you keep possession in any way you can, with the main aim only to see if you can get more ball time than the opposition? Of course not. The teams that play a possession style keep the ball deliberately and know exactly what they are doing with it. When considered, do you really think about it; do you honestly believe that before a match the Barcelona manager give the tactical instructions 'When you get the ball, just pass it lads'.

"La Intencion es a mover la pelota, sino a mover la oposicion."

The quote above is from Pep Guardiola and it's not as well-known as it should be, considering how many coaches are trying to emulate the things he done at

Barcelona, with their youth teams. The quote translates as, "The intention is not to move the ball, rather to move the opposition."

This is one of the key points behind the possession style of play. Teams like Guardiola's Barcelona practice not only being comfortable in possession but specific passing patterns to create space for their tactical plans. So when we are watching and we see the Barcelona midfielders making short passes to each other back and forth, it's not just a pass for the sake of it or so they can have a fantastic pass completion ration at the end of the game; they are trying to draw the opposition in or move opposition players in/out of areas of the field to create space. Subsequently, when they see that space they will attack you at lightening pace.

This space can come from an opposition player switching off and taking up an incorrect supporting position or from a player getting frustrated and trying to make a tackle at the wrong time. When this happens and the opposition leave a space, it's exploited to its maximum potential.

Once teams realise they are playing against opponents that are good in possession, they may start trying to get men behind the ball and try to form a block. We have seen this many times with teams playing against Barcelona and Spain and it brings other problems when possession teams carry the ball into the final third.

There are numerous examples of this where the team in possession

will attack, probe and recycle the ball until they find an opening to shoot or to play a through pass into the box. When we watch this, the ball will move from one side of the pitch to the other until an opportunity for penetration presents itself.

### **Implementing Possession**

If you want your team to play a possession based style it takes a lot of time, patience and 100% confidence in what you're doing because there will be difficult times ahead, mistakes made and some goals conceded.

The first thing that's needed is a high technical ability so you still need to be working heavily in all technical aspects, especially if you're working with a younger age group. Passing, receiving, movement, support, body shape and communication are all vital skills when coaching your team to play a possession style. You don't need a lot of different passing patterns, especially with younger teams. Create a few basic patterns and then build or expand on those.

The first aspect is playing out from the back and the first signal/trigger is what happens when your goalkeeper gets the ball. Where do your centre-backs go? Should the goalkeeper look for one player or side in particular to start the build up? What should your team do if they are being pressed aggressively?

The second aspect is the middle third. Believe it or not, I've seen a lot of coaches miss this section out when trying to implement a

possession style. Some seem to think that if they play out from the back that the midfield sorts itself out, possession will be kept and they go straight to working on combination play in the final third.

You need movement in midfield to receive the ball and rotations to receive or create space. Do the wide attacking players drop in to be involved or is their movement only to create space for the full-backs to overlap? Is there a player on the opposition that you want to drag out of position to allow you to play into the final third easier? Can we create overloads whenever we have the ball in the middle third?

The final aspect is what you do when you're in the final third and looking to score. When you're in possession in the final third you could be playing against blocks of 8, 9 or 10 players between you and the goal. That brings its own problems.

Can your players play in tight spaces? Do you want to get a shot off as soon as you can or will you ask your team to wait for a specific type of opportunity? If you get a chance to cross the ball into the box, will you take it? Will you try to keep possession in the final third until you get an opportunity or play back into the middle third to try and encourage the opposition to come out and leave some space to exploit?

You need to think of all these things, and a lot more, when you want to implement a possession style of play. Once you have considered all of the aforementioned factors, you then

need to break them down into bite sized chunks and create sessions that applicable to your team and how you want them to play.

It's important to think about how you will start to technically and tactically break down your sessions progressively in order to keep your players out of their comfort zone; learning and continually progressing toward the style that you want to play. All this has to be done on top of all the other technical and tactical work.

### **Train Like You Play**

This is something that all teams should be doing anyway, but it's especially important in developing a possession style of play, because this is where we lay the foundations of these passing patterns and have players getting you to combining with each other.

Before that we need to lay the technical foundations needed to play this style whether now or in the future. A coach must create or adapt sessions to introduce your team to the style and then add simple passing patterns that you want to see in matches.

If you want to introduce players to building up possession and playing through the thirds, maybe you could play a small side game or a possession based exercise that has the area split into three zones and they will begin to see the difference in each zone and the consequences of losing the ball in each zone.

## Setting Targets

When you start using this style with your team, one thing a coach can do to check progress in matches is to set some targets for your team. You could ask them to try and play out from the back a minimum of 5 times in the first match. Tell them you would like them to try and play out from the back.

Other targets that can be set are passing sequences, so seeing how many times your team can achieve sequences of over five passes. Once they execute that consistently perhaps you can put the target up.

Be careful that you your team don't just pass to hit the target. Also, how many times can your team perform a passing pattern that you worked on in training and if they couldn't complete it, at what area did it break down? Setting targets can help you see some progress when first implementing this style of play.

## Passing, Not Dribbling

OK, using a possession style doesn't mean that we forgo all other options. The same coaches I mentioned at the start with this 'pass, pass, pass' mantra are usually the same ones that are telling players not to dribble. If you think of all the teams that use this style of play, they all have players that can dribble, commit players and create space in other ways to passing.

Even the incredible Barcelona team under Guardiola, known for their amazing distribution, had players

like Iniesta, Alves, Pedro and some guy called Messi that would regularly dribble and attack in 1v1 situations. We still need to coach our players how to dribble, run with the ball and how to attack in 1v1 situations, especially if we are working with youth teams.

One of the worst aspects I've seen of this regularly is when a team is trying to play out from the back. The goalkeeper passes to the centre-back and he immediately looks to pass to the defensive midfielder, despite him being 15-20 yards away.

The centre-back passes the ball to the midfielder and as the ball is travelling, the opposition close him down and force him to play backwards. After this happens a few times, when the centre-back receives the pass back he looks to play long. In this situation the centre-back should drive forward with the ball and the midfielder can fill into his position.

There is, of course, a time and a place to pass or to dribble and your players should be encouraged to learn which is which, as opposed to doing one over the other all the time.

## Summary

So in summary before we can use a possession style with our team, we need to understand what it is and that it certainly isn't 'pass, pass, pass' or possession for possession sake.

Teams that execute this style do so to dominate the possession and keep the ball until they can

implement their tactical plans or create an opportunity to score. When implementing this style of play, coaches need to understand that it won't happen overnight and you will need a lot of patience.

We also need to continue to coach the technical aspects of play because it's not only needed to develop this style of play but also to develop our players to their potential. Think about how you want to play through the thirds of the pitch and develop a few passing patterns and build on them rather than 10/15 different patterns.

Train how you would like to play on match day and set some targets for your players in order to see progress. Finally, don't neglect other technical aspects like dribbling just to focus on passing.

I think the possession style is great to watch and can help develop players the way we need to, so I hope this was useful and you can take at least one thing away from it that will help your journey towards replicating the standard of Guardiola's unbelievable Barcelona team and, maybe in time, everyone will be trying replicate your style.

## By Kieran Smith

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# FUTURO

Our latest Futuro edition examines five exciting youngsters who are set for future international honours. Under our gaze come Gabriel Barbosa Almeida, Liam Moore, Adrien Rabiot and Anthony Martial.



Gabriel (Front)



### Gabriel Barbosa Almeida

**Club:** Santos

**Position:** Striker

**DoB:** 30/08/1996

Muricy Ramalho is a Brazilian football oracle. You don't win the Copa Libertadores and three Campeonato Brasileiro's in a row on pure luck. In Brazil, and wider world football, it's safe to say Muricy is a coach that is an experienced figure head in managerial terms.

So a man that cultured doesn't just throw a 16 year-old forward into the lion's den unless he sees some prodigious ability. Even in a country that excels in thrusting adolescent talent into the first team, 16 years of age to be making first team appearances is a hefty decision to execute. Gabriel Barbosa Almeida left Ramalho with little alternative.

'Gabigol' is currently playing joint valedictorian, amongst the youthful ensemble at Santos, alongside good friend Victor

Andrade. The young forward started his playing career at perennial rivals Sao Paulo and after playing in a game of the much loved futsal against his eventual team Santos, Gabigol put on a one man show after scoring all of his side's goals in a 6-4 victory.

According to reports, two time World Cup winner and Seleção legend Zito, who made over 700 - no that's not a typo - 700 appearances for Peixe was present and took no time in contacting the right channels to begin the transfer of Gabriel from Sao Paulo, since the former midfielder held an executive capacity at Santos.

Come 2004, Gabriel was a Santos player and had continued his ruthless streak in front of goal. Fast forward to 2012 and after a sizeable catalogue of youth team goals, he has been doing his time and making his way up the ranks.

His progression should really have been exactly that, progression. But in his so called nurturing phase, Gabigol scored nine goals at the U17 South American Championships and has caused a serious stir within the Latin American footballing circles.

If the performance at the South American Championships caused a stir, his cameo appearances and handful of starts thus far have caused a tornado-like flurry. A goal against Gremio off the bench in the cup, still aged 16, was followed by a goal in the league against Vitoria later that week, yes still aged 16. So far Almeida has clocked up 12 appearances but recently his

playing time has slowed down. That is no testament to his performances but due more to his tender age.

You don't have to be Roberto Bettega or Steve Rowley to realise where Gabriel's strengths lie and which facets of his game have made him a minor celebrity in the barrios of Vila Belmiro. Like a predator in the 18 yard box, Gabriel should feature on a Nat Geo documentary.

His finishing instincts are clear cut and right or left foot Gabriel will look to place a delicate finish in the corner or smash a powerful drive past the keeper. His dribbling compliments his finishing marvellously as his excellent pace sees his almost signature dribble from the final third into the opposition box before you have even blinked.

There is a sense of tremendous self-belief, his body language gives the impression he is bordering on arrogant or just overly confident in his own ability. But his mannerisms of buoyancy are not reflected in his play but in his celebrations or off the field behaviour. There is far less flamboyancy about him on the ball in comparison to Santos' former favourite son Neymar (at least I waited this long before making the inevitable name drop).

Why wouldn't your whole atmosphere be engulfed in bravado after the amazingly modest beginnings Gabriel has come from? His father would leave for work every day at 4:30am and his mother would catch three buses every time Gabriel had

training, so would you not feel a sense of entitlement If you knew you had the talent and potential to leave behind the life of serious poverty many in Brazil look to elevate themselves from.

When Barcelona struck the deal for the worst kept secret in football in regards to Neymar's transfer, they pulled off an exceptional add on by securing first option on three of Santos' players, Gabriel being one of them; although the £50 million release clause in his contract could cool the transfer talk for at least a few years.

To be brutally honest, Neymar could be the best and worst thing that could have happened to Gabriel. In one sense he should follow his example, keep up performances and force your way into scouts, fans and world football's thoughts ultimately resulting in that decisive big money move to Europe, but with a less ostentatious style his direct manner may not win over fans who were in awe of step overs and rabonnas that Neymar chucked around for fun.

At the other end of the spectrum, everything he does could be quantified against his older counterpart. His exploits on the pitch will unescapably be measured up against the Barcelona striker and if the goals dry up the knives will sharpen.

A far-fetched and dramatic thought but the most important thing to remember here is Gabriel's age and it makes him a different entity from a youngster in one of Europe's top leagues.

His agent Wagner Ribiero reflected an opinion so true. "It is natural that there is this pressure, but he is humble and of good family. If you hurry to release it, you can skip steps."

Hopefully the footballing education he receives is not rushed and the quite obvious hunger for the game Gabigol expresses never escapes him. If his rise continues at this seemingly faster pace than Neymar, who knows how much of a transfer fee he could warrant. I told you it was hard not to draw comparisons.

### Liam Moore

**Club: Leicester City**

**Position: Central Defender**

**DoB: 31/01/1993**

"What's pressure? If you can't handle a bit of that what's the point of being a footballer."

The genuine feel of Liam Moore's whole aura in a recent BBC Sport interview and you really do get the sense that he fears no one. The Leicester City youngster can do no wrong at the minute and has just landed himself the Young Championship Player of the Month award. And deservedly so. You get the feeling, though, that the journey for the young defender has only just begun.

Born in Loughborough, a stone's throw away from the King Power Stadium, Moore is a local boy and whether you read his quotes or watch his interviews, there is a serious deep rooted connection to the club he joined as a seven year old.



Liam Moore

English, talented and humble, the stopper impressed within the youth set-up and quickly displayed his leadership qualities and captained a number of the youth sides he played in. Like so many youngsters in the lower leagues before him, Moore had impressed so much that he was sent on loan to Bradford City in 2011 to give the Englishman some regular game time and it was not a wasted six months.

After returning from his 22-game spell Moore finally donned the blue shirt of his boyhood club on January 2 2012. With every game, Moore looked more assured and comfortable playing in a Championship back line, but he would see another loan move come his way, this time to Brentford, to the surprise of many fans. This move that was initially seen as a strange and wasted choice ended up being an inspired decision by Nigel Pearson as the defender came back to the club fitter, stronger and hungrier.

The incredible athleticism combined with his evident physical presence are two of Moore's biggest assets, but don't be under the impression he is just your run of the mill bumbling English centre-back.

With this strength, Moore combines unsuspecting pace and a great reading of the game, but most of all he is a grafter, someone who is always concentrating and whether you need a Titus Bramble-style hoof up the pitch or a Ricardo Carvalho-style simple pass, Moore is content with either.

These traits are probably the reason why Arsene Wenger, David Moyes and Paul Lambert have all reportedly sent their chief scouts to watch the youngster. With no disrespect to the likes of Ravel Morrison or Wilfried Zaha who are two of English football's hottest properties right now, there is an alarmingly clear modesty to Moore.

In countless interviews he affords his success to playing in such an experienced side; a back line that contains former England and Fulham left back Paul Konchesky and club captain and player of the year Wes Morgan. Alongside Morgan, who Moore is extensively complimentary about, a unique partnership of youthful mobility and wise brute strength has formed.

Alongside Morgan, who Moore is extensively complimentary about, a unique partnership of mobility and strength has formed.

It is the manager Nigel Pearson however that Moore so graciously admires for giving him his big break, quoted in the same BBC interview saying, "I've got to hold my hands up to that one and say thanks to the gaffer."

What comes with the tag of being a great English talent is the pressure to succeed in the game; every match will be more and more scrutinised by the press and the fans, if not to create stories but to judge whether the hype has been worth it.

It's the norm over the last decade, once a youthful player is identified; we as a nation produce mass media and create a buzz that can sometimes overwhelm many young stars.

But with Moore, you get a distinguished feel and a sense of a player with a wise head on his shoulders way beyond his years; a player that doesn't look like he will be playing in the second tier of English football for much longer.

Joleon Lescott, Tim Cahill and Leighton Baines are all players who initially impressed in the Championship before becoming top flight regulars.

In an era when the cream of the English crop are syphoned through and locked down within a few months, it will be a short period of time before you hear Liam Moore's name announced in the team sheet on Match of the Day as opposed to The Football League Show.



**Adrien Rabiot**

**Club: Paris Saint-Germain**

**Position: Central Midfield**

**03/04/1995**

Form is temporary, class is permanent; an age old saying that is a more than apt saying to describe the last few years of Adrien Rabiot's career.

High profile transfers of young Europeans to the Premier League are well documented; José Antonio Reyes and Alberto Aquilani warranted multi million pound transfer fees and the pressure ultimately got to them, along with a spot in the physio room.

Relatively unknown players like Rabiot saw his signing for Manchester City go under the radar in 2005. The same concept still applies though, young foreign imports who can't speak the language coming to a foreign land

with different cultures and surroundings.

Sheikh Mansour put his hands in his pocket and picked out the spare shrapnel and loose button he had kicking about to buy Manchester City quite soon into Rabiot's tenure at the citizens. It looked like the young French midfielder, born in the Saint-Maurice suburb of Paris, would be a part of the new transfer policy to herald a long lasting legacy of blockbuster superstars intertwined with a La Masia-esque conveyor belt of youth players making the step up from the academy.

The former concept can boast players like David Silva and Yaya Touré, while the latter hasn't come into fruition like the Blue Moon-chanting club would have liked.

Rabiot lasted six months in England, unhappy and unappreciated he left for the next flight back to Paris, even with the offer of a six year contract on the table. You don't just offer a player not even in his teens a six year contract unless you're under the impression he's a keeper (not your David Seaman keeper before jokes are made).

Back at Creteil, a place similar to the prestigious Clarefontaine academy but think more Volvo than Ferrari, where City had originally signed Rabiot from, it took his stand out talent little time before home town club Paris Saint-Germain signed him onto the books.

After failing to make the grade or agree on a grade in the UK,

the young Parisian's career could have nose-dived like many before him, but his classy style of play only cemented PSG's longing to promote him through the ranks and go some way to easing the negative murmurs from the Parc de Princes faithful in regards to the lack of home grown talent within the squad.

After a glorious and astonishingly quick rise in the reserves, including a brace against Auxerre U19s that his PSG fanatic father Michel was able to attend despite a full body paralyzing injury that lead the family to believe he would never be able to see his son play, Rabiot signed his first professional contract in July 2012 aged 17.

A quote that will constantly be referred back to is President Sheikh El-Khelaifi's originally ludicrous, yet now much more believable claim that the French outfit are at the beginning stage of spending "500 million Euros in five seasons." El-Khelaifi hasn't disappointed either.

Despite the reported 40 million euros paid for Lucas Moura or the apparent 64 million shelled out for Edinson Cavani, it is the securing of the first PSG nurtured player to sign a contract under the new Gulf financed project that has paved the way to create the formula that counter parts Manchester City have in all honesty failed to produce; amalgamating established stars with cultivated starlets.

After initially impressing then coach Carlo Ancelotti, Rabiot was a regular in the match day squad and spent the first half of last season

making a handful of starts coupled with a string of substitute appearances; no mean feat of course but while 17 and in a team of players such as Verratti, Pastore and Matuidi the feat looks so much more impressive.

He made his debut against Bordeaux on August 26 and after the New Year, an instrumental decision to his success was taken when Rabiot joined a Toulouse side on loan that featured such talents as Frank Tabanou and Yassine Ben Yedder. If you haven't already witnessed his debut goal a month later in March versus Stade Brestois, you really need to get yourself to a computer. ASAP.

An all-action midfielder in the sense that he can play the CAM role or anywhere in central midfield, Rabiot is most certainly a ball playing midfielder as opposed to a ball winning one. Although he's not one for Paddy V style challenges, probably due to his broom stick like physique, Rabiot finds himself in all the four corners of the field, willing to take the ball in any angle or position while possessing wonderful ball retention skills.

Full of composure, he also enjoys the fact he has an excellent turn of pace for a central midfielder, something that is hard to find amongst his type of player. His spell at Toulouse was an exceptional one, starting the majority of the games until the close of the season. Now he is back in his home town, he is back in Paris and under new manager Laurent Blanc he will be looking to

forcibly create a space on the starting team sheet whilst surrounded by superstars in the changing room.

Has he let the scrutinised and celebrity-like culture of playing for PSG get to him? The recent start in a 4-0 drumming of Bastia would answer that question, if Laurent Blanc has followed the views of his predecessor Carlo and seen the ability in the home town boy; Adrien is in for an interesting season alongside other Parisian born talents such as Hervin Ongenda and Kingsley Coman.

The hipsters have got bored of telling you about Belgium's arrival on the international scene, "take it from me mate, Belgium are my outside shout for the World Cup" is a statement nearly every football fan has uttered recently.

If you think Diables Rouges are seeing a purple patch after a revamping of their international set up, the French are in for a splendid few years ahead with Rabiot one of the youngest in a epically gifted U21 side which includes already accomplished talents like Paul Pogba, Kurt Zouma and Raphaël Varane, whilst incorporating virtuoso squad members such as M'Baye Niang, Geoffrey Kondogbia and Florian Thauvin.

If Rabiot is training with Ibra, Cavani and Thiago Silva during the club season, then playing keep ball with the Pogba and Varane during international break, how can he not improve as every day goes by?

### **Anthony Martial**

**Club: AS Monaco**

**Position: Striker**

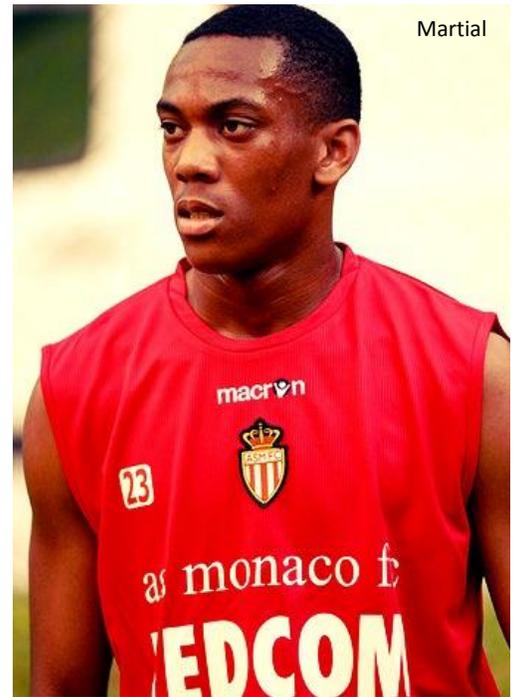
**DoB: 05/12/95**

Maybe Bafétimbi Gomis' 15 million euro move to Olympique Lyonnais from bitter rivals Saint-Etienne was cursed from the get go. After donning the jersey of once ephemeral Les Verts like many notable players before him, Michel Platini and Laurent Blanc just two names that probably wouldn't get picked last in PE, the powerhouse forward made the cardinal sin of footballing travesties.

Once turning out for ASSE in the Rhone derby, he made the 40 odd mile cross over to bitter rivals Lyon, and the drama that ensued when he signed has only flamed up like a forest fire this past summer.

The transfer would have had him feeling alienated from the Saint-Etienne faithful for some years now, yet the Stade de Gerland residents could unleash a hellish back lash if his insistence on reportedly refusing to take a pay cut in a move to Newcastle this August, which resulted in a mesmerising young forward having to leave the Former Ligue 1 champions to balance the books, turns out to be the most foolish decision since Samuel Eto'o thinking Anzhi was the "right club" for him.

In the midst of this chaotic soap opera-style turn of events involving numerous slagging matches between Gomis and outspoken Lyon chairman Jean-Michel Aulas,



the elephant in the room has a 'what if' cloud hovering over the forcible release of said mesmerising striker Anthony Martial.

A player, who thanks to Bafétimbi, has entitled a 5 million euro transfer fee at the fickle age of 17. Gomis' refusal to leave Lyon and Lisandro López's departure, according to Aulas, meant that the books had to be balanced one way or another and Martial was apparently the sacrifice. Naturally, the principality club AS Monaco and their Russian owner Dmitry Rybolovlev played good Samaritan and saved the day (cough), superman red cape style, stumping up the fee for the teenager.

The back story with Gomis and the episodes relating to the young teen strikers fascinating transfer are imperative to creating the buzz and painting the full picture in regards to how special a talent he is for such a fracas to be caused.

Born in Massy, a southern suburb of Paris and also birthplace of Arsenal's Yaya Sanogo, the youngster was spotted by Olympique Lyonnais scouts, invited to train and eventually join the fruitful academy at the age of 14. Two seasons into his tutelage and Martial was already posting figures like 32 goals in 21 games for the youth side.

Well on course to become a first teamer similar to Clément Grenier and Maxime Gonalons path in the starting line-up, the teenager was most certainly disturbing the peace on not only a national but international level amongst scouting networks around the world with clubs like Juventus reportedly expressing an affinity to the player.

His brilliance was recognised by Remi Garde and Martial made his debut last December in the Europa League making a substitute appearance and subsequently went on to make a handful of appearances of the bench that season. His euphoric form with the second string and youth set up forced a call up to the epically poised talent in Willy Sagnol's (remember Willy Sagnol, Bayern full back; what a guy) U21 side, making him one of the youngest members of the squad alongside Adrien Rabiot.

His Guadeloupian heritage will keep the comparisons to a certain Renault Clio advertising va va vooom legend who also dazzled the Stade Louis II before making the move to Italy and then, of course, North London.



Of course, I'm not going to try and compare the ability of Martial and Henry at this moment in time because the top and bottom of it is one could slalom through the greatest of defences and pick locks with his right foot, while the other is an adolescent prodigious talent just trying to settle in at his new club.

The unique style and technique can most certainly be mirrored in Martial's football though. The dribbling with lightning speed and sublime first touch are features in his game that the forward has clearly moulded around the former Arsenal legend who also happens to be his idol. Add to that the clear exemption to pressure when on the field, so easily visible when you see how composed Martial remains whether in front of goal with his deadly finishing or standing at the 18 yard box surrounded by three defenders whilst still finding that pin point through ball, and you can see why comparisons are made.

5 million euros is an incredulous fee for a player who hasn't made

enough starting appearances that you can count on one hand, but surely that just creates more of an intriguing haze around the French youth international, positive or negative that may be.

The way I see it though you never let your mercurial elites go so it makes you wonder the talents within the OL academy if a player of Anthony Martial's quality is the make weight. Bafétimbi might have fallen out with Aualas, but if Martial continues his excellent progression at Monaco under the tutelage of the tinker man and shadowing a world class striker like Radamel Falcao, Bafétimbi may never be welcome in Lyon again.

**By Naz Haque**

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Naz is a regular columnist on tFt, specialising in youth football and the next generation of stars making their way in football. To read more of his outstanding work, follow Naz on Twitter:

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# SPONSORING GRASSROOTS

With a number of financial incentives and benefits, why should businesses invest in their local amateur football team? What are the returns and long-term benefits? David Thomson from Soccer United offers a comprehensive break down.



In today's tough economic climate, local businesses are finding it increasingly challenging to compete with their big brand rivals, internet shopping and retail centres. Small business owners are constantly creating new, innovative methods to stay competitive, yet many remain unaware of a prevailing opportunity to increase revenue that has been successfully practiced in the UK for decades.

Did you know that on average a local business can expect to return between £1,500 and £10,000 per annum by sponsoring a nearby sports team? Welcome to one of small business' best kept secrets.

Having played non-league football for the past 15 years and having been involved with helping other grassroots clubs secure sponsorship deals, it never ceases to surprise me when business owners dismiss the opportunity to get involved in funding their local sports club.

From my experience the most successful independent businesses are the ones who embrace the idea of getting behind their local community as often as they can.

It's a simple concept however the word sponsorship can carry with it some negative connotations. When a business owner is first approached with the idea of sponsoring a local football team their initial fears involve the following:

- Many wrongly believe that they will have to pay £500-£1000 up front to purchase the team's kits with their logo imprinted on the front. A substantial outlay for a small business trying to find ways to compete.
- They imagine that kit being paraded every Saturday or Sunday at the local park in front of one man and his dog and a couple of stray teenagers, gaining them neither exposure nor extra income.

But I believe that these fears are unfounded and these business owners are missing a trick. Many other successful businessmen have cashed in on the benefits, and this is why local football sponsorship is so popular the length and breadth of the UK.

Let me explain how and why.

Over the past ten years independent businesses have faced increased competition in the form of downsized supermarkets, retail developments and the growing popularity of online shopping. Consequently many of them have simply ceased trading. However, not all of them have gone to the wall. Many local businesses continue to flourish and here are some of the reasons why:

- They've adapted to change
- They've become more niche
- They're more competitive on price
- They offer a better service or product



Grassroots clubs need sponsors

- They offer a more personal experience, that can't be found in the local supermarket or in front of your computer.
- They've learnt to invest in their local community, whatever their industry.

Local Pubs, coffee shops, florists, mechanics, restaurants, etc. are now all competing with big brand competitors and although they may capture passing trade from time to time, their principal custom comes from the local community in which they operate. Building a relationship and trust with their regulars is the key to them surviving and competing in Britain's capitalist, competitive market.

So how does this all tie in with football sponsorship? At the heart of every community in the UK there will be handful of dedicated football teams plying their trade

in the lower leagues of the English football pyramid. More often than not, the story behind each of these teams will be a heart-warming one - involving a handful of people, or sometimes just one or two, sacrificing their spare time and much of their hard-earned cash in order to bring together people from the local area to create a team.

It's estimated that on average, a grassroots football club has an annual expenditure of roughly £4,000. The amateur game is no longer simply a case of turning up at the local park with your muddy boots. Nowadays, you'd better put your wallet in the boot bag too.

But why does it cost so much money to run a non-league football team?

To help explain a club's expenses, I have provided a breakdown of my own clubs' costs for the 2012/13 season below.

The breakdown is for the 2012/13 season for LM United who played in the Premier Division (Tier 14) of the Kingston & District League.

Surrey FA Fees: £196

League Fees: £295

Training Ground Fees: £70 x 52 weeks = £3640

Match Day Fees: 15 x Home Games at £60 = £900

Ref Fees: 15 x Home Games at £30 = £450

Team Kit: £750

Training Equipment: £250

Socials: £800

Total: £7,281

These figures do not include other expenses covered by the players, including travel to and from games and training, mandatory equipment such as goal nets, corner flags, linesman's flags, correct colour sock tape, etc.

With over 7000 registered men's amateur football teams and 1,000 female sides in the UK it's no wonder there's a clear need for funding in grassroots football. Hundreds of local clubs fold each season, unable to afford the running costs, which not only causes havoc for the organising body, the FA, but also affects local communities, with many residents - especially youngsters - unable to practice the sport they love.

But supporting the costs of a local football team isn't just about supporting your local community, it's proven to help your business too.

How so? Let's start by looking at the demographics of a community football team.

In general these teams are:

- Between 15-30 people strong
- Generally Male
- 16-40 years old
- Live locally to where they play and train

- Enjoy sport, especially football

- Enjoy socialising together

- Have families and friends that also live locally

- Gather together at least twice a week to play and train

When analysing the make-up of your typical 11-aside local football club, it quickly becomes apparent that for many small business owners, they represent their perfect target consumer.

So let's unveil how the sponsorship tool is such an effective method to unlocking their consumer potential.

There are various ways of defining the concept of sponsorship. One useful version, put forward by S Sleight in the 1989 publication, *Sponsorship – What It Is And How To Use It*, reads as follows:

"Sponsorship is a business relationship between a provider of funds, resources or services and an individual, event or organisation, which offers in return rights and association that may be used for commercial advantage."

The most common mistake that local football teams make when approaching businesses for sponsorship is that they do not recognise their main asset. They often view themselves as the Manchester United of the non-league world and sell the idea of shirt sponsorship rights and adverts on their website.



These clubs fail to recognise that this will generate next to no real income for their potential sponsor.

The biggest asset that a non-league football team has to sell a local business owner is themselves, and the sooner they realise that the more likely they are to secure a partnership.

Here's an example of what happens when a pub sponsors a local team:

- A typical football team will have 15 registered players in their match day squad.
- On match days between 5-10 fans will typically come along.
- The visiting away team will also be made up of 15-20 people.
- After each game, the team take the fans and visiting players to their local sponsoring pub.
- This pub sponsors them for £1,000 per year.

- Studies show that on average, Britons spend £10.88 each time they enter a public house
- Between 20–40 people will go to the pub after each home game (spending a total of £200 - £400)
- They play 15 home games per season (bringing their sponsor revenue of £3000 - £6000)

The profit brought from match days alone is great; however, this is just the beginning of the benefits for the sponsor.

As I mentioned earlier when looking at the profile of non-league clubs, they also meet to train once, sometimes twice, a week. Afterwards, half a dozen may regularly go to their local for a drink and/or some food. Furthermore, as all of the players live locally, they may well come in on a Tuesday or Wednesday night to watch the Champions League game after work or bring their family out for a meal.

Positive word of mouth is also a telling incentive. Many pubs will hang the team photo on the wall, display their team's trophies and feature their images and results on their website. This demonstrates to other locals that the business is supporting the local community and is a great conversation starter for anyone new to the area:

"Is that the team you sponsor?"

"How are they getting on this season?"

"Where do they train, I might try out?"

The example of the pub above is a typical one that has worked for decades the length and breadth of the British Isles however there are many examples of this successful model being adapted to fit a wide range of business types, such as Mechanics, Restaurants, Nightclubs, Local Taxi firms, Builders merchants, Butchers, Estate Agencies, News Agents and Barbers.

For business owners however, this is not the end of the story. If the above example was so conclusive then wouldn't every small business owner be ploughing money into local sports teams? Also many will ask; if the above is true why do you hear news of negative experiences regarding the sponsorship of community teams?

The simple answer to these questions is that the most successful partnerships always practice the following:

### **Offer Incentives**

Research shows that at all levels of business, incentives offered to loyal customers keep them coming back for more.

As Jemima Bird, Marketing director for Tragas Group (Café Rouge, Bella Italia, Strada) says; "Promotions drive footfall, both new and loyal, and if a loyalty promotion encourages a customer to turn to your brand over another, then this is a win-win."

Susan Aubrey-Cound, Chief Executive of ecommerce, A&N Media and formerly of Marks and

Spencer, also supports this view, advising that, "Regular discounts can form and reinforce purchase habits and create a variety of emotional loyalties among regular customers."

Continuing with the pub analogy, this theory suggests strongly that the pubs that offer their sponsored team an added incentive will prove to be the most profitable.

For example, the landlord could offer £5 burgers to his sponsored team on matchdays or a discount on the price of a pitcher of beer. These incentives cement the idea within the team that they are special and highly valued by their sponsor; that they are more 'loved' than the typical customer. This in turn generates a feeling of belonging and their loyalty to the sponsored business is further strengthened. It's simple stuff but really effective.

### **Create a Shared Story**

The second trick to a successful deal is to unite forces and create a shared story. The easiest and most common way to achieve this is to organise a charity event mid-way through the season.

It may be a charity bike ride, or shaving off everyone's hair, or participating in Movember, however the most important thing is that the staff of the business and the members of the sponsored football team are brought together.

This unity and joint effort further installs and bond between the sponsor and their team, helping to

generate a family feel and a sense of trust and loyalty.

Once these two aspects have been mastered and added to the sponsorship mix, experience shows that there is no stopping the success to be had.

If you remain sceptical over the possibilities of local sports sponsorship it is always an idea to compare the alternatives.

What advertising alternatives are there for between £500-£1500 that will last for an entire year and not only create awareness but also give back to the local community and guarantee local, loyal, repeat customers?

Adverts in local papers, on the local radio and on billboards are expensive short-term solutions that, yes, create awareness, but do they do anything to help the local community? Do they guarantee loyal customers? And can you really measure how effective they were?

Traditional adverts on billboards and paying huge sums of money for adverts to appear at half-time in the world's biggest sporting events are being abandoned by big brands. Instead they are exploring the possibilities of hand-on sponsorship that can produce a measurable return of investment and don't rely so heavily on exposure.

It's one thing for many people to see and hear an advert about your business, it's quite another for them to actually use your business. By sponsoring local people as

opposed to a billboard, you not only can guarantee new loyal customers, but you now also have various walking, talking billboards who will tell friends and family about your kind act of generosity and pitch good vibes about your business via word of mouth; the single most powerful marketing tool according to research.

In conclusion, if you run a small business, the next time you are approached by a local football team to help them out with the purchase of some kits and equipment, control your urge to hurry them away and really consider their credentials.

Weigh up whether or not what they are proposing could turn into a real money spinner for your company. It's surprising what goodwill can do for a small business.

This is not a new concept, you may have already known all of the information set out but hopefully it just encourages you to take the next step and reach out to your local community.

### **By David Thomson**

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David is the founder of Soccer United and is aiming to attract sponsorship to amateur clubs while helping football development in Africa.

Visit [www.soccerunited.co.uk](http://www.soccerunited.co.uk) for more on his great quest.



# SKREAMER



## TECHNICAL SPECS

ClawTec Blades designed at the optimum angles.  
 Carbon X-bow Shank for hyper-acceleration and game enhancing.  
 SkreamFree internal construction – stitch-less construction inner.  
 S-Lite superlight microfibre one piece upper for incredible weight.  
 ArrowBed Insole – to stimulate circulation to the foot bring extra touch.  
 ArrowHead Forefoot Vamp for accuracy and power.

## PERFORMANCE

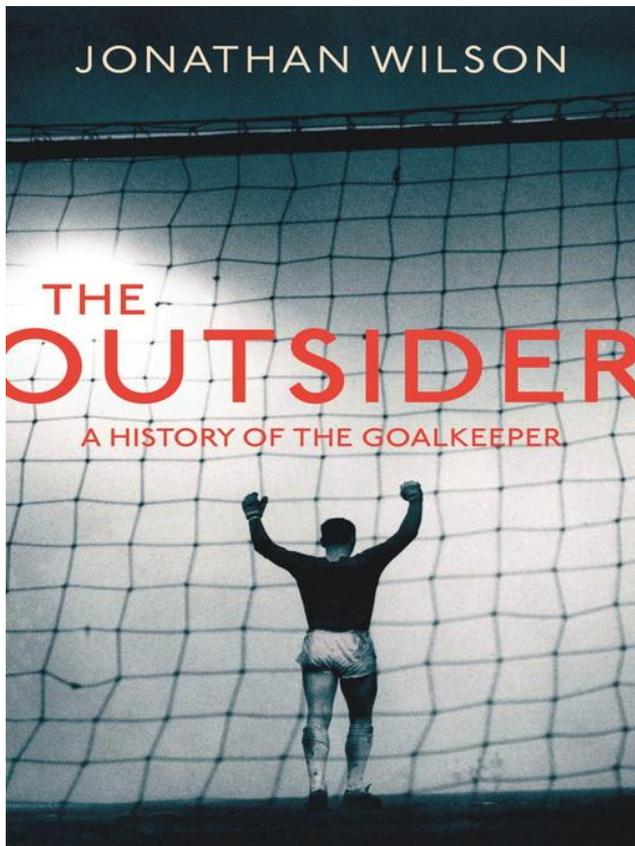
Whenever a new company makes a foray into the boot market, scepticism is abound. tFt are pleasantly surprised by the performance of the boot - one of the best new models we've tested. The upper gives a consistent and easy feel for the ball and the K-Lite leather is unlike any other we've felt. The external heel counter is flexible yet solid and the studs are impeccably arranged, giving maximum grip and stability even in harsh wintry conditions. The lack of stitching ensures the boot moulds superbly around the foot and with gradual use will increase its comfort and flexibility. Warrior has invested heavily in R&D and the boot is said to increase blood flow to the key areas of the foot.

## DURABILITY

The one piece upper design theory is both flexible and durable as Nike has consistently demonstrated with their Vapor range. While the Skreamer is in the Power market, the lightness and lack of stitching gives impressive returns. The boot is well put together and Warrior claim the sole and toe are connected better than any other boot on the market (time will tell). The leather on the K-Lite version is high grade; in fact the leather will gradually become softer and more durable over time. The sole plate is sturdy which gives the foot a better balance and ensures injuries are kept to a minimal when twisting and turning. The durability of the heel counter is also impressive and the stitch-less inner should, in theory, limit the amount of wear inside the boot. A strong performer that beats the Predator LZ for durability.

## WARRIOR SKREAMER

At £109.99 RRP, the boots are slightly cheaper than their main competitors. Players who are currently wearing the boot include Vincent Kompany, Jonás Gutiérrez and Marouane Fellaini.



# THE OUTSIDER

## JONATHAN WILSON

"A splendid history of football's complicated scapegoats."  
Jim White, The Daily Telegraph

"Fascinating"  
The Literary Review

"You'll never view the Number 1 in the same way again."  
FourFourTwo

**tFt Score: 10/10**

### The Review

'Aloof, solitary, impassive, the crack goalie is followed in the streets by entranced small boys. He vies with the matador and the flying aces, an object of thrilled adulation. He is the lone eagle, the man of mystery, the last defender.'

Nabokov (quoted above), Camus, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, James Joyce, even Julian Barnes ...it's safe to say the goalkeeper hasn't always been a team player. In *The Outsider*, Jonathan Wilson traces the sometimes dangerous intellectual and literary preoccupations of the keeper, and looks at how the position has secured a certain existential cool, as well as taking a deep tactical and technical look at the history of goalkeeping. There has been the odd, minor work on goalkeeping in the past, but nothing like this in scope or depth.

*The Outsider* is Jonathan Wilson's unique and well researched look into the history of the man between the sticks. Clearly a long time in writing with contributions from across the world, this fascinating book is the first of its kind and a philosophical gem.

The book follows the evolution of the goalkeeper since the invention of football and the on-going development of the game. Contributions from the world renowned greats including Yashin, Zoff, Seaman and Buffon give a telling insight into the mind of the goalkeeper and their on-going battle against chronic aloofness.

For tFt the highlight of the book is without question the story of the battle for the number one position between the Cameroon keepers N'kono and Bell and the political sensitivity of their rivalry. A story that will make you contagious with a need to research it yourself, once you read Wilson's book you'll soon realise it's a rivalry that cannot exist in any other position on the pitch. In addition to the Cameroon story, Brian Glanville's contribution is typically bullish and frank.

This book is nothing sort of a masterpiece, full of wonderful stories and historical insight into the lonely nature of being a goalkeeper. The best football book we've read since *Inverting the Pyramid*.

# GET MORE

Huge thanks to George Pitts, outstanding young writer and editor, for sub-editing this month's issue. Follow George on Twitter @GeorgePitts\_

Don't forget to check us out at [www.thesefootballtimes.net](http://www.thesefootballtimes.net) and join in on Facebook and Twitter. Search these Football times and you'll find us across social media platforms.

The website is updated daily with great new features so be sure to continue reading tFt throughout the month.

As ever, thank you to all our readers for their continued support and the writers who make this all possible.

