

# The ugly game

MATTHEW BROWN surveys the international fault lines of football racism



## Football mirrors and gives expression to society's passions and prejudices

In Poland, Emanuel Olisadebe is a footballing hero. A prolific striker with the national team since his debut in August 2000, he became a national icon after scoring two last-ditch goals in a World Cup qualifying game to secure Poland's place in the 2002 finals. Think of that David Beckham free kick against Greece, and double it.

To Rafal Pankowski, however, Olisadebe is a hero for other reasons. As the first black player to represent Poland, he's a symbol of the changing face of football – and society – in eastern Europe, and a totem for anti-racist campaigners. Like many other black players, he's also a magnet for racism, a target for the slings and arrows of the continent's cruder cultural insecurities.

'He is a very important figure', says Pankowski. 'For a lot of people here it was a real discovery, a profound shock, to see a black player playing for Poland. It was very symbolic. Through his amazing success for the national team, he's managed to change a lot of things, he's made people think about national identity, in football and in wider society.'

The idea that football reflects society is so often cited, it's almost a cliché. But that doesn't make it any less true. 'Football is the fault line of racism in Europe', as Martin Jacques put it in *Observer Sport Monthly* last year. 'Far from being some kind of hermetically sealed hobby on the periphery of society ... football is an exemplar of society: it mirrors and gives expression to society's passions and prejudices.'

This is as true of Poland as anywhere else. Pankowski runs the anti-racist organisation Never Again (*Nigdy Wiecej*), a national body that started campaigning against racism in Polish football in the mid-1990s. 'Football fan culture, youth culture, was dominated by racists', he explains. 'It was racism in a very graphic form – anti-Semitic abuse, banners with racist symbols, visible Nazi groups.'

In Poland, as elsewhere in eastern Europe, black players began to appear in the late 1990s, migrating from Africa and South America, seeking a foothold in Europe's new markets. It was a way in, a stepping stone – they hoped – to the rich pastures of western European leagues. Olisadebe was among the first.

Barely 20, he arrived in Poland from Nigeria and quickly made his mark, scoring regularly for Polonia Warsaw. He attracted the attention of Poland's national coach, and in 2000 was granted Polish citizenship by presidential decree so he could play for the national side. He also attracted crude racist abuse of a kind that in Britain appears almost old fashioned: monkey chants, bananas, songs about swinging from trees. Weeks before his



Illustration: Swava Harasymowicz

international debut, he was spat on by another player.

But Olisadebe became a figurehead for anti-racists too. He spoke out, giving interviews about his experiences and appearing on anti-racist posters. At first the authorities wouldn't accept there was a problem. Slowly, however, Never Again has begun to have some influence on the football association, and some clubs now have an anti-racist following. It's a start.

'There have been some positive changes, especially at some smaller clubs', says Pankowski. 'But the problems are still very serious. We still see extreme right-wing organisations in the stadiums. Matches are still charged with a nationalistic, xenophobic atmosphere. There's still a long way to go.'

There's even further to go in other parts of eastern Europe. Pankowski is a member of the Football Against Racism in Europe network (FARE), and leads its anti-racist campaign in countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and the Baltic states. 'In many of these countries, the situation is like Poland in the mid-1990s', he says. 'There's organised neo-fascism in the stadiums, and outside them, and there's casual racism against recent immigrants.' Football brings the two together.

This came to international attention most graphically in October 2002, when England's black players were racially abused during a game against Slovakia in Bratislava. To the TV audience, it seemed the entire crowd was involved. For Piara Powar, director of Kick it Out, Britain's campaign against racism in football, it was a significant moment.

'It exposed how eastern European societies think about black people and minorities', he says. 'Like everywhere, football is one of the main public environments where people express their prejudices and allegiances. On top of that, neo-Nazism is a big part of youth culture, it's seen as rebellious.'

In Poland, Powar has watched fans create a giant swastika, and in Romania he's seen fans form an image of Adolf Hitler. The police do nothing. *The Sunday Times* recently reported that right-wing gangs from Serbia, Croatia and the Czech Republic are planning to join up at the World Cup in Germany this summer to abuse England's black players. 'Fascism has a much greater purchase in eastern Europe than the National Front ever did among fans in England', says Powar.

As ever, with a World Cup so close, there's a danger of media hysteria here. Ten years ago, every tournament was preceded by scare stories in the English press about 'our' hooligans; now it's 'their' racism, 'their' neo-Nazis. The real 'fault line of racism' exposed by European football may lie deeper, and closer to home.



The abuse endured by England's players during their friendly against Spain in Madrid's Bernabéu stadium in November 2004 was like an amplified echo of Slovakia. Yet it wasn't orchestrated by fascist gangs, it came from sophisticated Spanish society. Carlos Ferreira Núñez is secretary general of the Coalición Española contra el Racismo (CECRA), the Spanish Coalition Against Racism. 'It was the whole stadium', he says. 'Most of the crowd was middle class, even upper class. Even the VIP section was monkey-chanting.'

In Italy last year, Paulo di Canio's fascist salutes to Lazio's notoriously right-wing fans attracted media outrage, fines and a ban. Yet a more significant incident occurred at the end of November, when Messina's Ivorian defender, Marc Zoro, picked up the ball and, in tears, asked the referee to stop a game because of the abuse he was getting from Inter Milan's fans. 'I have been playing in Italy for three years and I see this happening almost daily', he said. 'We are not animals, we are people who love sport and give everything for our teams.'

Spain and Italy are two of the largest footballing countries in the world – rich, multicultural leagues, with huge clubs, where the world's best players have been heading for years. 'They are also established European societies, long-standing members of the European Union, subject to all the EU anti-discrimination legislation', says Powar. 'Yet they're barely grappling with ideas of where to stand on race and immigration. We took on multiculturalism; the French went for integration. The ideas are not even being debated in these countries.'

The Bernabéu abuse provoked outrage in Britain. In the Spanish media, it was greeted with a shrug. The Spanish football federation (the RFEF) claimed it was a one-off, a reaction to the British outcry over Spain's manager, Luis Aragonés, calling Thierry Henry a *negro de mierda* [black shit]. 'There is no racism in our football', said a spokesperson. 'Absolutely no racism.'

The truth is somewhat different. According to Núñez, racist

## *Racist incidents in Spanish football have increased five fold since 2004*

incidents in Spanish football have increased fivefold since 2004. This season alone, Barcelona's Cameroonian forward, Samuel Eto'o, has complained of racism from Albecete and Real Zaragoza fans, and Real Madrid's Brazilian full-back, Roberto Carlos, has been on the end of abuse from Atletico Madrid and Deportivo La Coruna supporters. 'Racism is endemic here', says Núñez. 'It's a cancer that has touched every aspect of football. It happens every week, up and down the country.'

Amazingly, after Bernabéu, the RFEF actually cancelled the coalition's grant; four months after the event, it fined Aragonés a mere 3,000 euros. Even when UEFA (European football's governing body) pointedly staged its second 'unite against racism' conference in Barcelona this February, none of Spain's national papers wrote a word about it.

'There's a culture of denial', says Núñez. 'Racism here is not acknowledged and it's not new – Gypsies have suffered for centuries ... You don't see ethnic minorities in our police or in politics ... Minorities are abused in the street. And the government doesn't have any plan to combat it.'

Immigration to Spain is the highest in the EU, yet the idea of cultural diversity is hardly recognised, says Núñez, despite Spain's own regional differences. 'The ideological impact of the Franco dictatorship on Spanish mentality is much stronger than most people realise', he says. It feeds national vanity, and keeps its minorities and migrants on the economic fringe.

Racism has been a feature of Italian football for years, but Zoro's actions put it on the public agenda as never before. 'It was very important', says Daniela Conti, from the anti-racism campaign Progetto Ultra. 'Zoro was saying, I am a black person but I am also a human being, and I don't accept being treated in this way.' It was the first time any black player had taken such a stance, and it provoked a national debate.

'The majority of people don't realise we are a racist society', says Conti. 'The federation says there isn't a problem with racism, just a few stupid people. But it's there every Sunday.' As in Spain, the prevailing view is that monkey chanting is 'not really racist', just a way to offend an opposition player. 'Until Zoro's tears, they didn't understand the hurt it caused', she says.

While some Italian clubs – Lazio, Verona, Inter Milan – are known for their right-wing 'ultras', Conti believes the endemic nature of racism in Italian football reflects deeper cultural currents. Immigration to Italy is relatively recent and a combination of government inaction and media stereotyping has bred fear and misunderstanding of immigrants. There are no

programmes for integration, and public services don't cater to the particular needs of minority groups. There is no 'multicultural education' in Italian schools.

But racism does not just come from the terraces. In both Spanish and Italian football, black faces are only ever seen on the pitch. There are virtually none in the crowd, and the prospect of a black club director or federation official is even more distant than in England. Tellingly, no Italian officials or clubs attended the first UEFA conference on racism at Chelsea two years ago, and none of its big clubs were represented at the second gathering in Barcelona recently. Similarly, only three Italian MEPs have so far signed a UEFA-backed EU declaration against racism in European football.

UEFA is increasingly active. It has a good practice guide and a ten-point plan for federations, and it fines and takes disciplinary action against clubs where racism is reported, such as Sparta Prague last year. In December, UEFA's vice-president, Per Ravn Omdal, warned that players, clubs and national teams could be thrown out of competitions for racism, and called on referees to abandon games, if necessary. Its chief executive, Lars-Christer Olsson, says that tough sanctions aren't enough: 'We need to follow a two-stage policy of heightening awareness and then trying to change people's beliefs.'

Problems may be acute in countries like Spain and Italy, and even Ireland, where the shift from emigration to immigration is relatively recent. But they still exist in Germany, Holland and, yes, England. The problem for UEFA is getting what Powar calls 'a base-line' of commitment from all its 52 member federations. And that, he says, will take action from national governments, and pressure from the grassroots.

UEFA actively supports the work of FARE, and funded its activities during Euro 2004, when activists brought fans and Portugal's minority communities together through street football. Inevitably, as attention shifts to this summer's World Cup, Germany's geographical proximity to eastern Europe is raising concerns that football will again be a crucible for racial tensions. Never Again's Rafal Pankowski admits to having 'real fears'. Then again, 'the fault line of racism' could just as easily open among Italian or Spanish, German or Dutch, or English fans.

As for Emanuel Olisadebe, he's since left Poland, moving first to Greece and, this season, to Portsmouth. In many ways, he's just another of the continent's economic migrants, albeit one who's already played his own small symbolic role in shaping the new Europe.