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Bosnia: Multi-Ethnic Football Kicks Off

Teams from the Republika Srpska are to join a newly constituted all-Bosnia premier league ending an era of footballing apartheid

By Julie Poucher Harbin in Sarajevo (BCR No 348, 5-Jul-02)

Football teams from Republika Srpska, RS, and the Bosniak-Croat Federation are set to play each other in a national league for the first time since the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

From August, 20 select teams - 14 from the Federation and six from the RS - will compete in a newly reconstituted all-Bosnia premier league.

Many observers feel that sport has the power to advance reconciliation - while fans are looking forward to an improvement in the quality of the football played in the region.

Just a decade ago, Yugoslav football clubs were among the best in Europe, their players renowned for their technical skill and close-passing style.

When the country broke apart and war erupted in the early Nineties, high-quality play was put on hold. The clubs also suffered from changes to the transfer system, which allowed players to move to European clubs as soon as they turned 18, rather than the previous age limit of 28.

After the conflict ended, the Bosnian game split into three ethnically-based sections. The Bosnia and Herzegovina Football Federation, NSBiH, created to represent all three organisations, was recognised by the world football governing body FIFA in 1996 and UEFA two years later.

As the Bosniak football federation was the only one to join, its clubs alone were allowed to compete internationally and contest the "all-Bosnia" premier league.

The Herceg-Bosna (Croat) Football Federation joined up in April 2000 but the RS league continued to press for separate international recognition.

Finally in May of this year, following discussions supervised by the international bodies and facilitated by the Office of the High Representative, OHR, the new association was born.

"It's in the interest of us all, including our teams," said RS Football federation vice president Slobodan Tesic. Indeed, the quality of Bosnian Serb teams has suffered the most during the years of division because of limited competition.

In a joint statement, UEFA and FIFA hailed the latest move as being "for the good of football in Bosnia-Herzegovina and, in particular, for the development of football in Republika Srpska".

The general assembly of NSBiH, which comprises representatives from both

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entities and all three ethnic groups, has elected a three-member rotating leadership structure, comprised of the previous president, a Bosniak, a new Serb vice-president and a Croatian second vice-president.

NSBiH general secretary Munib Usanovic told IWPR that the sport is setting an example to a country whose utilities and transport bodies remain divided into three sections. "We have achieved a lot with this unification, more than any other sector - political or economic - has managed," he said.

One of the major challenges facing the sport is retaining skilled, exciting players. "Just as there is a brain drain of the young and talented in other sectors, there is also a talent drain in football," said OHR special political adviser Archie Tuta, who has assisted with the football unification issue since 1998.

And that is understandable. Almir Gredic, a star striker with Zeleznicar Football Club, says a very good Bosnian club player can expect to earn just 15,000 US dollars, compared to the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, offered to stars elsewhere.

Most national team members play for big European clubs, including Bayern Munich star Hasan Salihamidzic, and Gredic himself is getting a lot of attention from scouts and agents.

While UEFA has been providing financial assistance to Bosnian football since February 1999, most of it has gone into developing the youth and women's games.

On the world stage, the current national squad has a majority of Bosniak players, with five or six Croats and at least one Serb, although Tesic hopes that more will join the national team in future. The NSBiH is currently trying to secure the services of at least two RS-born footballers plying their trade with Partizan Belgrade.

But even if a greater ethnic mix is achieved, Gredic warns that the "Balkan mentality" could cause difficulties in the dressing room, as "egos are a problem" and teamwork does not come easily. Improvements have to be made, as Bosnia stood at just 72 in the FIFA world rankings published in May 2002.

In another significant development, the Bosnian team will challenge Yugoslavia in Sarajevo on August 21 - their first friendly match since the conflict.

"Belgrade and Sarajevo met last year and there were no problems at all. The players don't have anything to do with politics," said Usanovic.

In a display of regional unity, the Yugoslav football federation president has also pledged his support for Bosnia and Croatia's joint bid to host UEFA Euro 2008. FIFA President Sep Blatter has even promised his help for what Usanovic says could be one of the most significant steps toward Balkan reconciliation. A national team of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, seen to play together successfully would, says Tuta, mean the population "looking at Bosnia Herzegovina as a country, something they really belong to".

"You can achieve something with football that you can't achieve with billions and billions dollars," he added.

Leo Zovko, president of the Ultras - a fan club for the Mostar-based Zrinjski team - also has faith in the power of football. "Sport is the only thing that can unite this country," he told IWPR.

Julie Poucher Harbin is freelance journalist in Sarajevo

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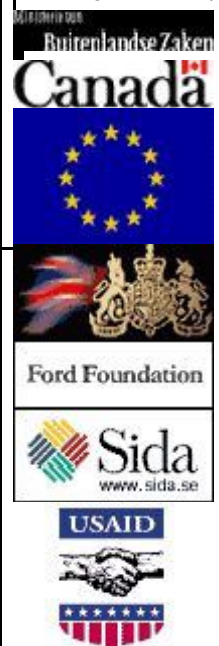
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