

FOOTBALL ACROSS THE ETHNIC DIVIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Football in Bosnia-Herzegovina, like almost everything else in that fractured country, has mirrored political divisions. However, this year finally brought some changes which may mark the beginnings of a new period. Of particular significance was a football match which took place on 13 August 2000 in Mostar, a town which epitomises the destruction and divisions resulting from the Bosnian conflict.

INTER-ETHNIC FOOTBALL FINALLY KICKS OFF

After several years of stymied efforts, an inter-ethnic football competition in Bosnia-Herzegovina finally started. Until the 2000-2001 season football clubs in the country competed in three separate, ethnically-based, leagues with three different football associations having been established representing Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs respectively.

The quality of football was low and attendances poor. Attempts by the European football authorities to organise some sort of joint competition failed to bear fruit. As a result, clubs from Bosnia-Herzegovina were not invited to compete in European competition: the Champions League and UEFA Cup. This was set to change this year as representatives of all three ethnic associations agreed to a draft statute, prepared by World football association (FIFA), on a unified football association of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

However, when the statute was due to be implemented, the representatives of the Serbian association refused to take part. They claimed that according to the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, sport issues are under the jurisdiction of the two entities (the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serbian entity, Republika Srpska). Consequently they claimed that football association of Republika Srpska, should be directly represented in international bodies and competitions. Given the Serbian side's poor track record on issues of cooperation and football's status as traditionally the most popular game in the country, it was perhaps unsurprising that the Serb authorities wanted to express their separation once again through this issue.

Both UEFA and FIFA stated that Bosnia-Herzegovina could only be represented by one football association and banned clubs from Republika Srpska from the international stage. In order to decide which of the remaining teams would represent Bosnia in European competition, a playoff was organised between three Bosniak and three Croatian clubs. The playoff was staged without serious problems and the competition was won by club named Brotnjo from small Western-Herzegovian town of Čitluk. Brotnjo became the first football champions of Bosnia-Herzegovina in history and entered this summer's qualifications for the Champions league.

The playoff was made possible partly due to the fact that the town of Mostar was represented by only one club, Zrinjski, which is based in the western, Croat-controlled, part of Mostar. The team currently based in the eastern, Bosniak-controlled, part of the town, did not qualify. Why was this factor so important?

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In this context, it should be noted that the playoff between the Bosniak and Croat clubs had been scheduled for the beginning of the 1999-2000 season but failed to materialise principally because two teams from Mostar could not agree upon the use of the central football ground in Mostar. This represents a clear example of the symbolic significance of particular pieces of territory, in this case a piece of territory the size of a football ground.

MOSTAR'S FOOTBALLING INHERITANCE

Unfortunately, Mostar's footballing inheritance does little to help resolve the issue of sovereignty over the football ground. Before WW II there were two major teams in Mostar. Zrinjski was founded in 1905 and is therefore the oldest of all existing football clubs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In an ethnically mixed town, Zrinjski came to be the club representing the Croatian community. It was named after a hero of Croatian medieval nobility, had Croatian chequered arms in its emblem and mostly Croatian lads played for it.

Another team, Velež, was founded in 1922 and became characterised as a workers club with Bosniaks dominating among its players. Following WWII, however, the communists banned Zrinjski, while Velež continued its existence, with the red star dominating the club's emblem. After its rival club was eliminated, Velež remained as the only team from Mostar and Herzegovina in the Yugoslav premier league.

Velež used the Bijeli Brijeg football stadium to stage its matches as this was the only ground in Mostar suitable for the highest level competition. As the years went by, Velež became generally accepted by the ethnically-mixed town population but never attracted widespread support in the ethnically 'pure' hinterlands. Indeed, Croats from Western Herzegovina widely supported Dinamo Zagreb, while the Serbs from the eastern part of the province tended to follow Red Star Belgrade.

This situation changed with the end of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991. The Croats revived their traditional club Zrinjski. Velež, already largely Bosniak dominated, continued to play in the so-called Yugoslav league with Serbian clubs for almost a year although teams from Croatia and Slovenia had withdrawn. When the town of Mostar was divided along a line mostly coinciding with the Neretva river, the Bijeli Brijeg football stadium, located on the righthand side of the river, was left under Croatian control. The Bosniak-dominated Velež club moved to the left, Bosniak-controlled, side of the river and began using a football ground in the Vrapčići suburb of Mostar.

A DISPUTE OVER FOOTBALL TERRITORY

When talks about an inter-ethnic competition started in the post-Dayton era, the two Mostar teams immediately quarrelled over the right to use the Bijeli Brijeg ground. Zrinjski, the oldest team in the country and previously banned by the communists, considered it natural to use the ground which was in the western, Croat-dominated, part of the town where the club was based. Velež, from the other side where it was exiled as result of Croat-Bosniak conflict, also claimed the Bijeli Brijeg stadium on the basis that the club had used Bijeli Brijeg as its home ground for almost half a century following the WWII. Despite their territorial dispute over the ground, the two Mostar teams did not in principle object to playing one another – as demonstrated by a friendly match at a neutral ground in 1999 which ended in a 2:2 draw without violence.

Without Velež taking part, the 1999/2000 playoff was possible because there was no dispute about Bijeli Brijeg stadium. Ironically, the draw to determine the fixtures for the new Bosniak-Muslim premier league was less 'politically patient'. Velež were set to host Zrinjski at the very beginning of the competition and a dispute instantly arose. Velež refused to host Zrinjski at the Vrapčići ground and insisted on playing its home match at Bijeli Brijeg. In contrast, Zrinjski maintained that the match should take place at the Vrapčići ground where Velež is effectively based at the moment. A football scandal capable of derailing the newly formed inter-ethnic league threatened once again, but this time was avoided at the last moment.

The match was postponed for a week, but finally took place on 13 August in front of well-attended stands of the Bijeli Brijeg stadium. The supporters of the two teams were separated and marshalled by more than 500 policemen. They vociferously

supported the footballing representatives of their respective ethnic groups and even more devotedly directed verbal abuse towards the other side's fans. Nevertheless, there were no clashes among the fans and the long-awaited inter-ethnic league in Bosnia-Herzegovina finally started.

FOOTBALL ACROSS THE ETHNIC DIVIDE?

The question is, can one say that in Mostar football was played across the ethnic divide? Unfortunately, the answer is ambiguous, regardless of the fact that all, superficially at least, went relatively well. The match was not played on the basis of a long-term compromise. A short-term solution was found in the way that the teams agreed to exchange home and away matches. The match happened because Zrinjski agreed to host it, while Velež will host a return match in the second part of the competition.

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Finally, readers may be interested to know how the match ended on the pitch. Zrinjski won 2:0 and thus delighted their fans on the right bank of Neretva river, but in the wider context the match between Zrinjski and Velež has not ended yet. The final outcome will be known only when we see where, and significantly at which ground, Velež host Zrinjski sometime in the spring 2001.

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