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FOOTBALL ASSOCIATIONS

42nd Congress

Associations assemble in Bratislava

GOLDEN GIRLS
Lithuanian grandmas go for goal with #EqualGame

THE TECHNICIAN
Futsal EURO talking points

HISTORY
The brains behind the European calendar

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STRONGER TOGETHER

It is with great pride and satisfaction that I look back at the 42nd Ordinary UEFA Congress in Bratislava. I feel a true spirit of teamwork between us all as we work together across the continent to protect, promote and develop football.

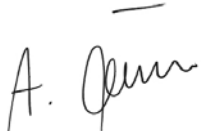
It is crucial to invest in the development of football and I believe the record increase in HatTrick funds will make a significant difference to the growth of the game in every single football association in Europe. By sharing our revenues, we are also staying true to our principles and recognising that solidarity and the well-being of the grassroots game are priorities for us all.

The increase in EURO prize money was also a significant announcement which will guarantee that sporting success is rewarded and that national team football continues to blossom.

On the topic of teamwork, we are continuing to open the door to our partners. As I said in Bratislava, isolationist policies are symptoms of weakness and it is through openness, sharing and dialogue that we will, all together, make the right decisions for the good of the game. I was very pleased to welcome the Association of European Professional Football Leagues (EPFL) onto our Executive Committee, because it is by having the leagues and clubs at our side that we will rise to the challenges of tomorrow.

And make no mistake, there are many challenges ahead – challenges we must not be afraid to face and overcome. It is together that we will improve competitive balance and ensure that financial fair play continues to play a crucial role in the financial stability and health of the club game in Europe. The European Commission will of course also be an important ally in this battle, and I was very encouraged by a meeting I had with the political authorities in Brussels last month, when we signed a new cooperation agreement. They seem genuinely ready and willing to assist us in achieving our common goals.

Finally, let us all remember that we are in a uniquely privileged position and have the power to shape the football of the future. Millions of fans all over the world would give anything to be in that position. We must not disappoint them or ourselves; we must lead by example and show cooperation and courage so that football continues to be the most popular and relevant sport on the planet.



Aleksander Čeferin
UEFA President

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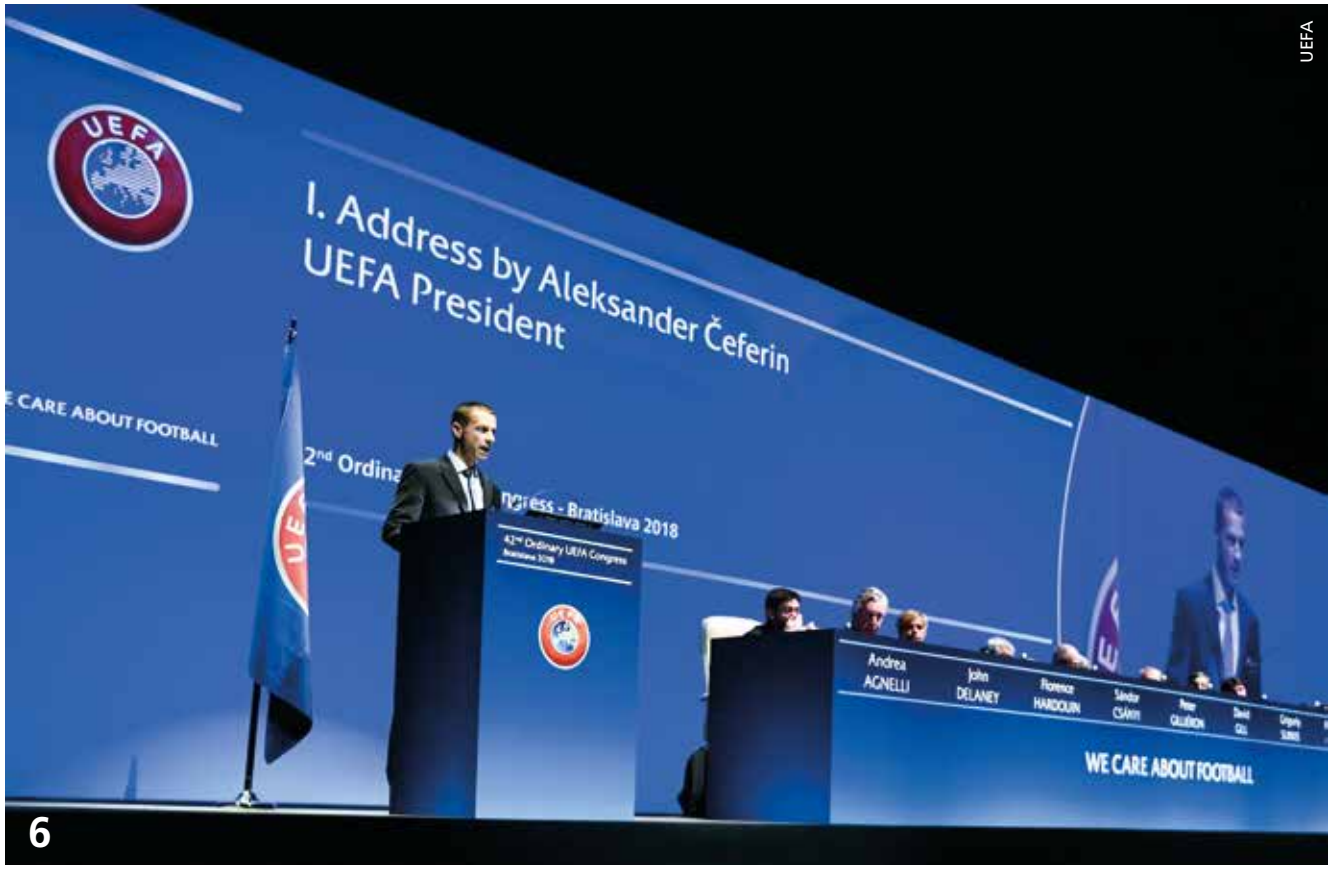
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WE CARE ABOUT FOOTBALL

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‘WE MUST SHOW COURAGE’

The Slovakian capital, Bratislava, welcomed UEFA and delegates from its 55 member associations for the 42nd Ordinary UEFA Congress on 26 February. The UEFA president, Aleksander Čeferin, used the occasion to issue a clear and firm call for courage, creativity and far-sightedness from everyone involved in building European football’s future.

Addressing the Congress, the UEFA president recalled his rallying cry to last year’s event in Helsinki – “Let us not be afraid” – and reflected that UEFA had indeed taken a series of bold decisions in moving European football forward. “Calculated risks that have paid off,” he said, “and which enable us to look to the future with quiet confidence.”

He highlighted the implementation of good governance reforms that had strengthened UEFA’s foundations, the inclusion of important European stakeholders such as the clubs and leagues in the decision-making process, and the continued positive relations with the European political authorities. “We have not been afraid to open the door to our partners,” he said. “We have understood that isolationist policies are symptoms of weakness and failure.”

Financial fair play, the UEFA president stressed, would be further fine-tuned to continue its stabilising effect on European club football’s financial management. In addition, UEFA’s standing as a ‘social fair play’ body would flourish through initiatives such as the #EqualGame campaign promoting diversity, inclusion and accessibility in football.

Leading the way

Courage and openness are crucial to UEFA’s mission to nurture and develop the game, as the UEFA president emphasised. “Let us dare to aim high, launch initiatives that continue to instil hope, and make European football as big as it can be,” he urged. With competition from other sports and activities vying for the attention of the younger generation, UEFA would have to adapt and be flexible in mapping out the future. “Many people consider UEFA to be a model among sports organisations in Europe,” he said. “We lead the way. That is not a reason to rest on our laurels.”

Funding to help Europe’s national associations would continue to be substantial. “We must dare to redistribute,” the president stressed. “More. And in new ways. UEFA is not a bank. We are an association of associations whose primary purpose is to promote the development of football in Europe.”

Later during the proceedings, the Congress was informed of two decisions taken by the UEFA Executive Committee the previous day – first, that a record amount of €775m would be available for distribution to the associations for the fifth cycle of the UEFA HatTrick assistance programme from 2020 to 2024, and second, that the prize money for the 24 teams taking part in EURO 2020 would amount to €371m – a € 70m increase compared with EURO 2016 in France (see opposite page for more details).

Competitive balance

Maintaining competitive balance would remain a priority, but the UEFA president also called for pragmatism: “Thanks to the UEFA Nations League, we appear to be on the right track with national team football. But the club game still requires our serious attention …”

“I cannot promise you the moon. I am not a merchant of dreams, or a politician … I will fight tooth and nail to introduce measures that restore some balance, but I cannot claim that these will result in a club such as Steaua Bucharest or Red Star Belgrade being the next to have their name engraved on the Champions League trophy.”

The UEFA president urged daring and creativity from the associations and other stakeholders in the planning of UEFA’s future strategies. “We are in a uniquely privileged position,” he stressed. “We have the power to shape the football of the future. Millions of fans all over the world would give anything to be in that position. We must not take it lightly. And we must not disappoint. We are agents of change.”

‘A human game’

Closing his address, the UEFA president remembered the words spoken by the late president of the Football Association of Finland, Pertti Alaja, at last year’s Congress:

"Football is a human game, it removes barriers, unites people and is an endless story of joy."

"In a world that seems to want to put up walls," the UEFA president continued, "we must defend our beautiful game – football as we know and love it. Football that transcends differences, gives young and old reasons to dream, and gives hope to so many around the world. UEFA must remain a model of openness. We must show courage. But we must also show cooperation."

Congress elections

Elections featured on the agenda in Bratislava. Juan Luis Larrea Sarobe from Spain was elected as a member of the UEFA Executive Committee for a one-year term, and Sándor Csányi from Hungary was elected as a FIFA vice-president, also for a one-year term. Both were elected by acclamation as there were no other candidates for either position. Following the election of Sándor Csányi, the UEFA Executive Committee decided to appoint Fernando Gomes (Portugal) to replace him as an ordinary member of the FIFA Council until the 2019 UEFA Congress.

Lars-Christer Olsson from Sweden was ratified as the representative of the European Professional Football Leagues (EPFL) on the UEFA Executive Committee for a term lasting until the 2021 UEFA Congress.

The Congress in Bratislava was also called to vote on the Jersey Football Association's application for UEFA membership, which it rejected.

In ordinary business, the UEFA Congress approved the 2016/17 Report of the UEFA President and the Executive Committee, the 2016/17 Report of the UEFA Administration, the 2016/17 financial statements and the 2018/19 budget, as well as several amendments to the UEFA Statutes.

Last but not least, three stalwarts of European football were honoured with the UEFA Order of Merit in Bratislava for their services to European football. Diamond awards went to former national association presidents Allan Hansen (Denmark) and François De Keersmaecker (Belgium), while youth coach Aurélio Pereira (Portugal), who discovered a host of fine Portuguese players, received the ruby award.

Rome will host the 43rd Ordinary UEFA Congress on 7 February 2019.

RECORD HATTRICK FUNDING AND EURO PRIZE MONEY

On 25 February, the day before the Congress, the UEFA Executive Committee convened in Bratislava for its first meeting of the year, and took two key decisions which would be announced to UEFA's member associations the following day.

The Executive Committee in Bratislava

The committee decided that a record amount of €775m would be earmarked to support UEFA's 55 member associations as part of the 2020–24 HatTrick V solidarity and development programme. This represents a considerable increase on the €600m made available for the HatTrick IV cycle (2016–20).

Consequently, each of the 55 UEFA member associations across Europe will be able to receive up to €14.1m over the four-year period. Since its creation in 2004, the HatTrick programme, funded by revenue from the European Football Championship, has supported UEFA member associations in implementing education and development programmes, as well as financing football infrastructures – helping to build pitches, stadiums, training centres and headquarter offices. In the years since it was launched, HatTrick has invested €1.8bn in European football.

The Executive Committee also approved an increase in prize money for the teams participating in EURO 2020, which will be staged in 12 cities across Europe in two summers' time. A total of €371m will be shared among the 24 teams, compared with the €301m the EURO 2016 teams received.

The 24 participants will each receive a participation bonus of €9.25m. For the group stage, performance bonuses of €1.5m for a win and €750,000 for a draw will be paid. No performance bonuses will be paid for the knockout phase. Instead, each team that reaches the round of 16 will receive €2m, the eight quarter-finalists will each receive €3.25m and the four semi-finalists €5m each.

The team that wins the final at Wembley Stadium in London will receive €10m, while the runners-up will earn €7m. If the European champions were to win all their matches at EURO 2020 – three group matches, round of 16, quarter-finals, semi-finals and final – the total prize money they would earn would amount to €34m, compared with a maximum of €27m at EURO 2016.

NEW COOPERATION AGREEMENT WITH EUROPEAN COMMISSION

UEFA and the European Commission team up for the healthy evolution of football.

On 21 February, UEFA president Aleksander Čeferin, European Commission first vice-president Frans Timmermans and commissioner Tibor Navracsics signed a new cooperation agreement at the European Commission's headquarters in Brussels.

The agreement outlines plans for the two organisations to work closely together in many areas – including EURO 2020, which is set to be the largest transnational event in the history of sport.

UEFA and the European Commission are both committed to the healthy evolution of football at all levels, with a focus on matters such as good governance, solidarity, integrity, fair competition and the sustainable development of the game. They also recognise the need to address other issues, such as contractual stability and the role of agents, including through the EU social dialogue process.

"UEFA and the European Commission share a common desire to promote the social values of sport and to safeguard the principles of fairness and solidarity."

Aleksander Čeferin
UEFA president

Aleksander Čeferin explained: "UEFA and the European Commission share a common desire to promote the social values of sport and to safeguard the principles of fairness and solidarity. We are pleased that the commission supports UEFA's commitment to enhancing competitive balance and improving governance in football. We look forward to working closely with the commission to further protect, promote and develop football for the benefit of society as a whole."

Frans Timmermans said: "I am pleased that the European Commission and UEFA will continue to work together to promote our common values through this sport, which means so much to so many Europeans. Footballers – men and women alike – are role models for children and adults across Europe. This great power can be an important ally in the fight against racism and discrimination, and in the promotion of solidarity, sustainability and equality – on the pitch and in our daily lives. Football is also a cross-border business, with cross-border threats to its security and integrity which can be tackled in partnership with the European Commission. Together, we are a great team."

Tibor Navracsics, European commissioner for education, culture, youth and sport, added: "We have been working with UEFA for years, tackling some of the biggest challenges facing football and involving other stakeholders in the game – including players, clubs and leagues – in an inclusive way. The renewed arrangement for cooperation that we have signed today confirms our intention to continue in this spirit, keeping up our efforts to address issues such as good governance, sustainability and gender equality for the benefit of European football and our societies at large." ⚽

Getty Images

From left to right: Aleksander Čeferin, Frans Timmermans and Tibor Navracsics.

REFEREES PRIMED FOR SPRING DUTY

Europe's referees travelled to St George's Bay in Malta for UEFA's annual winter introductory and advanced courses from 28 January to 1 February.

Match officials and members of the UEFA Referees Committee joined forces for a week in Malta to prepare the way for the second half of the 2017/18 season.

The UEFA winter courses serve to review the first half of the campaign and do some fine-tuning for the referees' coming assignments, in particular in the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League and UEFA Women's Champions League. Some of the elite male referees will also be on duty this summer at the World Cup in Russia.

During a week of theoretical and practical work, fitness training and feedback discussions, UEFA also welcomed the latest intake of international referees.

"You're here in Malta because you have showed that you are talented," UEFA chief refereeing officer Pierluigi Collina told the newcomers. "But you have to put the work in as well if you want to succeed.

"Trust in yourselves. If you can say to yourself that you've worked hard, prepared in every way, and done your absolute best, you're on the right path forward."

Domenic Aquilina

Expert advice

Education and instruction sessions are key elements of each winter course. UEFA deputy chief refereeing officer Hugh Dallas and referee officer Vlado Šajn gave the new referees expert advice on what is required of them in terms of match management, as well as in uniformity and consistency of decision-making, and primed the advanced course referees for their duties in the coming months. Meanwhile, referee officer Dagmar Damková ran specific sessions with the female referees.

"There is a difference in the delivery of the sessions," said Dallas. "The new referees are being introduced to taking charge of matches at European level for the first time, so more instruction is given, as we are showing them the path that UEFA wants them to take. With the experienced, advanced referees, the sessions involve much more discussion and exchange of opinion."

Match incidents from major club and national team competition matches are prepared by Dallas and Šajn in advance of the courses to highlight various topics, trends and cases that are worthy of particular attention. "The game is constantly changing and particular trends can appear over a period of a few months," Dallas explained. "We need to continually remind our referees of such changes, so they know what to expect."

Fit and prepared

Fitness work took place under the watchful eye of UEFA referee sport scientist and training expert Werner Helsen and his team. "Many teams go to a winter camp to prepare for the second part of the season," Helsen said. "And the same goes for Europe's referees.

"We measure the referees' body weight and fat percentage, and look in particular at their 40-metre sprint performance and match readiness using the yo-yo intermittent recovery test. The referees also undergo injury prevention screening – we not only measure cardiovascular load during the fitness test, but also focus on the musculoskeletal load on joints, muscles and tendons, with the aim of producing an individualised injury risk profile. Based on this screening, we provide the referees with tailor-made injury prevention exercises."

Protecting football's image

The referees were reminded of their role as ambassadors of football's image. They are responsible for applying the laws on the pitch, as well as for protecting players. Referees are expected to punish poor conduct, serious foul play and reckless challenges that could injure a player and put a career at risk.

"We need to have players playing, so they must be protected on the field," said Collina, who stressed the need for mutual respect between players, coaches and referees. "You're also showing respect towards spectators in this way. Football is a show, it's a spectacle, and fans want to enjoy it."

HOW THE EUROPEAN CALENDAR TOOK SHAPE

Ever since the European Champion Clubs' Cup was created in 1955, the format of the UEFA club competitions has constantly been revised and adjusted. As Hans Bangerter, then UEFA general secretary, recalls, the establishment of fixed match dates 50 years ago was an important milestone.

Previously, the clubs were expected to agree match dates between themselves within a generous two-month window. This system was not without its problems, since the two opposing clubs often had very different agendas, depending on their domestic fixtures, traditions or even the wishes of their sponsors or the media. "When the clubs couldn't agree, they turned to UEFA and their letters started piling up on my desk. I was soon swamped and it had to stop; something had to change," remembers Hans Bangerter, 93. After much thought and discussion, the then UEFA general secretary took action, proposing that clubs be required to play on fixed dates, initially in the rounds of 32 and the rounds of 16, when the number of matches was at its highest. Not everyone liked the idea, but after consulting the Champion Clubs' Cup and Cup Winners' Cup organising committees, the Committee for Non-Amateur and Professional Football and the national associations, the Executive Committee approved the plan at its meeting in Vienna on 20 March 1967. It also fixed the round of 32 dates for the following three seasons, i.e. until the 1969/70 season, a step that fitted well with its desire to streamline the organisation of the two club competitions by combining their respective regulations.

Presse Sports

18 September 1968 – Robert Herbin and Billy McNeill exchange pennants before the European Champion Clubs' Cup first-round tie between Saint-Étienne and Celtic, the first time that all European Cup ties in the same round had been scheduled on the same date.

Fine-tuning

It was quite clear that the proposed change would require some fine-tuning. The Executive Committee merely recommended the dates for the 1967/68 season before making them compulsory from 1968/69 onwards. Although a few exceptions were granted, the change proved a success, as Hans Bangerter noted in his general secretary's report for 1968 and 1969: "The introduction of a European fixture list for the UEFA club competitions and the concentration of the matches on the same dates allow a much better overall picture, and thus the football fan is in a much better position to follow the competitions. The press has already found the right denomination for the days of the matches: they simply speak of the 'European Cup Wednesdays'."

Meeting in Lisbon on 5 March 1969, the Executive Committee therefore decided to go a step further by fixing the dates of the quarter-finals and semi-finals as of the 1969/70 season, a decision that received unanimous support at the conference of presidents and general secretaries held in Bürgenstock, near Lucerne in Switzerland, in June that year.

A sense of initiative

The greater clarity that Hans Bangerter brought to the European football calendar – aided by another of his innovations, the rule that away goals count double if the aggregate score is level – is undoubtedly

"When the clubs couldn't agree, they turned to UEFA and their letters started piling up on my desk. I was soon swamped and it had to stop; something had to change."

a significant part of the former general secretary's legacy. However, it only represents a small fraction of the work that he carried out during his 29 years as head of UEFA's general secretariat. Even at a very young age, the Swiss was never afraid to take the initiative. "There were no junior teams in my village because we didn't have any pitches. So I asked the chairman of the local council to let us play on a piece of land that I had found. He agreed, so I set up a junior club and became president, secretary, treasurer, coach and player all at the same time. When we played away matches in the neighbouring villages, we always travelled by bike."

Hans Bangerter became UEFA's first full-time general secretary on 1 January 1960, when he replaced Pierre Delaunay, who had combined the role with a similar function at the French Football Federation. It was thanks to Hans Bangerter that UEFA moved its headquarters to the Swiss capital, Berne.

In his new post, he was also the main driving force behind UEFA's consolidation and growth at a time when the president's role was honorary and neither he nor the Executive Committee members had time to keep a close eye on UEFA's increasingly numerous and varied affairs. The general secretary was therefore largely responsible for the smooth running of the organisation. With seven years' experience as FIFA deputy general secretary under his belt – he helped to organise the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland and the 1958 edition in Sweden, for example – Hans Bangerter oversaw the steady growth of UEFA's administrative machinery. Having started with two secretaries, the same number as at FIFA, Bangerter had built a 25-strong team by the time he retired in 1988 – an administrative structure capable of adapting to the increasingly complex challenges faced by European football at the time.

Hans Bangerter (seated, centre) at the UEFA Congress in Rome on 7 June 1968.

A positive mentality

It is true that the economic stakes were not as high as they later became when commercial television and advertising sent the market into orbit, and that UEFA's legal affairs were on a completely different scale to the one that we know today, but there was no shortage of tricky issues to deal with. "International politics caused me numerous headaches, and a lot of work. We were right in the middle of the Cold War and political tensions could have a detrimental effect on our competitions. I remember, for example, the 1961 International Youth Tournament in Portugal. I was already on the plane to Lisbon when we discovered that the Yugoslavian FA had been forced to pull out of the tournament by the political authorities. My plane had barely touched down when, with the tournament about to kick off, I had to rewrite the whole match schedule!" Visa problems affecting both teams and officials were also commonplace. It is perhaps worth pointing out that, in those days, telephone, telex and then fax were the only forms of communication and there were no computers whatsoever.

However, the former head of the UEFA administration has a strong 'can-do' mentality, which is summed up in his philosophy: "Problems are there to be solved."

The same positivity shines through as he calmly sums up his long career as a leading international football administrator: "Problems were always sorted out in a way that was acceptable to everyone. It was, on the whole, a very pleasant and positive time."

Born in Studen, around 30km from the Swiss capital, Berne, on 10 June 1924, **Hans Bangerter** obtained a diploma in public administration from the Bienne technical college. After initially working for the postal administration, he was employed by the Swiss federal school of gymnastics and sport in Macolin, where his linguistic knowledge made him the ideal person to look after foreign guests. It was in this role that he welcomed some of FIFA's senior officials, who approached him in 1953, when they were looking for an assistant for their general secretary, Kurt Gassmann. In 1959, it was UEFA's turn to come knocking on his door, inviting him to become general secretary, a position he held from 1 January 1960 until his retirement on 31 December 1988. He was made a UEFA honorary member at the UEFA Congress in Gothenburg in June 1992 and, as such, still regularly attends the UEFA Congress and major UEFA competition finals, having lost none of his passion for football. He is also an honorary member of the Swiss Football Association and holds the FIFA Order of Merit.

hummel

RAMUTĖ KARTAVIČIENĖ – LITHUANIA

"FOOTBALL CONNECTS OUR FAMILY ACROSS THREE GENERATIONS OF WOMEN"

"A football is just a ball, but it can do a lot." Simple but effective words from Ramutė Kartavičienė, a 60-year-old grandmother from Lithuania, who has seen football connect three generations of her family. "We are all happy kicking a ball around together, and it has brought us closer together."

Ramutė is a natural-born leader who has always been fond of football. The sport plays a big part in family life and, inspired by her grandchildren, Ramutė is now sharing her love of the game with other women like her, having set up a grandmothers' football team in the Lithuanian town of Keturvalakiai, some 170km from the capital, Vilnius.

She makes it sound simple: "We wanted to play football, and that's what we do. When we first arrived, a coach said, 'What are you doing here? You are women'." Ramutė, who served as a police officer for almost three decades, was not going to be put off that easily. "We carried on playing – and more and more women came to join us."

Ramutė has been involved in football since she was a child and regularly played with her daughter. However, work commitments prevented her from taking to the field as much as she would have liked for most of her adult life.

"I got back involved in football because of my grandchildren," she says. She enjoys playing with them and believes it is important to give them "strong role models" so that they "look for solutions instead of giving up" when faced with difficulties in their lives.

Football also helped to fill a void in Ramutė's life when her husband died a few years ago. She enjoys the camaraderie and admits, "when we meet, we have smiles on our faces straight away."

On the pitch, Ramutė displays plenty of passion and enjoys learning new skills, while helping to create a place for "more and more grandmothers who want to play football."

Ramutė has found her path in football and urges other people of all ages to do the same. "Whatever goal you set for yourself, keep it at the forefront of your mind," she says. "Move forward … and try to achieve your goals."

"FOOTBALL IS A GREAT WAY TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER. I HAVE MADE SO MANY FRIENDS THROUGH PLAYING AND THEY HAVE REMAINED PART OF MY LIFE FOR YEARS."

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"SOMETIMES WHEN WE HAVE DISAGREEMENTS, WE START PLAYING FOOTBALL AND ALL OUR MISUNDERSTANDINGS FADE AWAY."

Photos: UEFA

"I USED TO PLAY FOOTBALL WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, AND I DECIDED TO START PLAYING AGAIN BECAUSE OF MY GRANDCHILDREN."

'THOSE WHO DO NOT LEARN FROM HISTORY ARE DOOMED TO REPEAT IT'

This is a powerful statement and one that cannot be denied. It also formed the basis of the five UEFA stadium and security strategy summits that took place through December and January – bringing together small groups of UEFA member associations to analyse the past and grasp, for the future, the essential nature of a multi-agency and integrated approach to safety and security in football.

Safety is of paramount importance. As a parent, if you go with your child to watch football, the first thing you want to be and feel is safe. The safety and security measures that a municipality, local police force, football club or national football association put in place, together, are fundamental to producing a safe environment.

Regrettably, football is no stranger to tragedy. Overcrowding, fires, pyrotechnics and violence have been an unfortunate reality for over 100 years and have claimed and damaged lives. Acknowledging the past is crucial – and one of the reasons we can fall down is because we share our knowledge and experience in the present but do not think to do the same from generation to generation or from one leadership to the next. Working together is not only in the now – it is born of our past and it is the only way to educate and shape the future.

Michael van Praag, UEFA Executive Committee member and chairman of the UEFA Stadium and Security Committee, emphasised: "The summits are a prerequisite for progress. Working together is not a new concept but the human tendency is to work with what we know – and so in uniting the national association, police and government representatives, we break the silos and create a stronger appreciation of tasks, problems, solutions, leadership and responsibility."

The UEFA stadium and security summits advocate an integrated approach to safety and security. Here we present some of the areas and subjects on which an integrated strategy should be built.

Inclusion and exclusion

Or majority and minority. This domain is about fan engagement and the recognition that 99% of people going to football matches are not a threat to safety. These people are friends, family, parents and children, and they are the tradition and social driving force of football. These are the people that make us love football and, so, it is vital to give them a warm welcome and an enjoyable – and safe – football experience.

The key challenge, then, is to identify the tiny percentage of troublemakers, whose sole mission is to fight, hurt and cause chaos and disorder through the platform of football. The Council of Europe – with which UEFA works very closely – has a convention listing good practices on how exactly to exclude that minority through proportionate and targeted exclusion methods. It is a must-read for all football stakeholders involved in safety and security.

In small groups, UEFA's member associations took part in five stadium and security summits in December 2017 and January 2018.

Working together is not only in the now – it is born of our past and it is the only way to educate and shape the future.

Policing

Intelligence-led policing is a perfect fit for football. Information at all levels can be analysed to assess risk – and then an appropriate and tailored risk management plan can be put into place. Instinct perhaps leads us to think that the bigger the risk factor, the more police are needed – but this assumption is worth deeper consideration.

David Bohannan, chairman of the Pan-European Think Tank of Football Safety and Security Experts, explains: "It isn't about the numbers of police; it is about the atmosphere they generate. In order to be most effective, the police should be interactive with the crowd – out in the street and engaging with the people. There is no doubt this could be a culture change for some European nations, but it is really worth looking at."

Stadium management

Stadium safety and security management is all about policy and best practice. Policy must first be decided, then consistently applied and clearly communicated to everyone involved in football operations. And the best policies are based on best practices, i.e. tried and tested methods of successfully and efficiently dealing with a wide range safety and security issues.

Taking pyrotechnics as an example, this would translate as:
Policy – there is no safe use of pyrotechnics in a crowded area.
Best practice – if a flare is burning on the ground, do not pick it up or try to put it out. Stand away and let it burn out.

Another real need is competent and trained staff. Stewards are responsible for crowd management – they should know their area of the stadium inside out, quickly alert their superiors to a potential problem and be aware of crisis management plans and evacuation procedures. Training is essential – in terms of building both knowledge and confidence. And, ideally, stewards should be paid for their time and efforts like any other employees. Volunteers may seem like a viable and economical option, but the risk is lack of continuity and buy-in for the role.

National strategy and legal framework

The number of stakeholders involved in the safe operations of a major football match is another challenge in itself: the government, the police, the national associations, the clubs, the players, the travelling fans and the local community all play their part. UEFA recommends a government-led national strategy which means that the authority sits at political level. But open cooperation and communication across all parties – as well as between the different levels within each party – is all-important.

Going deeper still, the strategy should sit on a legal framework that clearly defines where each aspect of responsibility lies and where the big decisions should be taken. From a liability point of view, when a decision is taken, it is important to document the reasoning and decision-making process.

The very last thing the football world needs is another tragedy. So the time to make changes, be honest about the challenges and problems – and strengthen our overall safety and security performance – is now. Together, we have the power to stop the next disaster before it happens, and through its numerous safety and security support programmes, UEFA is working with its 55 member associations to do just that, and to enhance the overall fan experience and safety of the game. ⚽

FOOTBALL MEDICINE IN THE SPOTLIGHT IN ATHENS

'The importance of medicine in football' was the main theme of the 7th UEFA Medical Symposium, a three-day gathering held in Athens from 30 January to 1 February, which brought together medical experts from throughout European football.

Doctors from all 55 UEFA member associations and a number of European clubs attended the symposium, which is held every four years. This year's event, which was organised by the UEFA medical and anti-doping unit with the support of the Hellenic Football Federation (HFF), gathered around 230 participants from various backgrounds. The symposium proved to be an important platform for exchange and interaction, and enjoyed similar success to previous gatherings in Frankfurt (1993), Coverciano/Florence (1997), Nyon (2002), Istanbul (2006), Stockholm (2010) and Madrid (2014).

In his welcome message, the UEFA president, Aleksander Čeferin, stressed the "significance of such a stimulating and informative symposium" for European football's medical family, and underlined the "high importance that UEFA places on the health of the players". He also pointed out that "medicine and scientific research are extremely important in football," and welcomed "the amazing work done by the doctors and medical staff in their own associations and clubs".

The HFF president, Evangelos Grammenos, said it was special honour

Intime

Intime

for his association to have been entrusted with the organisation of this highly important scientific conference in Greece. "Football is now more than a game. It operates on a very high level, within highly demanding and competitive conditions," he said. "The provision of high-level medical services is a top priority, and the performance and recovery of the players depend on the high scientific level of support provided by experienced professionals," he added.

Progress in football medicine

In his address, the chairman of the UEFA Medical Committee, Dr Michel D'Hooghe, drew attention to the continued development of football medicine over the last few years. "It has increased in complexity and, at the same time, has become more and more integrated within a larger system with the overall aim of keeping players performing at their best," he said. Dr D'Hooghe added that there were numerous different elements to be taken into consideration in relation to a player's well-being, such as nutrition and physiotherapy, while communication and leadership styles also "contribute directly to overall team performance and success".

The participants were also given an insight into the work of the UEFA medical and anti-doping unit over the last four years and an update on UEFA's football doctor education and anti-doping programmes.

The symposium included presentations from guests and speakers on a variety of topics, such as concussion management, injury rehabilitation, nutrition, player well-being and female-specific injuries. Also highlighted was the UEFA elite club injury study led by Professor Jan Ekstrand, who has been in charge of the project since it started in 2001. The injury study has shown that there is a correlation between injuries and team performance – teams with lower injury rates perform better in both domestic and European competitions, making injury prevention a key part of performance strategies. Professor Ekstrand presented the findings of a recent study on the impact of coaches' leadership styles on injuries.

Panel talks

The symposium concluded with a panel discussion on the significance of medicine in football. The panel comprised distinguished guests, including football coach Louis van Gaal, the general secretary of the Royal Netherlands Football Association, Gijs de Jong, Dutch national team doctor Edwin Goedhart and two heads of performance, Dave Reddin from the English Football Association and Darcy Norman from the Italian club AS Roma. There was general agreement among the panel that medicine cannot be seen as a separate discipline, but is rather an integral part of a multi-disciplinary system that aims to optimise team performance.

One of the key points highlighted during the discussion was the importance and value of communication between doctors and coaches in order to properly manage injuries as well as to prevent them from occurring in the first place. "We need to help the communication between the coach and medical team – the doctor plays an important role, and receiving information on a daily basis prior to and following training sessions and matches is crucial," said Van Gaal. "Meetings with the heads of performance and medical team are of paramount importance, without of course ignoring that the general philosophy and vision come from the coach." Van Gaal also underlined the importance of the information that comes from the UEFA injury study. "Coaches need to know about this," he said. "And, of course, it should be a part of the education of younger coaches too."

The opening and closing sessions of the symposium were open to the media and attracted great interest from journalists on-site, who were given the opportunity to interview participants and put questions to those taking part in the panel discussion. They reported positively and widely about the importance of this symposium for both UEFA and the wider world of football medicine.

NEW UEFA BENCHMARKING REPORT SHEDS LIGHT ON THE EUROPEAN CLUB FOOTBALLING LANDSCAPE

UEFA's ninth benchmarking report, published by the UEFA intelligence centre, highlights how financial fair play has helped turn around football finances and also how the gap between the haves and have nots continues to widen.

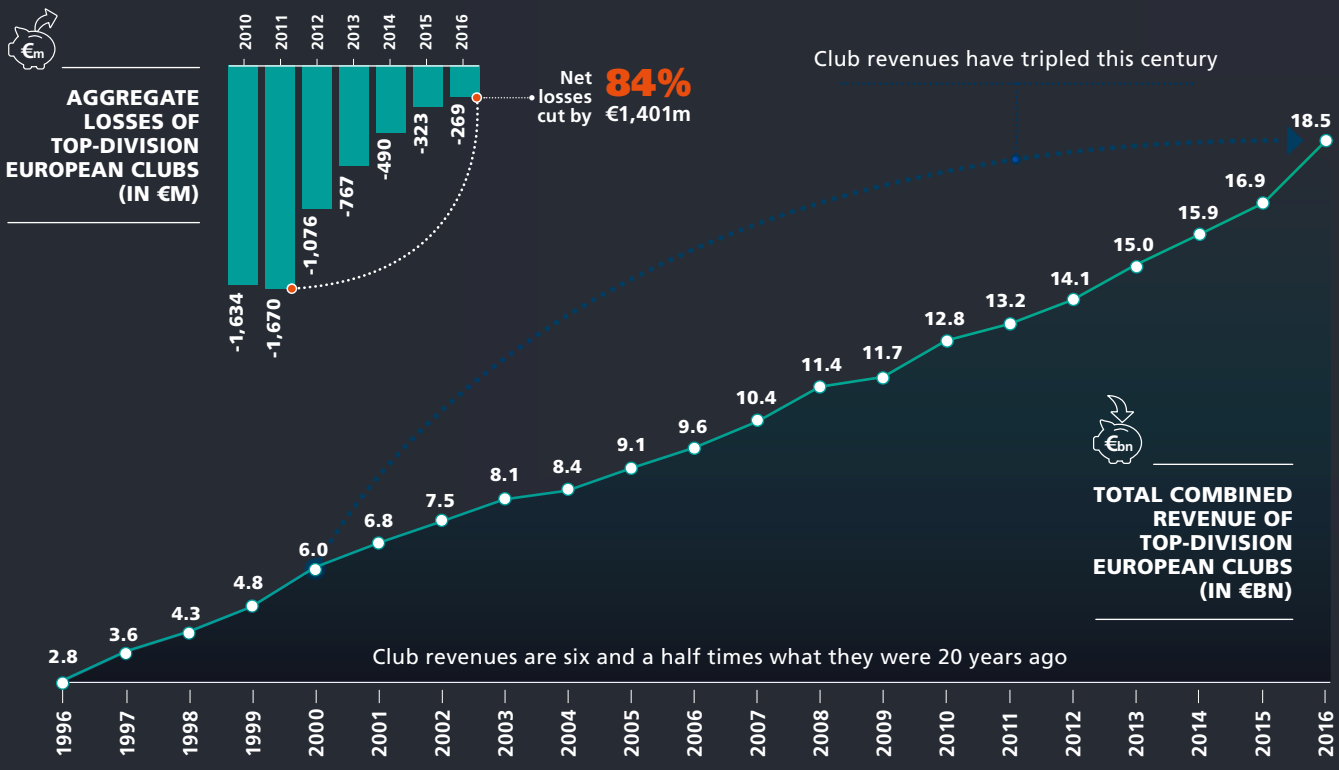
The report offers a detailed and exclusive review of club football in Europe across the top divisions of all 55 UEFA member associations. The €1.6 billion increase in European club revenue in 2016 is the highest ever recorded in a year, and this 10% growth has taken top-division revenues up to €18.5 billion. Perhaps more importantly, the underlying health of European club football finances has improved by every major measure, with net losses falling from €1.7 billion to under €300 million, the net debt to revenue ratio dropping from 65% to 35%, and club net assets doubling in the past six years.

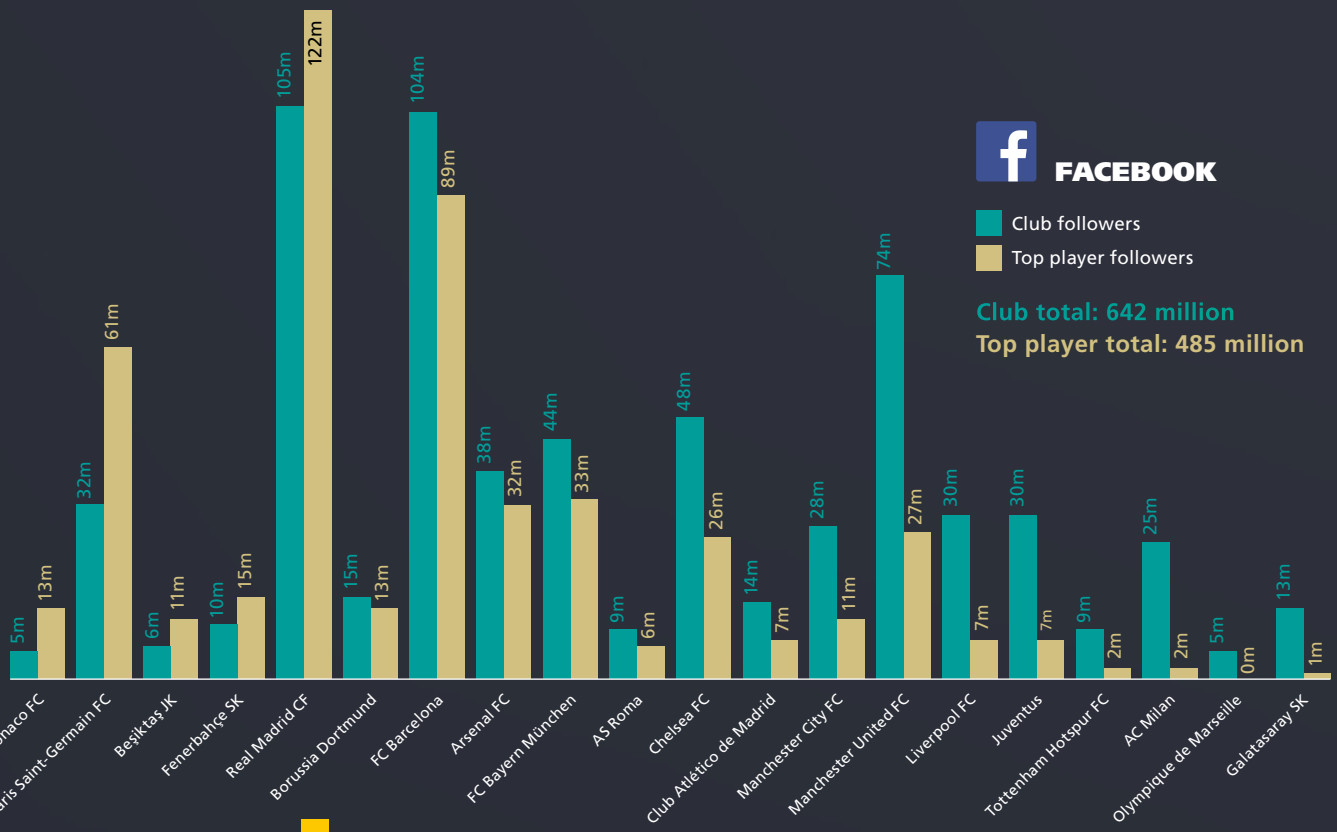
The wide-ranging report highlights trends in club attendances, sponsorship and ownership, and shines a spotlight on transfer and agent activity.

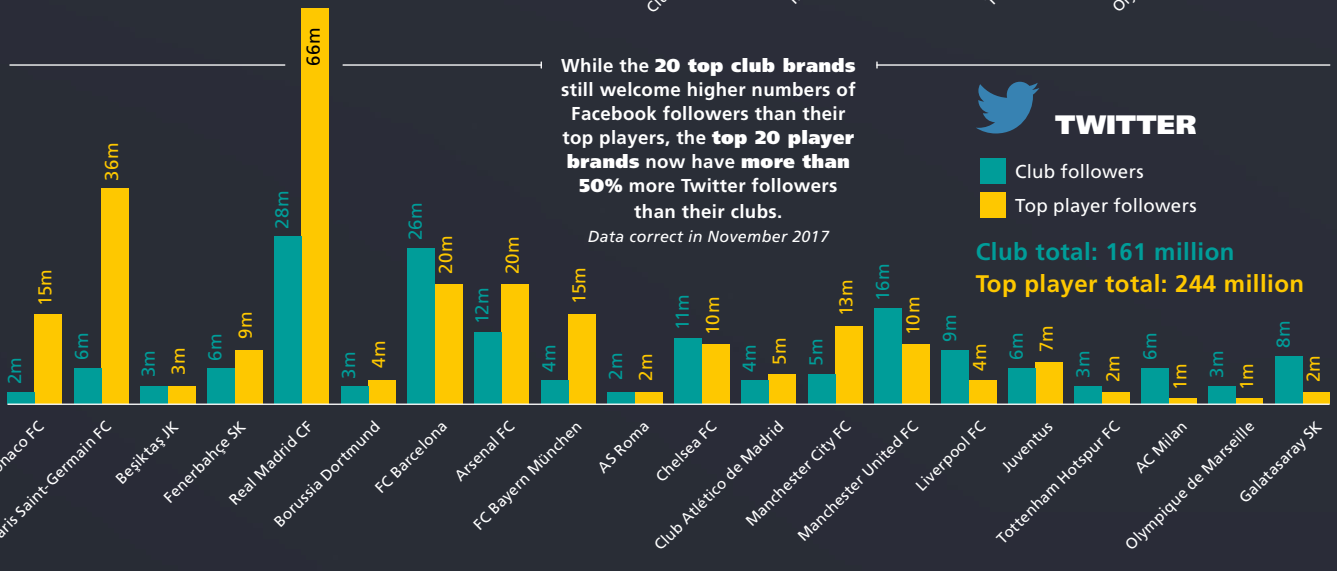
UEFA's ninth benchmarking report is available to download in five languages (English, French, German, Mandarin and Russian) from UEFA.com.

It also documents the increasing wealth gap between clubs and between leagues. In his foreword to the report, the UEFA president, Aleksander Čeferin, says: "The data from this report and other research from our new intelligence centre helps inform our decision-making. Once more, we cannot help but note that the polarisation of commercial and sponsorship revenues between the top tier of clubs and the rest is accelerating.

As the guardians of the game, UEFA must ensure that football remains competitive even as financial gaps are augmented by globalisation and technological change."

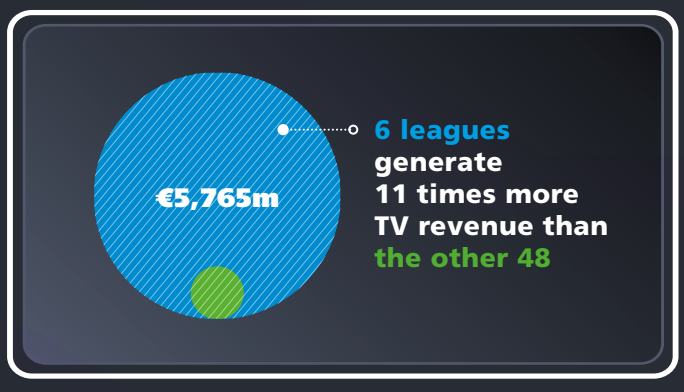


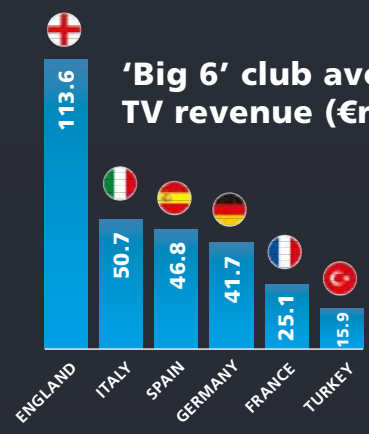




While the **20 top club brands** still welcome higher numbers of Facebook followers than their top players, the **top 20 player brands** now have **more than 50%** more Twitter followers than their clubs.

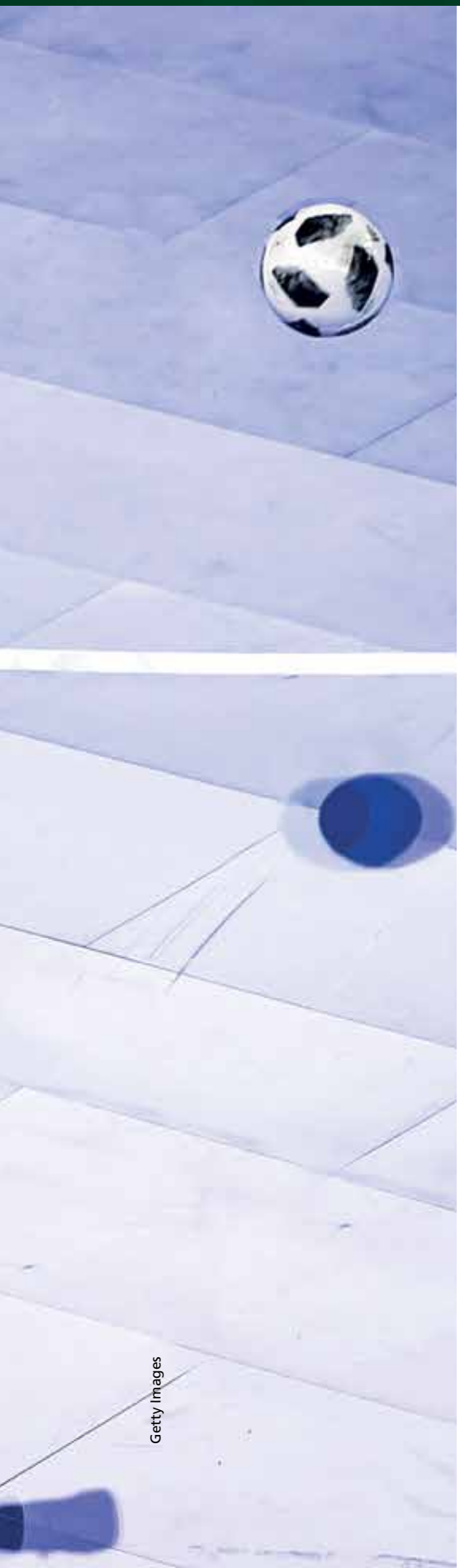
Data correct in November 2017





WRITING NEW CHAPTERS IN THE FUTSAL STORY

When the ball started rolling at the Stožice Arena in Ljubljana, the history of the European Futsal Championship was entering its 20th year. During those two decades, ten EUROs have been written into the futsal story. The event in Slovenia bade farewell to the 12-team format which had been in force since 2010.


Getty Images

The coaches at Futsal EURO 2018 not only applauded UEFA's move to expand the final tournament to 16 contestants; they gave equal importance to the parallel decisions related to the introduction of an Under-19 Futsal EURO and a Women's Futsal EURO in 2019. From a coaching perspective, UEFA's projects afford exciting player development opportunities and incentives. This, in turn, has prompted a revamp of UEFA's technical report on Futsal EURO 2018. The content, which forms the hard core of the shortly-to-be-published tournament review, sets out to examine aspects of the event which will hopefully be useful to the coaches responsible for leading national associations into the new competitions and to all those involved in player development work at club level.

Prime movers

By coincidence, the prime movers in the reconstruction of the technical report were prime movers when the European Futsal Championship was officially launched in 1998/99. "Ball skills are important," Spain coach Javier Lozano was quoted as saying in the technical report on the first final tournament in Granada, "but high-speed decision-making is even more important." "There is too much emphasis on defensive aspects of the game," said Portugal coach Orlando Duarte, "and not enough on attacking play." The two former national team coaches met again in Slovenia, teaming up as UEFA's technical observers. While the general concepts they had expressed in 1999 retained their validity, they were keen to inject more detailed coaching content into the technical report they generated in 2018.

Getty Images

19-year-old Poland goalkeeper Michał Kałuża was the only player aged under 21 to feature at Futsal EURO 2018.

At the same time, they reiterated long-standing concerns – and the hope that UEFA's new strategic plan for futsal will help to erode or erase them. In Slovenia, they expressed disquiet about a trend that had first raised their eyebrows at EURO 2010, when the technical report stated: "Of the 60 most regular starters, 38 had reached or passed the age of 30." At EURO 2018, 46% of the 168 players on view had passed their 30th birthdays – some by a considerable distance. The "lack of players from the Under-21 age group" which had been a cause for concern eight years previously was echoed this time round by the fact that the 19-year-old Poland goalkeeper Michal Kaluza was the only player below the age of 21.

Bridging the gap between youth and senior level

The coaches in Slovenia acknowledged the problem. "Older players are important as role models," said Serbia coach Goran Ivančić, "and we have young talent coming through. But our youngsters must get more opportunities to play because they need more international experience if they want to make the jump to the senior team."

"It's not easy to select younger players to blend in with the seniors," agreed Slovenia coach Andrej Dobovičnik, "as they lack playing time at top level." "We need to reorganise structures," Kazakhstan coach Cacau commented, "because, at the moment, young players have few opportunities to compete." "The gap between youth and senior levels is a big problem," admitted Italy coach Roberto Menichelli. "There are good youngsters but [they are] not yet ready for the top. They would suffer if they were thrown into a competition of this level. And many coaches are finding that a transitional phase can mean a serious risk in terms of results."

Romania coach Robert Lupu, who competed as a player at EURO 2014, added: "We have Under-17 competitions but then there is a huge gap to the senior team. It's not easy for the players because the lack of opportunities to acquire international experience doesn't help them to bridge that gap. We now have games under futsal rules in our schools, but it will take some years for that to bear fruit. This is why the introduction of an Under-19 competition can only be →

A 10% increase in blocked goal attempts raises questions about decision-making (i.e. when to shoot) and the value of feinting and dummying.

beneficial. And the technical reports on the futsal events are useful in encouraging senior players to become coaches. I think it's important for former players to move into coaching in order to raise the level of competition."

A valuable development tool

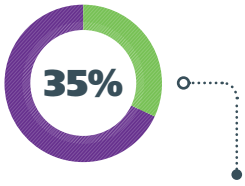
In other words, the introduction of the U19 Futsal EURO aims to add a valuable tool to the coaches' youth development toolbox. But what qualities need to be prioritised when it comes to designing elite development programmes? The coaches highlighted the importance of sustained physical and mental intensity but, at the same time, cited the diversity of standards in domestic competitions as an impediment. Poland, back in the final tournament for the first time since 2001, and debutants France both acknowledged the inherent difficulties in pitting amateurs against professionals, explaining that squad members had travelled to Slovenia only after securing time away from jobs such as driving buses or mining.

As Poland coach Blazej Korczynski commented: "This means that when you get the national team together you cannot overlook basics, such as the ability to visually cover ball and opponent at the same time." Goran Ivančić also stressed the need to prioritise "basics such as passing principles, the use of both feet, body positioning and so on". Their comments prompted Javier Lozano and Orlando Duarte to feature in the technical report illustrations and details on games played at EURO 2018 which coaches might find useful when working with young players.

91
goals scored in total, a fall from the **129** scored in 2016

An average of
4.55
goals per match, the lowest ever recorded

23
goals scored by **Portugal, 25%** of the tournament total



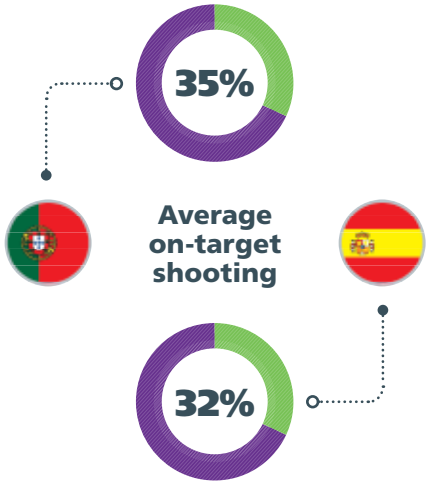
of the goals were scored in the five matches involving the eventual champions

Where were the goals?

This gave added value to their overview of a final tournament where the main talking point was an abrupt downturn in the number of goals scored. The total fell from 129 in 2016 to 91. And the average of 4.55 per match was the lowest ever recorded during two decades of futsal EUROs. The average would have been even lower had the two semi-finals not provided 15 goals between them. As the technical report points out: "Portugal, with a total of 23, provided one quarter of the tournament total and the five matches involving the eventual champions accounted for 35% of the goals."

A drop of 29.5% was at odds with, as Russia coach Sergei Skorovich put it, "the classic image of end-to-end futsal". The obvious question for the technical observers was quite simply: Why?

As coaches, Javier Lozano and Orlando Duarte started their quest for answers with a degree of self-examination. "I think there were risk management issues," said Lozano, "especially during the group stage, when we started to talk about fear of losing and the number of players committed to attack." Portugal and France, they felt, were exceptions to the general rule in that they were prepared



to throw players forward rather than adopt a more conservative approach of keeping numerical balance behind the ball. "You could detect a tendency to defend deeper rather than go for the high press," Azerbaijan coach Alesio mentioned to the technical observers. "But you have to pace the team for knockout matches in a heavy match schedule."

Polishing the art of finishing

The observers discussed the relative scarcity of direct counterattacks (in normal play rather than power play with the flying goalkeeper) as opposed to a lower-risk retain possession approach. "There seems to be a greater tendency to play across the pitch," Italy coach Roberto Menichelli said to the technical observers. "It is easy to overlook the importance of verticality. And if teams focus on defending ten metres in front of their goal, it is difficult to maintain levels of spectacle and entertainment."

But to attribute the downturn in goalscoring exclusively to game plans designed on the bench would be facile – and even unfair. On-court factors also exert a major influence. For example, the technical report points out: "The striking decline in goals was not backed by a striking decline in the number of goal attempts. The 2018 statistical balance showed no more than a 2.7% downturn in the number of attempts and a 3.7% drop in the number of shots on target. A negative trend, yet way out of line with the 30% shortfall in goals."

Coaches responsible for polishing the art of finishing might find it interesting that, even at elite level, half the teams were off-target with more than half their goal attempts, with percentages of on-target shooting varying from 26% by Slovenia to 50% by Romania. Among the others, Azerbaijan and France were alone in passing the 40% mark, while the on-target finishing by Portugal and Spain – the two finalists – averaged 35% and 32% respectively.

The percentages are evidently based on the total number of goal attempts – including those blocked by the defending team. And the total in the latter category registered a 10% increase. This prompted, in the technical report, the comment that: "This raises questions about decision-making (i.e. when to shoot) and, bearing in mind the growing tendency for defenders to put themselves momentarily out of the game by spreading themselves horizontally on the court to block, the need to emphasise at development levels the value attachable to the arts of feinting and dummying".

Efficiency in front of goal – or rather, the lack of it – went some way towards explaining the decline in goalscoring. At Futsal EURO 2016 in Serbia, the least efficient scorers required 25 attempts to hit the net. In Slovenia, six of the finalists were even less efficient than that. The extreme examples were group-fallers Poland and Italy, each with two goals to show from, respectively, 86 and 89 shots. By contrast, Portugal lifted the trophy for the first time on the basis of one goal per 7.9 attempts.

Four clean sheets

As the technical report hastens to point out, goalkeepers were not alien to the goalscoring issue. Clean sheets are a rare species in futsal. But the 20 games at EURO 2018 produced four. On 14 occasions, a goalkeeper left the court having conceded only once. It is easy to glibly launch a theory that sound work in training by specialist goalkeeper coaches has contributed to a rise in standards. But the final tournament yielded statistical evidence to support the theory. In Serbia at Futsal EURO 2016, Stefano Mammarella topped the goalkeeping chart by stopping fractionally over 87% of the shots directed →

Clean sheets are a rare species in futsal, but the 20 games at EURO 2018 produced four, two of them for Spain and their goalkeeper Paco Sedano.

Bruno Coelho scores the winning penalty for Portugal.

Sportsfile

at the Italy net. In Slovenia, that percentage was topped by Russia's Georgi Zamtaradze, Serbia's Miodrag Aksentijević, Kazakhstan's Higuita, Slovenia's Damir Puškar and, by a few decimal points, Mammarella himself.

The first two on that list saved in excess of 90% of everything that opponents threw – or, rather, kicked – at them, with the Slovenia keeper amply topping 90% during a memorable performance when the hosts eliminated Italy in Group A. The technical observers were at pains to emphasise, however, that there is no 'photofit' picture of the futsal keeper on which development programmes can be based. The tournament in Slovenia showcased a diversity of personalities and leadership qualities with, for example, Aksentijević dressing his competence with nice trimmings of showmanship. Lozano and Duarte remarked that the two keepers they ultimately selected for the UEFA team of the tournament (from a hearteningly ample list of candidates) represented two different styles of goalkeeping.

Zamtaradze defended his net with sobriety, consistency and reflexes seemingly at odds with a man of such physical stature. Higuita, more flamboyant, defended and attacked, pushing forward to become an effective fifth outfield component whenever power play was conducive to the Kazakh cause.

The role of the flying keeper

Mention of Higuita inevitably prompts a review of the roles played by flying goalkeepers – a topic which has been a constant debating point in recent years. At EURO 2010, the subject had no more than relative importance, with ten goals hitting nets during power play. In 2012, all but one of the finalists used the flying keeper, with more goals conceded than scored. In 2014, the total soared to 30 power-play goals (11 scored; 19 conceded); and in 2016, the negative trend in power-play successes was extended: of 19 goals only six were scored by the team with the flying keeper. In Slovenia – even though Higuita's dual role meant that, officially, Kazakhstan did not operate with a flying keeper – the teams played a total of over 83 minutes' power play, with a balance of eight goals scored and ten conceded. It meant that 28% of the tournament's open-play goals were scored while the flying keeper was on court and that the number of goals scored in 'normal' open play was 46 in 20 matches.

Among the goals scored with the flying keeper on court was the volley by winger Bruno Coelho, which brought Portugal back to 2-2 against Spain with 102 seconds of normal time remaining in the final that they went on to win 3-2.

Among the goals scored with the flying keeper on court was the volley by Bruno Coelho which brought Portugal back to 2-2 against Spain with 102 seconds of normal time remaining in the final that they went on to win 3-2. Resorting to power play when chasing a result is a ploy which respects the spirit of the tactical option. Debate kicks in, however, when the option is, as Russia coach Sergei Skorovich put it, "used to slow the game down in other situations. This is not good for the game".

Romania sent on the flying keeper after 10'30 when trailing Portugal 1-0 and after only 6'12 when leading Ukraine 1-0. Slovenia played out the last five minutes of the first half against Italy as a damage-limitation measure when struggling to remain only 1-0 behind. Azerbaijan resorted to five outfielders eight times during the first periods against Portugal and Spain. "The use of power

Getty Images

The opening match between Slovenia and Serbia drew a crowd of 10,212 to the Stožice Arena.

play can be terrible," Serbia coach Goran Ivančić opined. "I once saw a game where the flying keeper was on for about 30 minutes and killed it as a spectacle. We have to find ways to avoid this."

Still with goalkeepers, the technical observers also commented on a disturbing tendency for keepers to feign injury with a view to cooling down the game. And, bearing in mind their increasing specific gravity within team frameworks, the importance of their ability to distribute accurately with hands and feet. Many teams used the long throw to the attacking pivot as a weapon in their counterattacking armoury – with varying degrees of precision – but Javier Lozano reiterated his long-standing concern that: "Keepers sometimes use the long throw just to get rid of the ball, to put it out of play and to oblige the opposition to start again versus a regrouped and reorganised defence." He and Orlando Duarte fully endorsed the view expressed by Azerbaijan coach Alesio: "The worry is that, at development levels, coaches sometimes encourage goalkeepers to play long – which means that the kids don't learn how to play a passing game."

Shaping the future of futsal in Europe

The imminent introduction of UEFA's Under-19 and women's futsal competitions has incentivised the aim to transmit useful information to those responsible for the education of young players. The overall Futsal EURO 2018 tournament review also features the commercial, marketing, hosting and media aspects which play major roles in developing and promoting futsal. The technical content, however, offers statistics, analysis, opinions, comments from coaches, illustrations based on specific technical aspects of matches. As the introduction to the publication indicates, "by highlighting trends at the peak of the European futsal pyramid, [it] provides coaches at senior and development levels with information that may be helpful when working on the qualities required by the players and coaches who will play leading roles in shaping the future of futsal in Europe".

The hosts bowed out in the quarter-finals, having lost 2-0 to Russia.

Getty Images

INTER BACK FOR MORE

With Portugal's sensational triumph at Futsal EURO 2018 still fresh in the memory, the focus shifts to the UEFA Futsal Cup finals as Inter target a record fifth title.

Last year in Almaty, Inter FS took their fourth European title, at the expense of Sporting CP.

Sportsfile

Winning a title is one thing; successfully defending it is quite another. And for Inter FS ace Ricardinho, the challenge ahead is a big one as the UEFA Futsal Cup holders prepare to return to the final-four tournament. "It gets harder and harder," Ricardinho said. "People are going to see us as the team to beat. We've won the Liga four years in a row, secured three Copas and have been in the Futsal Cup final four three times [in a row]."

And after their impressive 7-0 victory against Sporting Clube de Portugal in last year's final, a record fifth UEFA Futsal Cup title in Zaragoza is a distinct possibility. Joining Inter in the semi-finals are Sporting, looking to avenge last season's final defeat, Hungarian side Győri ETO FC, the first Hungarian club to reach that stage of the competition, and another Spanish powerhouse, FC Barcelona, winners in both 2012 and 2014.

"I think it will be a really good final four, with four very strong teams," Ricardinho said. "I want to congratulate Győr, who have shown that anything is possible even if you're not the biggest name. Sporting have shown they're really strong again and that they want to win the trophy. Barça are all-powerful and they will try to win. We also have something to say, though, and we're going to give our all to get to the final."

The semi-final draw was held at half-time in Barcelona's UEFA Champions League match against Chelsea on 14 March, and with two Spanish and a Portuguese side in the final four, there is a distinctly Iberian feel to the final tournament.

SCHEDULE

20 April
Semi-finals
Győri ETO FC v Sporting CP
Inter FS v FC Barcelona

22 April
Match for third place

Final

Add to that the presence in the Győr ranks of Juanra – a champion with Inter in 2009 – and former Barça favourite Javier Rodriguez as coach. Twice a UEFA Futsal Cup winner with Playas de Castellón FC and once with Barcelona, Rodriguez is thrilled to be back on the biggest stage. "It's a special competition," he said. "It's Europe's premier futsal competition and the one that everyone wants to play in and win. Knowing when you lift that trophy you're the king of Europe is the best prize there is. It's an incredible feeling. You can win your country's domestic league, but to lift that trophy is only for the best side in Europe."

It is the fourth time since the final-four tournament was introduced in 2007 that the event will have been held in Spain, with the 10,700-capacity Pabellón Príncipe Felipe in Zaragoza hosting all four matches this year, from 20 to 22 April.

The final-four tournament is the culmination of a competition involving a record 56 clubs from an unprecedented 52 UEFA member associations. It took 120 matches over three rounds to determine the four semi-finalists, and having got this far again, Ricardinho is not about to let the trophy slip from his grasp. The Portuguese star was at his best as he led his nation to their first Futsal EURO title in Ljubljana on 10 February and, although he picked up an injury in the final, he remains focused on this next goal. "We're here and we want to win the title again," he said. "We know it's not easy, but people will have to keep Inter in mind."

FC Porto

The youngsters of FC Porto knocked out the titleholders, FC Salzburg, with a 3-1 win in February.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

The UEFA Youth League finals are set to take place opposite UEFA's headquarters in April, with some familiar names targeting the Lennart Johansson Trophy.

Record crowds, famous faces, high drama – the UEFA Youth League was designed to prepare Europe's youngsters for senior club football, and it is certainly hitting the mark.

Indeed, a massive sell-out crowd of 32,510 watched as FC Krasnodar hosted Real Madrid CF in the play-offs in February. For fans, this competition is an exciting opportunity to catch a glimpse of potential stars of the future, while for players, performing under such scrutiny is all part of the learning curve on their journeys to the top. "That was a UEFA Champions League-standard stadium," said Real Madrid defender Adri, whose side advanced on penalties after a goalless draw. "It was great to show what we could do in front of such a big, appreciative crowd."

For Krasnodar midfielder Artem Golubev, there were also plenty of positives, despite the result. "We have taken a lot from playing in the Youth League, because we have faced teams with a variety of different styles and tactics," he said. "The huge crowd did not put any extra pressure on us – far from it. The fans were our 12th man, and we are all grateful to everyone who came to watch us."

Rendez-vous in Nyon on 20 and 23 April

This season, 64 clubs from a record 43 UEFA member associations have participated in the Youth League, and the calibre of the quarter-finalists – Tottenham Hotspur FC, FC Porto, FC Barcelona, Club Atlético de Madrid, Manchester City FC, Liverpool FC, Real Madrid and Chelsea FC – shows how highly valued this competition is. Attention will soon be turning to the semi-finals and the final, which will take place on 20 and 23 April at Colovray stadium, opposite UEFA's headquarters in Nyon, to see who will be crowned champions.

Last season, FC Salzburg were the surprise winners, and the fact that their coach, Marco Rose, has since been promoted to the senior side shows that coaches, too, are benefiting from the Youth League experience. Champions League winner Steven Gerrard is a new face on the bench at Liverpool's U19 team, and his side's 2-0 win over old rival Nicky Butt's Manchester United FC was one of the standout results from the round of 16.

The scorer of Liverpool's opening goal in that game, Ben Woodburn, already holds the record as Liverpool's youngest-ever scorer and is second only to Gareth Bale as Wales's youngest scorer, and catching a glimpse of Europe's next generation of outstanding young talent is a key part of the Youth League's attraction. The competition is only in its fifth season, but already the list of alumni performing at the highest levels is hugely impressive. In last season's UEFA Europa League final, for example, Manchester United's Marcus Rashford came up against AFC Ajax duo Matthijs de Ligt and Kasper Dolberg – all three of them recent Youth League graduates. And this season, heads are being turned by the likes of Manchester City midfielder Phil Foden, who in December became the youngest English player ever to start a Champions League match but continues to gain experience with the club's Youth League side.

Invaluable experience

Such experience is being acquired both on and off the pitch. Many of the teams travel to matches with their respective senior sides, giving youngsters a chance to rub shoulders with the first team, ask advice and gain first-hand experience of what a Champions League away game is all about. Meanwhile, the opportunity to spend time and share a meal with the opposition and match officials after games helps to emphasise UEFA's respect message.

This all contributes to the players' development and helps them to make the step up to senior football. "Such great matches against such good opponents accelerate the growth of these players," Atlético coach Manolo Cano confirms.

A ringing endorsement of a competition that continues to hit its targets.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGE

How a national association is perceived by the public and its stakeholders is crucial. A positive image can mean more people wanting to play football, while sponsors are more inclined to back an association which is seen in a positive light.

"The UEFA GROW image research enabled us to demonstrate to our partners and various stakeholders that the image of the Irish Football Association has improved significantly over the last few years," says Patrick Nelson, chief executive of the national association in Northern Ireland. "This is an important aspect of our discussions with existing and potential sponsors, as well as the government."

Fact-based research

Launched in 2015, the UEFA GROW programme has become the central business development platform for national associations to grow the game across Europe in a systematic and strategic manner. It offers tailor-made consultation services to UEFA's member associations in the different areas that are most relevant for football organisations.

When a national association decides to join UEFA GROW, the collaboration kicks off with an independent piece of research commissioned by UEFA on behalf of the national association. That research is carried out in cooperation with leading specialists, who use samples representative of the respective countries' census data to enable the national associations to draw valid conclusions. The research aims to:

- provide an overview of the attitudes towards football in the country (including the image of the national association, the national teams and the various domestic competitions, as well as grassroots and women's football in general);
- produce a clear picture of how football ranks against other sports;
- understand the reasons for the current status of football in the country;
- identify areas to be addressed in future organisational planning in order to improve the image of football in the country.

"Listening to the Finnish football family is at the core of our DNA, and this independent piece of research is a great tool for us," says Kalle Seire, the Football Association of Finland's head of sales and marketing. "It presents an unbiased analysis of the current situation and gives us the ability to measure how we are developing. It identifies areas of strength, but also areas for improvement. The UEFA GROW image research is an important element in determining our future marketing and overall organisational planning."

No 'love brands'

So far, 30 national associations have benefitted from this research, and the data from those 30 markets have generated plenty of positive findings.

Getty Images

The data from 30 European countries shows that parents with a positive perception of their national association are more likely to take their children to football matches (above; Ukraine) and let them play (below; Poland).

Sportsfile

For example, football is by far the most followed sport across Europe and is among the three most followed sports in every single market surveyed.

Although the research has uncovered that football has a positive image, this does not necessarily translate into positive perceptions of the governing bodies that are in charge of developing and promoting the game.

The research shows that just as many people say their respective national associations have a positive image (39%) as those who say the opposite (37% believe their national association has a negative image). Equally alarming is the fact that in over one third of the markets surveyed, there are more people with a negative perception of the national association than with a positive one.

These negative views are often driven by perceptions of national associations being out of touch or slow to react, which has important implications for strategic communications planning. This is an important area that needs to be addressed, as negative perceptions of a national association may have a serious impact on key business objectives.

1) Attendance

The research shows that people with a negative image of their national association are significantly less likely to go to matches of the men's national team. Conversely, parents with a positive perception of their national association are more likely to take their children to a football match.

2) Participation

Respondents with a positive image of their national association are more likely to play football and more often than those with a negative perception of the governing body. Parents – who play a huge role in determining which sports their children play – are also more likely to let their children participate in football if they have a positive perception of their national association.

The UEFA GROW research in Northern Ireland showed the Irish Football Association's stakeholders that its image has improved significantly in the last few years.

3) TV viewership

Respondents with a positive image of their national association are more likely to watch football on TV.

These results underline that the image of the national associations is crucial and show why it is one of the key pillars of UEFA GROW. Each research report is presented to the national association's top management and, together with UEFA, a clear plan of action is drawn up to address the areas for improvement. The image pillar also sets the tone for additional follow-up support. For example, UEFA GROW is helping national associations to create clear strategic communications plans that seek to improve the image of the associations and help them deliver the right messages to the right stakeholders, while follow-up research can be carried out at a later stage to show whether the implemented changes have been a success.

"The UEFA GROW image research delivered lots of valuable insights for our organisation," says Elkhan Mammadov, general secretary of the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan. "Following the presentation of the research results, we have put together a clear action plan and are now developing and implementing a strategic communications plan with the aim of translating the AFFA's positive image into more positive perceptions of women's and grassroots football." ⚽

ENGAGING WITH DISABLED PEOPLE THROUGH FOOTBALL

Since 2010, UEFA has been supporting football-related academic research projects through its Research Grant Programme. This month, Dr Paul Kitchin analyses efforts to involve disabled people in football.

When striving for best practice, organisations require benchmarks to help them improve their performance. Many national associations and clubs offer football for all programmes and are working to improve spectator access, but how do we determine the best pratices in such areas?

Kitchin's research – which began in 2016 – sought to gather and highlight best practices in the engagement of disabled people[1] across UEFA's footballing community.

"We studied overall engagement rather than just participation, to give us a more complete picture," says Kitchin. "We wanted to find the best playing opportunities, see who provided the best spectating opportunities, and explore the opportunities for disabled people to work in football," he adds. "This broader understanding of engagement was the focus of our research."

Dr Paul Kitchin works at Ulster University in Northern Ireland researching sport management and social inclusion. He was supported in this research study by Stephen Bloomer.

Nigel McDowell

Measuring engagement

To understand the complexity of engagement, it was important to have input from as many organisations as possible, so Kitchin's team created a survey that included some follow-up interviews with those whom they believed demonstrated best practice.

The survey was designed to measure the organisations' perspective on the importance and performance of engagement. The team also collected information on each organisation's finances, facilities, brand, human resources and competencies. This was important to explain differences between large and small associations and clubs.

In total, the researchers received responses from 39 national associations and over 300 licensed clubs (those in Europe's top divisions), over 30 of which provided detailed information.

What works best

Across Europe, from Astana to Reykjavik, there are a large number of opportunities for disabled people to play and watch football. The study also found there has been a significant increase in integrated football for all abilities across Europe.

These opportunities allow disabled and non-disabled people to play the game together, providing shared experiences and a greater mutual awareness of each other's abilities. The report and case studies quote clubs such as FC Utrecht and FC BATE, which make sure the matchday experiences of disabled fans are as good or even better than those of any other spectators at the game.

Some opportunities remain

Despite the progress made by some organisations, a lot more needs to be done. Involving disabled people in behind-the-scenes operations is a great opportunity for the football community and will make the sport even more inclusive.

Second round

Even with this benchmark of engagement activities across Europe, many organisations felt that more research was required.

The survey was repeated in late 2017, to enable more organisations to take part and allow those that responded in the first round to see that increased awareness and engagement is of benefit to their organisations. The latest results are currently being analysed. ⚽

[1] *The term disabled people and not people with disabilities is recommended in the UEFA and CAFE Good Practice Guide to Creating an Accessible Stadium and Matchday Experience.*

REFEREE ACADEMY STARTS UP

The referee academy of the Georgian Football Federation (GFF) – the first of its kind in the country – has opened in Tbilisi, offering refereeing courses to participants free of charge.

GFF

This new project is being financed by the Georgian football development fund. Out of more than 500 applicants, 30 were selected to participate in the pilot course, including seven women. The opening ceremony was attended by UEFA Referees Committee representative Jaap Uilenberg, as well as UEFA Referee Convention Panel member Jørn West Larsen.

"This is an excellent project. The first edition of the referee academy course has 30 participants, with a further 50 due to join them in a month. This means that we can double the number of referees in a short period of time, which will represent a big success for Georgia," Larsen said.

Successful applicants receive free education, equipment and learning materials, and graduates from the academy will have the opportunity to start a career in refereeing.

The prospective referees were addressed and congratulated by the general secretary of the Georgian Football Federation, David Mujiri, who highlighted the significance of this new initiative: "As you know, the educational component of the GFF's development programme includes numerous different projects. One of the most important of these is the referee academy. To our delight, we had more than 500 applicants at the initial stage. Thirty young people have been selected to begin the course today.

"This project is being conducted jointly with UEFA, and the presence of such important guests at this event once again highlights this organisation's support for us. We will do everything to ensure that the young people starting the course today learn the refereeing trade and contribute towards the development of Georgian football."

The chairman of the GFF referees committee, Tengiz Sulakvelidze, also emphasised the significance of the referee academy and the potential benefits of the project for Georgian football.

The course participants were equally enthusiastic: "Football means a lot to me and plays a crucial role in my life. I always wanted to make my own contribution towards the development of Georgian football, and would love to become a referee, which is why I applied to participate in this project. I realise that this is a matter of great responsibility, but I hope that I can cope with it," said Vika Sakhuria, one of the seven female participants.

As well as educating prospective young referees, the referee academy will also aim to enhance the qualifications of existing match officials.

"I think this is a very interesting project. Football-mad young people in Georgia have been given a unique opportunity to become involved in a project of this size, and I believe that all of us have a chance to become actively involved in the game," added another of the participants, Giorgi Archvadze.

It is worth noting that as well as educating prospective young referees, the referee academy will also aim to enhance the qualifications of existing match officials.

WORK STARTS ON THE NEW HOUSE OF ALBANIAN FOOTBALL

The Albanian Football Association (FSHF) continues to invest heavily in sports infrastructure. After two football stadiums in Elbasan and Shkodër, and the National Arena currently under construction in the capital, work has now begun on a new house of football in Tirana, a project financed in its entirety by the association itself.

The new complex contains a sports centre that includes a mini-stadium to be used for training by the national teams and for friendly matches.

The Albanian prime minister, Edi Rama, joined Armand Duka, the president of FSHF, for the ground-breaking ceremony, in the presence of many important figures of Albanian football, and representatives of the clubs and the football community at large.

"Now Albanian football will have its own home," said Armand Duka. "Our fruitful cooperation with the government over the last few years has changed the face of Albanian football. We'll be back in 18 months' time to open the complex."

The prime minister emphasised that besides giving the national teams a new home, the centre would house the game's governing body, provide training facilities for coaches and also host other national and international courses.

The FSHF does not intend to stop here, as other projects are in the pipeline as part of what is a major investment in national sports infrastructure. ⚽

FSHF

ARMAND DUKA RE-ELECTED AS PRESIDENT FOR A FURTHER FOUR YEARS

At the general assembly of the Albanian Football Association in early February, Armand Duka was re-elected as president for another four-year term, his fifth in all.

Having made his first move in football as owner of Shijak-based club KF Erzeni, Duka was elected for his first term as president of the Football Association of Albania in 2002, determined to improve the image of Albanian football, promote the game and develop the nation's footballing infrastructure.

"I'm delighted with the confidence that the Albanian football family has shown in me today," he said. "This general assembly was held to international standards, as befits a top-ranking institution in Albanian society. And my dedication to improving the sport in Albania is greater than ever."

UEFA vice-president Grigoriy Surkis attended the assembly as an observer and congratulated Armand Duka on his re-election, conducted in a spirit of openness and democracy.

GROW PROJECT IN SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE

In close cooperation with UEFA, the Albanian Football Association has reached an agreement with the ministry of education and sport to include football in physical education classes, as part of the UEFA GROW project initially launched as a pilot in six European countries, including Albania.

Under the agreement, primary school children in grades 7 to 9 nationwide will have football added to their physical education curriculum. The GROW project had already been trialled in two schools in Elbasan, and was received with great enthusiasm by the children, their parents and the coaches. The project launch ceremony was attended by the FSHF president, Armand Duka, the deputy minister of education, sports and youth, Kostandin Shkurti, the headmaster of the Sule Harri school, and Elbasan's mayor, who is also the city's director of education.

"This ambitious project will support the children's passion and dreams of playing football," said Armand Duka. "As an institution, we want to give absolute priority to children's football and will follow up with initiatives and projects.

"This is a project that requires considerable commitment," he added, "including large-scale human and financial resources, together with technical or infrastructure investments."

AZERBAIJAN www.affa.az

BRAVE HEARTS FESTIVAL

ULVIYYA NAJAFOVA

On 19 and 20 February, the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan (AFFA) organised Brave Hearts festivals for refugee children living in the Guzanli settlement in the Aghdam region and in the Tartar region. The main aim of the project is to increase opportunities for children from refugee and internally displaced families to play football, to offer them organised recreational activities, to get them interested in football and to promote a healthy lifestyle.

In all, 111 children – including one girl – took part in the festival held at the Guzanli Olympic sport complex, while 72 boys participated in the festival held on the pitch of the Tartar regional sport and youth centre. Children who distinguished themselves at the festival were presented with awards by the AFFA for their active participation in the event.

Jahangir Hasanzade, head of the AFFA's grassroots department and coordinator of the project, said: "Our main aim is to use football to promote health, friendship, social integration and, of course, fun. The festivals have been a huge success. We are glad that we can bring the joy of football to refugee children in these front-line regions. We are happy to unite all these youngsters through football and fun. I hope that with the support of UEFA and the AFFA, we can keep this great work going."

BELGIUM www.belgianfootball.be

SUPPORTERS BACK CANCER FOUNDATION

JÉRÉMY SMEETS

At the end of January, the official Belgium supporters club, 1895, announced a new partnership with the Fondation contre le Cancer (foundation against cancer). Various events have already been organised to raise supporters' awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle, with further activities planned for the coming months.

Under this new partnership, 1895 supported the second edition of the 'Tournée minérale' (dry round) campaign in February this year. Organised by the cancer foundation, this initiative is designed to encourage Belgians to think about their alcohol intake by challenging them to remain teetotal for a whole month. Just like last year, the event was a great success, attracting more than 100,000 participants.

In a similar vein, the Belgian Football Association had already joined forces with the Fondation contre le Cancer in 2017 to ensure that, among other things, most matches played by its national teams took place in smoke-free stadiums, an initiative that was welcomed by many supporters.

Looking ahead, 1895 members will also take part in various 'Relais pour la vie' (relays for life), 24-hour races held to raise funds for cancer research. However, this is only a start and, with many Belgian supporters keen to get involved, other activities are bound to be added to the list in due course.

In football just as in day-to-day life, every step is important and no matches are lost in advance, as long as there is hope. Football is a team sport in which solidarity and mutual support are essential for victory, and the same is true in the fight against cancer.

BELARUS www.bff.by

WINNING GRASSROOTS PROJECTS

GLEB STAKHOVSKY

Last September, as part of UEFA Grassroots Week, the Belarus Football Federation (ABFF) launched its first annual contest for the best grassroots project ideas. By the entry deadline of 31 December, the ABFF had received 18 detailed project proposals from all over the country. The ideas were all so different and relevant that the jury – composed of staff from the ABFF's grassroots, marketing and communications departments, together with Belarusian grassroots ambassador and former Arsenal and Barcelona player Alexander Hleb – decided to select ten winning project proposals instead of just five as originally planned.

The ABFF also felt it was important to support as many projects as possible because behind each idea were people with a passion for football who were prepared to volunteer their time to get as many people into football as possible and contribute to its development.

The projects ranged from a girls' football academy to an internet platform bringing all amateur competitions within one site, and a football tricks and skills video contest. On 26 January, all ten winners were invited to the ABFF headquarters to receive their prizes from the ABFF general secretary, Sergey Safaryan, who thanked them for their interest and efforts. On the same occasion, the winners also had individual meetings with the grassroots staff to discuss the implementation of their projects.

At the end of this year, the ABFF will chose the most successful of the ten projects.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA www.nfsbih.ba

A WARM WELCOME FOR STEVANOVIĆ

FEDJA KRVAVAC

F. Krvavac

ŽFK Radnik Bumerang are currently top of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Under-16 girls' league, thanks in no small part to prolific forward Jovana Stevanović. Indeed, she is the league's second top scorer with 25 goals, just three fewer than team-mate Sofija Krajšumović.

Despite having a hearing impairment, Stevanović is a highly talented player, and after some excellent performances in the league, she was recently invited to join the national Under-16 girls' team. When she met up with the squad for the first time, her new team-mates had a big surprise for her: they had all learned some sign language to help her settle in.

"I'm so glad to be in the team, and my team-mates are great. I have made many friends through football, and I feel very fortunate. My family and friends are delighted for me. All of this makes me very happy. I started playing football four years ago. I've always wanted to be a footballer, and I'm doing well so far. I hope I can keep it up," Stevanović says.

In other news, new head coach Robert Prosinečki recently took charge of the men's national team for the first time, with Bosnia and Herzegovina playing two friendlies in the United States in late January – one against the hosts in Los Angeles and one against Mexico in San Antonio. However, for those two matches, Prosinečki was restricted to players from the Bosnian and Herzegovinian premier league, plus Ibrahim Šehić (who plays for Qarabağ FK in Azerbaijan) and Haris Medunjanin and Elvira Ibišević (who play for clubs in the United States). The first match, against the United States, ended in a 0-0 draw, and Mexico won the second 1-0, with Hugo Ayala scoring the only goal of the game in the 65th minute.

Meanwhile, in the UEFA Youth League, Bosnian and Herzegovinian champions FK Željezničar lost 3-1 to Club Atlético de Madrid in the play-offs in early February.

BULGARIA www.bfunion.bg

BORISLAV MIHAYLOV RE-ELECTED

PRESS OFFICE

Borislav Mihaylov was recently re-elected as president of the Bulgarian Football Union (BFS) at the association's eighth regular congress, securing 90.8% of the delegates' votes.

A total of 512 delegates had the right to vote in the election, and 510 did so (with 504 valid votes being cast). Borislav Mihaylov, who is also a member of the UEFA Executive Committee, received 463 votes, and is now embarking on his fourth term in office.

The election of a new executive committee was also on the agenda, and that committee now comprises the following 14 members: Yordan Lechkov, Mihail Kasabov, Atanas Furnadzhiev, Emil Kostadinov, Kamen Kostadinov, Rumyan Valkov, Ventseslav Stefanov, Mihail Statev, Valentin Mihov, Kiril Domuschiev, Spas Rusev, Petar Velichkov, Panayot Reyzi and Dimitar Georgiev.

Reinhard Grindel, president of the German Football Association, was a guest at the event, and he gave Borislav Mihaylov a special gift – a signed Germany shirt with the number 55 on the back – in celebration of the BFS president's 55th birthday.

The event was also attended by Krasen Kralev, the Bulgarian minister for youth and sport, who presented Borislav Mihaylov with the 'Wreath of the Winner', the country's highest accolade in the field of sport, in recognition of his contribution to Bulgarian sport.

At the end of the congress, amendments to the Statute of the Bulgarian Football Union were voted on and adopted.

As part of the BFS's efforts to popularise football, safeguard fair play and make our beloved game more accessible to everyone, a number of key objectives were agreed for the next four years.

The BFS is aiming to increase the total number of registered players in Bulgaria by at least 100,000 and wants to have at least 50% of the population participating in the game in some form – be it as players, coaches, referees or volunteers, or simply as fans. In particular, the association is hoping to increase the number of girls and women playing football at least sevenfold.

The BFS is also intending to invest around €4m from its own budget in football infrastructure across the country, building high-quality mini-pitches that are accessible to everyone. Those funds will be supplemented by contributions from FIFA and UEFA.

Finally, the association is aiming to complete its digitisation work – both internally and in terms of the overall organisation of football. The BFS wants to know about everyone who is involved in the game, so it can listen to their views and make the necessary improvements.

CROATIA www.hns-cff.hr

CELEBRATING CROATIA'S FOOTBALL HERITAGE

NIKA BAHTIJAREVIĆ

The Croatian Football Federation (HNS) kicked off 2018 with two major events, the first on 26 January, when the federation joined forces with the Croatian museum society for this year's sports-themed edition of the Night of Museums.

The event's headline exhibition took place at the natural history museum, where visitors could learn more about the long-standing bond between football and art. The exhibition was opened by the HNS executive director, Damir Vrbanović, who expressed his support for the Night of Museums and his "exceptional pride at the federation's collaboration with the natural history museum".

Croatia's rich football heritage was further celebrated at two other locations – the FA's multimedia centre stayed open until midnight and offered visitors a glimpse into the history of football in Croatia, while the Zagreb Fair housed an interactive exhibition on a number of different sports.

Then in early February, the HNS hosted its fourth annual conference on stadium safety and security. Experts from the judicial system, law enforcement and stadium security discussed potential courses of action for reducing hooligan behaviour during football matches, and stressed the importance of ensuring that football stadiums are safe and welcoming environments for people of all ages and from all social groups.

Finally, the HNS recently completed an organisational restructuring in order to optimise performance and effectiveness. As part of that process, it has recruited three new staff members to help it towards that goal: Marijan Kustić has been appointed as a director of competitions and infrastructure, Ivan Herak takes charge of strategic planning, EU funds and promotion, and Sreten Čuk joins the federation as technical director.

ESTONIA www.jalgpall.ee

FOOTBALL CELEBRATES ESTONIA'S CENTENARY

MAARJA SAULEP

On 24 February, Estonia celebrated the 100th anniversary of its independence and football joined in the birthday celebrations.

Martin Reim, head coach of the men's national team, attended the independence day parade on Tallinn's Freedom Square as a representative of Estonian football and laid a wreath at the foot of the war of independence victory column in memory of everyone – including people from the world of football – who had fought for Estonian independence.

Also as part of those centenary celebrations, the national anthem was played before kick-off when the first round of matches were played in the 2018 Estonian First League season. In addition, the Estonian Football Association intends to mark the anniversary throughout the year by including 'Estonia 100' visuals on posters promoting national team, league and cup matches.

However, Estonian football's main birthday present to the nation will come later in the year, with Tallinn playing host to the UEFA Super Cup in August, when the winners of the UEFA Champions League and the UEFA Europa League will face off in the country's newly renovated national stadium.

That venue is now almost ready for its big day, having undergone a number of changes affecting both the interior and the exterior of the stadium. An additional 5,000 seats have been added, bringing the stadium's total capacity to 15,000, and two giant screens have been installed in order to improve the fan experience. Media and TV facilities have also been significantly improved, as have stadium access, VIP services and much more besides.

Martin Reim

ENGLAND www.thefa.com

THE FA DISABILITY CUP RETURNS TO ST GEORGE'S PARK

TOM EVERETT

The FA Disability Cup returns this summer, with England's top grassroots disability teams competing at the national football centre, St George's Park, on Saturday 16 and Sunday 17 June.

The competition, which is now in its third year, is the largest of its kind in the country, with six cup finals scheduled to take place in partnership with a range of impairment-specific organisations:

- England Amputee Football Association
- The National Blind Football League
- Cerebral Palsy Sport
- English Schools' Football Association (for deaf children)
- National Partially Sighted Football League
- Wheelchair Football Association

As well as the introduction of a partially sighted category, this year's event will play host to an exhibition of frame football, which is a new format of the game currently being developed in conjunction with Cerebral Palsy Sport for people who use a frame or walker.

Phil Heap, national participation manager at The FA, said: "The FA Disability Cup is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate and recognise the achievements of players, coaches, officials, volunteers, fans and partner organisations involved across the grassroots disability game.

To learn more about grassroots disability football in England, visit TheFA.com/Disability.

FAROE ISLANDS www.football.fo

GENDER EQUALITY FOR NATIONAL TEAMS

TERJI NILSEN

At its congress in February, the Faroe Islands Football Association (FSF) signed a new sponsorship deal with Faroese ferry company Smyril Line, making that firm the main sponsor of the Faroese women's national team.

"We are delighted with this agreement. We will use the money to make sure that there is full equality between the men's and women's national teams, with all players being paid the same amount when representing their country," said Christian Andreasen, president of the FSF.

Women's football is a key priority for the FSF. Indeed, the association agreed a new strategy for women's football last year with the aim of increasing the number of female footballers in the Faroe Islands and taking the country's national teams to the next level.

Smyril Line's marketing director, Henny á Líknargøtu, is also excited about the new sponsorship deal. "Our national teams are highly visible abroad, and they have the potential to make us equally visible as a tourist destination," she says. The new sponsorship agreement between the FSF and Smyril Line will run until 1 March 2021.

From the left: Ásla Johannesen, national team player, Henny á Líknargøtu, Christian F. Andreasen and Rannvá B. Andreasen, national team player.

FRANCE www.fff.fr

LABEL OF EXCELLENCE FOR MEDICAL CENTRE

BASTIEN LHÉRITIER

The medical centre at the Clairefontaine national football centre has had its status as a FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence renewed.

Having been recognised as such by FIFA for the first time on 17 April 2013, the Clairefontaine medical centre has had its accreditation extended for another five years. The distinction has only been awarded to around 40 centres across the world, including two in France, the other being the Académie Médicale de Football de Lyon. "It's a sign of credibility and international recognition," said Emmanuel Orhant, medical director of the French Football Federation (FFF). "It shows that we are recognised as a centre of expertise and medical care."

"We have a medical care department for local, regional and national athletes," explained Dr Orhant. "There is also an evaluation department for physiological, cardiorespiratory, maximal oxygen consumption (VO_2 max) and isokinetic testing. Finally, we have a rehabilitation department where, although 90% of patients are professional footballers, we also treat athletes from other sports, such as rugby and basketball. Last year, we saw around 3,000 patients in the medical care department, 2,500 in the evaluation department and 2,400 in the rehab department."

GIBRALTAR www.gibraltarfa.com

UNDER-16 GIRLS TAKE PART IN FIRST INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENT

STEVEN GONZALEZ

Gibraltar's Under-16 girls' team recently took part in their first international tournament – a UEFA development tournament, where they faced Andorra, Liechtenstein and hosts Malta. The tournament, which took place from 29 January to 2 February, represents an important step in the evolution of women's football in Gibraltar, with girls now gaining crucial exposure to international football at a young age, supporting their development as players.

Although the girls lost all three games, results were of secondary importance on this occasion. Under the watchful eye of head coach Steve Cummings, the girls put in a lot of hard work in preparation for the tournament and performed admirably in Malta.

GFA

"Our expectations going into this UEFA development tournament were simply for our girls and technical staff to gain more experience at international level. The girls worked really hard throughout this tournament, both on and off the pitch, and this is just the start for them. They will only get better from here. It has been an honour and a privilege to be their coach," Cummings said.

This is just the beginning of these girls' journey in international football. Their never-say-die attitude is a real example to everyone involved in Gibraltarian football, and we as a country are immensely proud of them.

ISRAEL www.football.org.il

PLAYING TOGETHER AGAINST HOMOPHOBIA

EITAN DOTAN

As part of the Football v Homophobia month of action in February, Ramat Gan Stadium was the venue for a symbolic match between a celebrity team and the Rainbow team, comprising both gay and straight players, reinforced by Hapoel Katamon Jerusalem youth players.

The match provided the opportunity for Roy Ohana, the first transgender player in Israeli football, to make his debut in men's football. The celebrity team won 3-0, thanks to a goal by former Hapoel Tel Aviv star Zito Ogbuna and two from former Bnei Jaffa Ortodoxim player Tomer Yeruham. The Rainbow team was coached by Amaya Taga and the celebrity team by Oved Kraus. Maccabi Tel Aviv captain and Israel FA social responsibility ambassador Sheran Yeini was there to cheer the teams on, along with women's

IFA

international Moran Lavi, and the mayor of Ramat Gan city, Israel Singer.

"The pitch and the stands must welcome everyone in a spirit of equality," said Rotem Kamer, CEO of the Israel Football Association. "The IFA is proud to take part in various social responsibility projects aimed at promoting a society that respects, accepts and empowers everyone."

The founder of the Rainbow team, Ron Cohen, added: "We came here today to kick homophobia off the pitch. Football belongs to everyone, and everyone is equal. Even though we have made great strides, there are many more challenges ahead."

The special game had the support of the national social responsibility team, which was recently set up as a joint initiative by the IFA and the local Kick It Out organisation. The social responsibility team aims to encourage Israeli football players to work for the good of society and the community, speak out against racism and violence, and set an example for equality, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

ITALY www.figc.it

COVERCIANO'S FIRST-EVER OPEN DAY A GREAT SUCCESS

DIEGO ANTENOZIO

The first-ever open day at the Italian football technical centre in Coverciano was a memorable occasion for everyone involved. Almost 2,000 visitors, from diehard fans and football aficionados to those who were just keen to find out more, flocked to the centre from all over Italy to see the training facilities and pitches used by Italy's 17 national teams, as well as the facilities used to deliver courses for players, coaches and officials. They also had the chance to visit the museum of football, which offers a look back through the 120-year history of the Italian Football Association (FIGC), complete with memorabilia from many of Italy's greatest players.

Coverciano, known variously as 'the home of national team' and the 'university of football', is unique not just in Italy but throughout the world.

As well as being shown round the educational and training facilities, visitors were given the chance to experience a typical day at the centre by taking part in tactical and technical sessions in the classroom and on the pitch, as well as a penalty shoot-out challenge on the turf where the national teams train.

During the open day, there was a special ceremony in which three pitches and a classroom at Coverciano were dedicated to four individuals who played a hugely influential role in the development of Italian football: Fabio Bresci, former vice-president of the Lega Nazionale Dilettanti (Italy's governing body for amateur football); Enzo Bearzot, Italy's 1982 World Cup-winning coach; Vittorio Pozzo, coach of the Italy sides that won the 1934 and 1938 World Cups as well as gold at the 1936 Olympics; and Azeglio Vicini, the coach of the host nation at Italia 1990, who recently passed away.

Getty Images

The dedication ceremony was proceeded by a procession in historic dress celebrating the period of the Florentine Republic, and featuring a performance by the Bandierai degli Uffizi – flag bearers carrying the standards of the city's 16 historic districts.

Roberto Fabbricini, the FIGC special commissioner, who attended the open day along with his deputy, Alessandro Costacurta, said: "It was a truly magnificent event that delighted every visitor who attended, and the dedication ceremony means that these great names from Italian football will never be forgotten."

Michele Uva, CEO of the FIGC, said: "Coverciano is the beating heart of our association, and the investments we have made to improve the facilities here are further evidence of this. It was a genuine pleasure to see so many supporters, and so many families, accept our invitation to spend an enjoyable day in these fantastic surroundings."

Luca Lotti, Italy's minister for sport, added: "My thanks go to the FIGC, because this event highlights the importance of building on youth and infrastructure."

Meanwhile, Dario Nardella, mayor of Florence, said: "Coverciano's open day was made possible by extensive collaboration between the Florence authorities and the FIGC. Thanks to the technical centre, the heart of our city is even more azzurro than ever."

Other attendees included Antonio Di Sebastiano, general secretary of the FIGC; Gianni Rivera, president of the FIGC's technical sector; and Vito Tisci, president of the FIGC's youth and schools sector.

KAZAKHSTAN www.kff.kz

NEW PRESIDENT ELECTED

MURATBEK BIMANOV

The Kazakhstan Football Federation held its 16th extraordinary conference in Astana on 10 February to elect a new president, following the resignation of Seilda Baishakov, who was made an honorary member.

His successor is Adilbek Jaxybekov, who was elected unanimously by the extraordinary conference for a four-year term of office. Adilbek Jaxybekov is no stranger to the role, having previously served as the federation's president from 2007 to 2014.

After his election, the new president said that strengthening the country's domestic championship and further developing the grassroots would be among his key priorities to begin with.

LATVIA www.lff.lv

EDUCATING PARENTS

TOMS ĀRMANIS

The Latvian Football Federation recently produced a series of 11 videos and a printed comic book with the aim of educating the parents of young children involved in football, seeking to raise awareness of the role that parents have to play in the development of young players and their personalities.

That series of videos, which is entitled Tears of the King, is aimed at parents with

LFF

children involved in grassroots football, but it is equally applicable to other sports. Each video addresses a different issue, ranging from putting too much pressure on young players to interfering with coaches' work and criticising referees. The aim of the initiative is to inform parents about the problems that young footballers can face and advise them on how to act in specific situations. The videos focus on essential – but often neglected – values such as respect and fair play, calling on parents to support and encourage players, rather than criticising.

This material is being distributed to Latvian clubs free of charge, with the videos being disseminated via social media and other platforms and each club receiving multiple copies of the printed comic book to distribute to players and parents.

MALTA www.mfa.com

ENCOURAGING PERFORMANCES AT DEVELOPMENT TOURNAMENTS

KEVIN AZZOPARDI

January and February were great months for youth football in Malta, with both of the country's Under-16 teams achieving highly encouraging results at UEFA development tournaments.

The girls got the ball rolling, securing convincing wins over Andorra, Gibraltar and Liechtenstein at a four-team development tournament at the Centenary Stadium, which took place from 29 January to 2 February.

The team's victory in that mini-tournament was recognised at the highest levels of government, with Malta's prime minister, Joseph Muscat, personally congratulating the girls on their performances during an audience in his offices at Auberge de Castille in Valletta. "I received a blow-by-blow account of your victory against Andorra, as one of my daughters was a ballgirl at that match," he said.

The boys' team then followed suit by claiming victory in their own tournament, which took place from 24 to 28 February – also at the Centenary Stadium. They beat Andorra on penalties in their first game, before securing more straight-forward wins against Gibraltar and

D Aquilina

Liechtenstein in their other two matches.

The boys' coach, Noel Turner, praised his players' attitude: "The team produced good performances and showed a very positive attitude throughout. This will be essential if these youngsters are to keep progressing in their careers."

"This was the first time that our players had experienced an international tournament, and it will certainly aid their development ," Turner added. "In addition to the footballing side of things, they also had to sit school exams during the tournament, either at the team hotel or at their schools. Balancing their footballing and academic duties proved a challenge, but the team's performances show that the players coped well."

MOLDOVA www.fmf.md

CLUB LICENSING AND FINANCIAL FAIR PLAY WORKSHOP IN CHISINAU

PRESS OFFICE

On 1 and 2 February, the Football Association of Moldova (FMF) hosted a regional club licensing and financial fair play workshop, which was attended by representatives of UEFA and 14 member associations. The two-day event focused not only on developments and challenges in the area of club licensing, but also on financial trends and the implementation of financial fair play.

The workshop was opened by Pavel Cebanu, president of the FMF. "It is a great honour for us to be hosting this year's regional workshop and welcoming participants to Moldova's capital city. I am extremely grateful to everyone who has contributed to the organisation of this event," Cebanu said.

The official opening of the workshop was followed by a detailed presentation by Mihai Anghel, the FMF's first vice-president and its head of licensing, who explained how the licensing process in Moldova had been managed over the last

V Caftanat

15 years. That was followed by a presentation by two representatives of Moldovan champions FC Sheriff – the club's legal counsel, Dmitry Dimitrashko, and the head of its international department, Serghei Pogrebnoi.

UEFA's representatives then provided a general overview and an update on the future development of the UEFA Club Licensing and Financial Fair Play Regulations. The workshop also featured a panel discussion bringing together representatives of various different national associations, who discussed their experiences of implementing club licensing in their respective countries.

PORTUGAL www.fpf.pt

REBUILDING HOUSES DEVASTATED BY WILDFIRES

MATILDE DIAS

The Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) has begun rebuilding 12 houses that were destroyed by last summer's wildfires in central and northern Portugal, using solidarity funds collected over the last few months.

Those funds, which total almost €722,000, include the proceeds from the men's national team's recent home friendlies against the United States and Saudi Arabia, as well as donations made by telephone during those matches. As part of that charitable initiative, Portugal's

FPF

national television networks joined together to broadcast both games and help raise more money for the cause.

The FPF's president, Fernando Gomes, recently toured the affected areas, meeting the families who will benefit from that initiative. He was delighted to see rubble being replaced by brick – and desperation turning to hope.

NORTHERN IRELAND www.irishfa.com

NINE-GOAL THRILLER IN WOMEN'S FUTSAL CUP DECIDER

NIGEL TILSON

East Belfast Ladies have won the 2018 Northern Ireland Senior Women's Futsal Cup after staging a remarkable comeback in the final.

Linfield Ladies, reigning premiership champions in the 11-a-side game, looked to be cruising to victory in the decider after going four up. But East Belfast had other ideas and secured the trophy by scoring four without reply in the second half and then the winner in extra time.

The first half of the final – played at Shankill Leisure Centre in Belfast – was action packed. East Belfast created and missed several chances, while Linfield were clinical. Goals from Sarah Venney, Louise McDaniel, Abbie Magee and Megan Bell appeared to put them in the driving seat. East Belfast, however, found their range in the second half, with goals from Ally Lowey, Shelly Stothers and Leanne Watters (two) forcing the match into extra time. There was nothing between the sides in the extra period and the action was end to end. Stacey Bryce grabbed the all-important goal for East Belfast to put them 5-4 up. The trophy and medals were presented by the Irish FA president, David Martin.

More than 200 players and 23 teams in three regions across Northern Ireland took part in this year's Women's Futsal Cup competition, which was organised by Jackie Blyth of the Irish FA Foundation.

IFA

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND www.fai.ie

CONCUSSION AND LIFE SUPPORT TRAINING TOPS FOR DOCTORS

GARETH MAHER

Former Republic of Ireland international Kevin Doyle offered an honest insight into how a footballer deals with concussion at a workshop for doctors and physiotherapists organised by the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) at its national training centre.

Designed to educate, inform and engage the doctors and physiotherapists who work in the top-flight men's and women's leagues and for the national teams, the workshop proved to be a great success with the large number of participants. Dr Alan Byrne and highly experienced physiotherapist Colin Dunlevy – who both work with the Ireland men's senior team – were instrumental in organising the worthwhile event, the 11th of its kind.

There were a range of expert speakers,

FAI

including FAI head of fitness Dan Horan, Dr Louise O'Connell from Cobh Ramblers, Dr Charlotte Skidmore, who takes care of the women's Under-17 team, and the medical director of the Irish Rugby Football Union, Rod McLoughlin.

Among the topics on the agenda were an anti-doping update, information on a planned injury surveillance research project, a review of pitchside medical equipment and a course on basic life support training, which is approved by UEFA and the Irish Heart Foundation.

Kevin Doyle also delivered a fascinating presentation, alongside Dr Alan Byrne, on how he dealt with concussion, how it affected him, and how it ultimately ended his playing career following knocks to the head while playing for Colorado Rapids in MLS.

The insights from a player who scored 14 goals in 63 senior appearances for the Republic of Ireland provided the participants with plenty of food for thought and served as a basis for a subsequent discussion on recognising and treating concussion.

Supported by the FAI board and the FAI medical committee, the workshop addressed many key issues and provided each participant with a better understanding of the various topics addressed.

ROMANIA www.frf.ro

BUDDING WOMEN'S FUTSAL TEAM

PAUL ZAHARIA

Futsal and women's football are two important pillars of development for the Romanian Football Federation.

The number of women playing football in Romania has increased (from 1,176 in 2015 to more than 52,500 in 2017). Although there is no domestic women's futsal championship as yet, this has not prevented the creation of a competitive national women's futsal team, which has attracted and redirected talented female footballers towards the game of futsal.

David Asandei, 49, is the head coach of the new national women's futsal team. A former second-division footballer and head coach of several third-division men's

FRF

11-a-side teams, Asandei, together with current futsal international Florin Ignat (recently in action at Futsal EURO 2018), created the successful United Galati futsal club 15 years ago. Today, United Galati are flying high in the domestic futsal top division.

Now Asandei faces a much tougher challenge because, as he admits, "we don't have a women's futsal championship". Nevertheless, he is very optimistic, considering that "the projects developed in the last four years by our FA regarding futsal and women's football have discovered talents and offer us big hopes that we will succeed."

With this new national team, "futsal and women's football have merged and become united," Asandei says. What is his short-term strategy? "Our base will be formed by 11-a-side football players, but we also have some female futsal players in the first two Italian leagues, as well as in Spain. I am very happy and optimistic because when I contacted them, they were hugely enthusiastic."

So, good foundations already exist and the head coach has another advantage he can draw on: he has been working as a high school teacher for several years, which means he is used to working with girls.

After the futsal championships finish in Italy and Spain, there will be a trials in May, followed one month later by a double-header against Moldova. It will be a historic milestone, but not as important as the qualifiers for the new European Women's Futsal Championship. If the spirit and determination of the female futsal players is anything to go by, there is nothing to stop them emulating their male counterparts and reaching the final tournament.

RUSSIA www.rfs.ru

RUSSIA WIN ANNIVERSARY LEGENDS CUP

EKATERINA GRISHENKOVA

On 3 and 4 February, the Luzhniki Small Sports Arena in Moscow hosted the tenth international Legends Cup tournament in memory of Konstantin Eremenko, who was one of the best futsal players in the world and a multiple Futsal EURO medallist.

Six teams took part in the anniversary tournament: Russia, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and an all-star team. They all featured in their ranks players over 35 years of age who used to play for their national football teams, including famous names such as Francesco Totti, Hristo Stoichkov, Frank de Boer, William Gallas, Damien Duff, Luigi Di Biagio, Dmitri Alenichev, Aleksei Smertin and Sergei Kiriakov.

Each match consisted of two 20-minute halves. Russia finished top of Group A, beating the all-star team (7-5) and Italy (8-5). Portugal took the honours in Group B, defeating France (7-5) and Germany (6-4). In the final, the hosts beat Portugal by a convincing score of 8-4 to win their tenth tournament in a row, making it ten out of ten. A great

Legends.ru

achievement! The all-stars team finished in third place, beating Germany 10-7. In the match for fifth place, Italy conquered France 8-3.

The best players of the tournament were awarded with individual prizes. Evgeniy Aldonin (Russia) was named as the best player of the tournament, Stipe Pletikosa (all-star team) was named the best goalkeeper and Cacau (Germany) finished as top scorer with 11 goals. Last but not least, Francesco Totti (Italy) received a special award for his contribution to the development of football.

SAN MARINO www.fsgc.sm

TIFO TITANO: THE ONLINE COMMUNITY FOR FANS OF THE SAN MARINO NATIONAL TEAM

PRESS OFFICE

It is called Tifo Titano, a name that conjures up images of San Marino's iconic Mount Titano. Catchy and distinctive, fans will be proud to use it. But what is it exactly? A community? A club? A platform? Whatever you want to call it, we hope it will become the first port of call for anyone with an interest in San Marino's senior national teams, from diehard fans to those who simply have a soft spot for 'the Most Serene Republic' or who are curious to find out more.

Tifo Titano is a virtual space that offers real-world information and opportunities, with access to offers from official San Marino Football Federation (FSGC) partners; advice and suggestions on travel, accommodation and eating out; and exclusive discounts on official national team merchandise, with a range of exciting new items due to come online soon.

Subscribers will be given priority access to the limited spaces available at the fan events the FSGC organises for the national team's home games. Most importantly, they will also be able to purchase tickets for all San Marino matches.

The Tifo Titano community demonstrates the FSGC's commitment to serving the needs of its supporters. First and foremost, it provides a platform for biancoazzurri fans to engage with the federation, giving them privileged communication channels and fast-track access to a series of bespoke offers and opportunities.

Joining couldn't be simpler: all fans need to do is sign up for the official Tifo Titano newsletter on the FSGC website.

SCOTLAND www.scottishfa.co.uk

WORLD'S FIRST PARA-FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

MICHAEL LAMONT

Scottish FA

The Scottish FA is to create the world's first affiliated national association dedicated to para-football. Following an investment of more than £100,000 from the Scottish FA, the Scottish Para-Football Association will empower individual para-football associations to run their game according to their own wishes.

The Scottish Para-Football Association will include different associations governing a variety of types of para-football, including amputee football, cerebral palsy football, deaf football, frame football, learning disability football, mental health football, powerchair football and visual impairment football. It will provide sustainability for the individual associations, recognising the demands placed on their volunteers and allowing them to grow at a speed suitable to their own needs.

The creation of the organisation was announced at the inaugural Scottish para-football conference, held at the national sports training centre in Largs on 18 February.

The conference welcomed affiliates from para-football associations across the country to network, share best practice on para-football initiatives and hear from guest speakers, including Aileen Campbell, Scottish government minister for public health and sport.

Andrew Gould, head of football development at the Scottish FA, said: "We are delighted to be at the leading edge of innovation in para-football through the creation of the world's first para-football affiliated national association. Para-football is a key element of our One National Plan, our grassroots football strategy launched last year, and the creation of the Scottish Para-Football Association through this significant investment further demonstrates our commitment to providing football for all. It is important for us to allow para-football players to make decisions affecting their league and national team for themselves, and the Scottish Para-Football Association will empower the individuals playing the game to run their own game."

Aileen Campbell, minister for sport, also welcomed the initiative: "With the creation of the Scottish Para-Football Association – believed to be the first of its kind in the world – Scotland is leading the way globally in creating pathways for people to participate in football and fulfil their potential."

SLOVAKIA www.futbalsfz.sk

JÁN KOVÁČIK STARTS THIRD TERM

PETER SURIN

At the Slovak Football Association (SFZ) conference on 2 February, Ján Kováčik was re-elected as president of the association for a third term, having been first elected in September 2010.

"I am deeply honoured," he said afterwards. "I cannot promise results on the pitch, but I can guarantee that the upcoming period will be one of the best in terms of the development of Slovak football. My credo has always been 'do not build walls; build bridges instead'."

Executive committee elections were also on the conference agenda and resulted in one change, former Under-21 coach Dušan Radolský replacing Milan Lešický as the coaches' representative.

A players' representative was also supposed to be elected for the first time, however the only candidate failed to obtain the required number of votes, and the position will be therefore be left open until the next SFZ conference in June.

The Slovak FA has clear strategic goals. It plans to continue developing training facilities in small towns and villages, and to give youth teams the best facilities possible for their development. One of the biggest goals, though, is to continue developing the relationship with the national team fans. "If somebody had told me five years ago that 11,000 fans would travel to Poland to watch our team in action in the European Under-21 Championship final tournament, or that we would have 17,500 fans at our 2018 World Cup qualifier against Malta, I would not have believed it. I am looking forward to seeing the stadium in Košice finished, to have another stadium that will also allow us to take the national team to other parts of the country," Kováčik said. "Then when the stadiums in the regional cities are finished, we can bid for a European Under-21 Championship final round. And after the new national stadium opens in autumn 2018, we can think about making a bid to host the UEFA Super Cup."

SWEDEN www.svenskfotboll.se

HELPING YOUNG FEMALE PLAYERS ACHIEVE GREATNESS

ANDREAS NILSSON

The problem: not enough young women make it from top prospect to top-class player. The solution: the Swedish FA will spend €600,000 on a three-year project to help more players take the last vital step to greatness.

"We feel it's been getting harder for girls to clear that final hurdle," says the association's player development manager Lilie Persson. "We see it in the progression of players from our national Under-23 team to the senior women's team, and in how many fail to establish themselves in Damallsvenskan, the top women's league, after playing in the women's Under-19 teams. We hope our new 'world class women' project will enable these young women to take a

successful final step in their development."

Improvements will target 15 to 19-year-olds and focus primarily on club level, where the players spend most of their time. Clubs will be given resources to better follow up on injuries, and tools for individual video analysis. Coaches and staff will receive additional training, as part of a broader certification process. The national women's Under-23 team will also have the opportunity to play more matches to give young players more international experience.

"Better clubs will give the national team access to a pool of better prepared players," added Persson. "But of course it's also important for us to improve our own operations, and increasing the number of matches and practice sessions for the Under-23s will be vital to prepare players for full internationals."

SWITZERLAND www.football.ch

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL STILL THRIVING

PIERRE BENOIT

For Swiss women's football, which has enjoyed a real boom in recent years, there are plenty of reasons to celebrate. Not only has the senior national team followed up its first-ever participation in the Women's World Cup in 2015 and its Women's EURO debut in 2017 by qualifying for the 2019 Women's World Cup, but this year also marks a special anniversary.

It is exactly 50 years since women first played organised football in Switzerland. Since Sion were crowned the first, unofficial champions in 1969/70, plenty of water has flowed under the bridges over the Aare and Rhine and women's football has grown enormously. However, for the Swiss Football Association, this is no time to sit back and rest on its laurels. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Until now, efforts to develop the women's game have been very sporadic, with specific projects run whenever a need has been identified. Since these

projects have mainly concerned elite women's football, the development of the women's game at grassroots level has been much less structured. The lack of a conceptual framework has meant that the growth of women's football has not been fostered in a targeted way. The women's football development plan is designed to address this problem by identifying potential and providing the Swiss FA and its women's football department in particular with a set of guidelines that includes practical targets to be achieved by 2020.

As part of this initiative, the 'Mehr Frauen für den Fussball' (More women for football) project has two basic objectives: on the one hand, to encourage more women to get or remain involved in football as coaches, referees and administrators in order to strengthen the grassroots game; and on the other, to enable more women to make a living from football.

UKRAINE www.en.ffu.ua

TRAINING THE STEWARD TRAINERS FOR THE UEFA FINALS

YURI MAZNYCHENKO

From 13 to 18 February, NSC Olimpiyskiy hosted a workshop for those who will train the stewards for the men's and women's UEFA Champions League finals in Kyiv in May.

The training programme involved a variety of tests covering both theory and practice, with coaching from UEFA specialists. Upon completion, the trainers received their certificates from the general secretary of the Football Federation of Ukraine (FFU), Yuriy Zapisotskyi.

UEFA developed this training programme specifically for Ukraine, taking into account the legislative framework and the socio-political situation in the country.

"The Football Federation of Ukraine has a great history in steward training, and it is very encouraging we were asked to come back to develop this training programme," said UEFA instructor Gerald Toms. "This is a great challenge for Ukraine, with the Champions League finals this year, and good stewards are essential. We have given the FFU the tools to do the job and we have every confidence it will deliver, as it did during EURO 2012."

Every day of the workshop comprised several training modules, to acquaint the participants with the general principles of a steward's activities, including communication with spectators, fire safety, and emergency situations and evacuation.

In the practical classes, the future trainers had the opportunity not only to observe and evaluate stewards in action, but also to visit the pre-match briefing before the Ukrainian premier league game between Dynamo Kyiv and Olimpik Donetsk.

WALES www.faw.cymru

HONOURING TWO GREATS OF WELSH SPORT

MELISSA PALMER

The Football Association of Wales (FAW) was recently invited to join Great Western Railway in paying tribute to two greats of Welsh sport: footballer John Charles and rugby player Sir Gareth Edwards.

Great Western Railway, which provides train services across south Wales and large parts of England, is naming its new intercity express trains after individuals and organisations that have inspired the regions that it serves. In honour of those Welsh idols, Great Western Railway recently brought members of Wales' football and rugby families together to unveil a new train named after the two players, with Charles' name at one end of the train and Edwards' name at the other.

Representatives of the FAW joined Edwards at Cardiff Central Station, where they boarded the train and set off for London Paddington. When they reached London, they had the honour of meeting members of Charles' family, along with directors of some of his former clubs (including Juventus and Leeds United FC).

John Charles is rightly regarded as one of Wales' finest ever footballers and one of the greats of the game. 'The Gentle Giant', as he was affectionately referred to by fans, is remembered for scoring goals wherever he went throughout his long career. At national level, Charles is best known for helping Wales to reach the quarter-finals of the 1958 World Cup.

John Charles (right)

The FAW is honoured to have been a part of this occasion, celebrating a true great of Welsh and European football.

BIRTHDAYS

Elisabeth Derks (Netherlands, 2 April)
Michael Sjöö (Sweden, 2 April)
Dejan Filipović (Serbia, 2 April)
Kevin Azzopardi (Malta, 2 April)
Marton Dinnyés (Hungary, 2 April)
Kaj Østergaard (Denmark, 3 April)
Martin Sturkenboom (Netherlands, 3 April)
Dennis Cruise (Republic of Ireland, 3 April)
Yoav Strauss (Israel, 3 April)
Emil Ubias (Czech Republic, 3 April)
Christian Kofoed (Denmark, 4 April)
Eamon Naughton (Republic of Ireland, 4 April)
Alex Miescher (Switzerland, 4 April) **50th**
Marco Casagrande (Finland, 4 April)
Jan Ekstrand (Sweden, 5 April)
Momir Djurdjevac (Montenegro, 5 April)
Petteri Kari (Finland, 5 April)
Alexey Sorokin (Russia, 5 April)
Aleksandra Pejkovska (FYR Macedonia, 5 April)
Vencel Tóth (Hungary, 6 April)
Snježana Fočić (Croatia, 6 April)
László Szalai (Hungary, 6 April) **50th**
Jim Fleeting (Scotland, 8 April)
Peter Hegyi (Hungary, 8 April)
Yevgeniy Stolitenko (Ukraine, 8 April)
Márton Esterházy (Hungary, 9 April)
Ladislav Svoboda (Czech Republic, 9 April)
Zoran Petrović (Serbia, 10 April)
Gordon Pate (Scotland, 10 April)
Panagiotis Tsarouchas (Greece, 10 April)
Eduard Kindle (Liechtenstein, 10 April) **50th**
Umberto Gandini (Italy, 11 April)
Kristiaan Van Der Haegen (Belgium, 11 April)
Pierre Dumarché (France, 11 April)
Viktoryia Marozava (Belarus, 11 April)
Rodger Gifford (Wales, 12 April) **70th**
Valeriu Ionita (Romania, 12 April)
António José Fernandes Cardoso (Portugal, 12 April)
Johan Verbist (Belgium, 13 April)
Paolo Piani (Italy, 13 April) **50th**
Marcin Borski (Poland, 13 April)
Giovanni Spitaleri (Italy, 13 April)
Edvinas Eimontas (Lithuania, 13 April)
Octavian Goga (Romania, 14 April)
Georgios Bikas (Greece, 15 April)
Erol Ersoy (Turkey, 15 April)
Antonius van Eekelen (Netherlands, 15 April)
Dušan Fitzel (Czech Republic, 15 April)
Anders Hubinette (Sweden, 15 April)
Manuel Enrique Mejuto González (Spain, 16 April)
Horst Hrubesch (Germany, 17 April)
Charles Schaack (Luxembourg, 17 April)
Frances Smith (Republic of Ireland, 17 April)
Oğuz Sarvan (Turkey, 18 April)
Alexander Remin (Belarus, 18 April)
Norman Darmanin Demajo (Malta, 19 April)
Johan Timmermans (Belgium, 19 April)
Virgar Hvidbro (Faroe Islands, 19 April) **50th**
Elena Charina (Russia, 19 April)
Jean-Luc Veuthey (Switzerland, 20 April) **60th**
Michael Argyrou (Cyprus, 20 April)
Nenad Santrač (Serbia, 20 April)
Marc Lesenfants (Belgium, 21 April)
Vitor Pereira (Portugal, 21 April)
Martinus van den Bekerom (Netherlands, 21 April)
Alexandru Burlac (Moldova, 21 April)
Tomislav Vlahović (Croatia, 21 April)
Jan Damgaard (Denmark, 22 April)
Morgan Norman (Sweden, 22 April)
Rod Petrie (Scotland, 22 April)
Volodymyr Petrov (Ukraine, 22 April)
Claudine Brohet (Belgium, 22 April)
İlker Yücesir (Turkey, 22 April)
Roland Tis (Belgium, 23 April)
Mehmet Binnet (Turkey, 23 April)
Prune Rocipon (France, 23 April)
Nebojša Ivković (Serbia, 24 April)
Sándor Piller (Hungary, 24 April)
Philippe Verbiest (Belgium, 25 April)
Dany Ryser (Switzerland, 25 April)
Kanysh Aubakirov (Kazakhstan, 25 April)
Salustia Chato Cipres (Andorra, 25 April)
Nikolaos Bartzis (Greece, 25 April)
Thomas Einwaller (Austria, 25 April)
Valentin Velikov (Bulgaria, 25 April) **40th**
Lucilio Batista (Portugal, 26 April)
Yariv Teper (Israel, 26 April)
Marina Sbardella (Italy, 27 April)
Edgar Steinborn (Germany, 27 April)
Frank Fontvielle (France, 27 April)
Yuriy Zapisotskiy (Ukraine, 28 April)
Gudmunder Ingi Jónsson (Iceland, 29 April)

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Meetings

5 April, Burton-upon-Trent, England
European Under-17 Championship: final round draw

6 April, Lithuania
European Women's Under-17 Championship: final round draw

13 April, Nyon
UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europa League: semi-final draws

16 April, Nyon
Club Licensing Committee

17 April, Nyon
Youth and Amateur Football Committee

19 April, Portugal
HatTrick Committee

20 April, Nyon
Fair Play and Social Responsibility Committee

23 April, Nyon
National Associations Committee

Competitions

3/4 and 10/11 April
UEFA Champions League: quarter-finals

5 and 12 April
UEFA Europa League: quarter-finals

NOTICES

- On 2 February, Ján Kováčik was re-elected as president of the Slovak Football Association.
- On 7 February, Armand Duka was re-elected as president of the Albanian Football Association.
- On 10 February, Adilbek Jaxybekov was elected as president of the Football Federation of Kazakhstan.
- On 16 February, Borislav Mihaylov was re-elected as president of the Bulgarian Football Union.
- The new address of the Slovak Football Association is:
  Tomášikova 30C
  821 01 Bratislava, Slovakia
- The new address of the Football Association of the Czech Republic is:
  Atletická 2474/8
  169 00 Prague 6, Czech Republic

OBITUARY

Costakis Koutsokoumnis, a member of the FIFA Council and the president of the Cyprus Football Association, passed away on 5 March aged 61. Since 2007, he had been first vice-chairman of the UEFA HatTrick Committee, having previously served as a member of the Licensed Match Agents Committee (1996–2006) and of the Assistance Programmes Committee (2001-07).

5–10 April
Women's World Cup: European qualifying matches

20–22 April, Zaragoza, Spain
UEFA Futsal Cup: finals

20–23 April, Nyon
UEFA Youth League: final four

21/22 and 28/29 April
UEFA Women's Champions League: semi-finals

24/25 April
UEFA Champions League: semi-finals (first legs)

26 April
UEFA Europa League: semi-finals (first legs)

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