



Dries Mertens in action during Belgium's 4-0 win against Scotland in Glasgow on 9 September. Belgium became the first team to qualify for EURO 2020.



BELGIUM'S SECOND REVOLUTION

What is the best way to sustain the Red Devils' success on the international stage? This is the challenge Belgium face as they sit perched at the top of FIFA's world rankings. Planning for the future is being carried out at all levels across the country – epitomising the fact that, in a team sport, everyone has a role to play.

In Belgium, the first person that people think of when they hear the name Auber is the composer of the opera *La Muette de Portici*. On 25 August 1830, during a performance of that opera at the famous Théâtre de la Monnaie in central Brussels, the aria *Amour Sacré de la Patrie* prompted the audience to rise as one and spill out into the streets, where they joined a crowd of people who were doing battle with the armies of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Today, that event is regarded as the spark that triggered the Belgian Revolution, resulting in the birth of the Kingdom of Belgium a couple of months later on 4 October 1830. Since then, this country of just 11 million inhabitants has consistently shown that being small is no barrier to achieving worldwide renown.

When FIFA's world rankings were last updated in mid-September, Belgium continued to sit proudly at the top of the list. Despite having never won a major tournament, Belgium has been regarded as one of the world's top footballing nations for a number of years now, thanks to an abundance of highly talented players. Today, the objective for Belgium is clear: win a major international title and, above all, keep playing great football.

May the best team win!

Belgium's magnificent success is not the result of some kind of miracle; it stems from a long period of hard work. On 17 October 2018, several months after the country had achieved the greatest result in its history by finishing third at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, the chief executive of the Royal Belgian Football Association, Peter Bossaert, set out an 11-point plan aimed at modernising the organisation. He explained that the Belgian FA was "divided and unwieldy" and was being undermined by an "outdated corporate culture" and a "lack

of transparency" – all things that could harm the country's footballing prospects in the medium term. By Belgian standards, this self-criticism was a rare and bold departure from the norm. In cooperation with Gérard Linard, then president of the association, and Mehdi Bayat, who succeeded him in June 2019, Peter Bossaert devised a set of reforms spanning all levels and areas of the organisation: sporting matters, institutional issues, refereeing, governance, social matters, digital affairs, budgets – you name it.

External assistance

When it came to implementing this second Belgian revolution, the national association had no hesitation in seeking assistance from outside the country. In the case of refereeing, for instance, former international referee David Elleray was tasked with drawing up a master plan for the country to follow. "Belgium has traditionally produced significant numbers of top international referees, but that supply line has dried up since 2010, which was the last time we saw a Belgian [Frank De Bleeckere] officiating at a major tournament. Today, Belgium does not have a UEFA Elite or Category 1 international referee," says Elleray, who has, in particular, been working closely with Stephanie Forde (operations director), Bertrand Layec (technical director) and Frédéric Fautrel (VAR manager). Their work began with a three-month study and detailed consultation, which produced 167 recommendations aimed at creating a new structure to develop and support Belgian match officials. "There was then a meeting with club officials, team captains and head coaches," the Englishman explains, "in order to set out our expectations regarding conduct on the field of play, and to talk about the law changes and how the VAR system will be used. One of our fundamental →

In Russia, the Red Devils finished in third place, their best World Cup performance ever.

aims is to work closely with the various actors on the pitch wherever possible.”

Elleray cites a specific example in support of that last point, talking about a recent seminar on nutrition for semi-professional referees and their partners which was led by the Red Devils’ chef: “Being a player is not the same as being a referee, but the two do have certain things in common – such as athletic preparation, and therefore nutrition. It’s important for us to look at what we can learn from people outside refereeing, breaking down the artificial barriers that often separate us.”

Roberto Martínez and the Red Devils’ other coaches and support staff all attended that seminar. Martínez is, according to David Elleray, very likely the only national head coach in the world who is also a member of that country’s refereeing committee. This makes sense when you realise that Martínez is a workaholic by nature – to the extent that he took on a second role 14 months ago, that of acting technical director. “That allows me to work with the same intensity that I did in club football,” says the Spaniard – who, before coming to Belgium, had spent 10 seasons coaching in Britain at Swansea City AFC, Wigan Athletic FC and Everton FC. “I am working to keep Belgium at the pinnacle of world football, but we also need to plan for the future. With that in mind, we have developed a number of programmes that bring professional and amateur football together, and UEFA has given us enormous support with that. This also allows me, on a personal level, to discover another side of our sport.”

Long-term planning

When he is not coaching his Red Devils, Roberto Martínez works in his office in Tubize, the small town south of Brussels where Belgium’s national training centre is located. Eventually, the whole of the Belgian FA will



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Roberto Martínez
Belgium national team coach

Belgium can count on an exceptional generation of world-class players, led by Eden Hazard, in action here against England in their third-place play-off win (2-0) at the 2018 World Cup.

relocate there, vacating the association’s ageing premises adjacent to King Baudouin Stadium. However, Martínez likes to be out and about keeping an eye on everything: he’s as likely to be spotted in the stands at Belgian top flight games as watching amateur, women’s or youth football. “I always manage to find time for that – thanks to my wife, who is fantastic,” he says. “As a result of watching so many games, I’ve had the odd surprise. For example, I was amazed at the quality of the football in Belgium’s top amateur division. It’s important to have a comprehensive overview of things, and for that you need a good team by your side to help you keep an eye on everything.”

With a work ethic like Martínez’s, resting on your laurels is not an option. “We only have good people working at the national association. We foster the development of all aspects of Belgian football.” When it comes to refereeing, for example, the objective is to have a Belgian referee officiating at a major international tournament. And at a sporting level, there is already a need to start preparing for life after Belgium’s ‘golden generation’ – at which point, thoughts inevitably turn to the country’s Under-21s. Despite a somewhat disappointing performance in Italy in the final round of the last UEFA European Under-21 Championship (where Belgium suffered three defeats in as many matches in the group stage), Martínez is keen to remain positive: “They made it to the final round – the first time that had happened since 2007. Rather than focus on their defeats, I prefer to emphasise the change in mentality that led them to succeed in doing

something that others before them had not achieved. Taking part in major tournaments is important, as it helps you to measure the strength of your team. We now need to make sure that we keep qualifying for them.”

Martínez has a long-term vision for the future, which he says enjoys the full support of the association’s management: “As head coach of the national side and acting technical director, I have to take decisions as if I would still be here in 50 or 100 years’ time, rather than just thinking about the duration of my contract. Every day has to be thought of as an opportunity to put a new project in place.”

Here come the girls

Katrien Jans agrees. At just 34 years of age, she is head of women’s football at the Belgian FA. Earlier this year, she and her team launched a five-year plan entitled The World At Our Feet, which seeks to bring about a major expansion of the women’s game. According to a survey conducted jointly by the Belgian FA and UEFA, football is the third most popular sport among Belgian girls, behind tennis and swimming. The aim is to achieve top spot on the podium by 2024 and, according to Jans, things are looking good: “There has been a change of mindset in the management of the national association. Broadly speaking, what is done for the boys must now also be done for the

girls. Previously, we had just one or two people looking after the women’s national team from an administrative perspective; now, we have a whole team of people.” As Jans explains, women’s football in Belgium is in a somewhat unusual position: “We have around 38,500 registered players, and the majority of them are over the age of 18. So, we have an inverted pyramid. Consequently, one of the four pillars of our plan involves making sure that girls start playing as early as possible within structures that are tailored to them.”

Another pillar of that ambitious plan – one that the national association has already invested an additional €3m in, thanks to new sponsorship deals and bumper revenues from the Red Devils’ successful World Cup campaign in Russia – concerns sporting success. After taking part in their first-ever UEFA Women’s EURO in 2017 and losing in the play-offs in their bid to qualify for the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup, the Red Flames are hungry for success on the global stage and certainly have the wind in their sails. “These days, their matches are broadcast on free-to-air TV,” Jans says. “And the feedback we get from the team’s matches at Leuven Stadium is always highly positive: some people emphasise the family-friendly atmosphere, others say that it reminds them of how football used to be ... The team are gaining in popularity. If you stop people in →

“The girl’s team are gaining in popularity. If you stop people in the street and ask them who or what the ‘Red Flames’ are, they are far more likely to know than they were in the past.”

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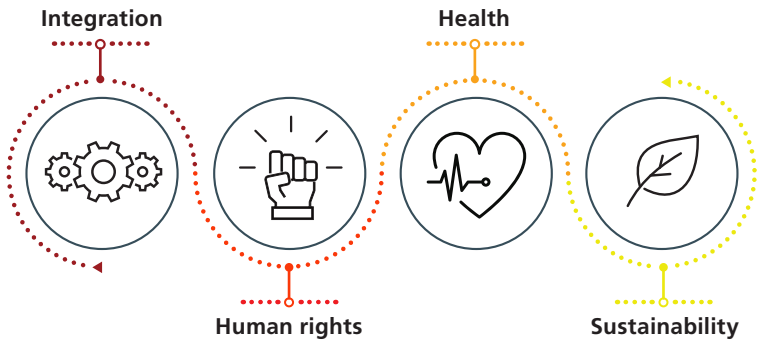
One other positive development, that augurs well for the future, is that people’s knowledge of the national side is no longer limited to Tessa Wullaert and Janice Cayman – admittedly still the biggest names in Belgian women’s football, playing for top European sides Manchester City WFC and Olympique Lyonnais respectively.

For Katrien Jans, future success will also be dependent on improvements being made to the structure of the national championship. Jans, who played in the Belgian top flight with Oud-Heverlee Leuven and FCF White Star Woluwé, refuses to rule out the potential establishment of something like the BeNe League – the groundbreaking cross-border league competition organised between 2013 and 2015 and contested by the top Belgian and Dutch sides. “Back then, the majority of the girls were amateurs, and the kick-off times were sometimes highly restrictive. We often had to take time off work, and sometimes you’d miss a game because you simply had no more leave to take,” she recalls. “These days, the standard is higher and players are more likely to be semi-professionals. Belgium and the Netherlands are in fairly similar situations: their top players play abroad, they have relatively few registered players [160,000 in the Netherlands and 38,500 in Belgium], and their top women’s divisions are small [eight teams in

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Hedeli Sassi
Corporate social responsibility coordinator, Belgian FA

CSR programme



the Netherlands and six in Belgium]. If we’re being realistic, it’s clear that both of us are too small to take on nations such as England or Germany at European level.”

Giving back to society

While we do not yet know whether the Belgian women’s national team will manage to follow in the footsteps of their Dutch neighbours, who were champions of Europe in 2017 and runners-up at the 2019 Women’s World Cup, it is clear that they already have the capacity to inspire the public. That can be seen, for example, in the national association’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme, which was launched in 2016 and spans four different subject areas: integration, human rights, health and sustainability. This is a way of giving back to a society that is strongly supportive of its national team. “It’s something of a cliché,

but the CSR programme was established because we know that football can help to bring about change in society,” explains Hedeli Sassi, a trained social worker who joined the Belgian FA in 2017. He and his colleague An De Kock are the only permanent members of staff dedicated to CSR at the national association. “We have so many different projects on the go that we have to agree priorities. I sometimes think it would be good to have a bigger team so that we can work even more effectively,” says De Kock, who admits that she was not a football fan at first, but is now a big supporter of the Red Devils after seeing the positive influence they have at a social level.

The players provide considerable support. “The various members of the men’s and women’s national teams have responded very positively to our initiatives, for example, by recording messages aimed at tackling discrimination. Having their support is, of course, extremely useful, as their opinions carry a lot of weight,” De Kock explains, pointing out that the national association also cooperates closely with external organisations working in the various areas covered by the CSR programme, as they “have more detailed knowledge of those specific issues and can deliver superior solutions”. Sassi also points to the support that the CSR programme receives from the association’s management: “We sometimes organise tournaments in order to promote our projects, but we also make great use of social media. Above all, we have the total support of Peter Bossaert and Mehdi Bayat, which is a great help in giving structure to our work and ensuring that we have a clear vision.”

In line with the general approach governing the Belgian FA, everybody contributes, in their own way, to others’ objectives: “We work closely with the two linguistic wings of Belgian football, both of which have someone dedicated to CSR,” Sassi explains. “And on the specific issue of refugees, we work in partnership with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Even sponsors such as Coca-Cola have sat down around the table and made a contribution, in this case to reducing waste.”

Against that background, the CSR team are hopeful that Belgium can one day be regarded as a model in ecological terms – “notably by moving towards zero-waste,” Sassi says, pointing out that the work he does with An De Kock has, in part, been made possible by the Red Devils’ sporting success. “More success means more partners – and thus more support for us,” he says. In Belgium, a football team is far more than just 11 players. 🌱

Three questions for ...
Mehdi Bayat
President of the Belgian FA



You were born in Iran and grew up and studied in France. How did your love affair with Belgian football begin?

In 2003, I joined Royal Charleroi SC as a commercial director. I then climbed up through the ranks within the national association, doing various jobs, before becoming president in June 2019. When you spend almost 20 years in a country, you end up becoming part of it – not just from an administrative perspective, but also, above all, in your heart. I now think of myself as Belgian, and I will soon be acquiring Belgian nationality.

In 2016, you were one of the instigators of Roberto Martínez’s recruitment as head coach of the national team. Tell us about that.

Together with my colleagues Gérard Linard [his predecessor as national association president] and Bart Verhaeghe, I issued a call for applications. And I’m glad that I did, because Roberto Martínez was not, in all honesty, someone who we would have instinctively thought of. When we met him for the first time, he was a real gentleman, and that has never changed. He’s extremely hard working, he’s humble, he lives and breathes football, and, above all, he has reinvented the position of head coach here

in Belgium by getting heavily involved in all aspects of sporting preparation. It’s a real pleasure to work with someone who has that kind of passion.

Before being elected president, you were involved in drawing up that famous 11-point plan. Since then, it has been said that your role is more ‘ceremonial’ than in the past. What exactly does that mean?

We want the national association to operate in the same way that all major companies do. That is to say, we have Peter Bossaert, who is responsible for all day-to-day operations, and we have me as chairman of the board. My role involves scrutinising and checking things at the start of each cycle [with his term of office running until 2021], so as to decide which strategy to implement. That effectively began before my election with the 11-point plan, which seeks to implement real reforms in order to professionalise the operational structure of the national association for the long-term. We are 100% behind all of those initiatives, rather than just supporting particular projects. However, I also represent the national association in its dealings with international organisations such as UEFA, hence the use of the term ‘ceremonial’ in relation to my role.



Back from the World Cup in Russia, Belgium’s coach Roberto Martínez waves to the crowd that had gathered on the Grand-Place in Brussels to welcome them home.