

Beautiful game turns ugly

Racism in Spanish and Italian football is making headlines. **Seán Kenny** investigates how the football authorities are dealing with the problem

The beautiful game is turning ugly again. Far-right politics and racism in football are back in the spotlight. Most famously, in a Spanish league game in February, Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o threatened to leave the pitch, having endured over an hour of racist abuse from Real Zaragoza supporters. The incident made headlines because Eto'o is a high-profile player at a famous club. A similar situation, involving Ivory Coast defender, Mark Zoro, arose in the Serie A match between Messina and Inter Milan three months before this, but received little attention. Zoro, unlike

Spain and Italy have treated the issue with a leniency that is suggestive of indifference. This is not to say that racism no longer exists in English football grounds. It does. However, the vigour with which the issue has been addressed means that racist behaviour is nowhere near as prevalent as it was during the benighted days of the 70s and 80s. In the 1980s, the English game had shock therapy in the form of the Heysel and Hillsborough disasters, when Shankly's famous words, really did become a matter of life and death. The twin tragedies prompted a drastic rethink of how English football grounds should be built and managed. This included a crackdown on thuggish and racist behaviour.

No such crackdown has occurred in Spain. Spanish anti-racism campaigner, Carlos Ferreira Nunez,

President, Angel Maria Villar, recently begged to differ. Speaking of racism in the Spanish game, he said: "we shouldn't make a mountain out of a molehill." With an impeccable sense of timing and place, Villar delivered this nugget of wisdom as part of his closing remarks at a UEFA conference on racism held in Barcelona.

Based on recent experience, Spanish clubs whose supporters racially abuse opposition players face the possibility of a modest fine of a few thousand euro: derisory sums of money to a large football club. The RFEF's head-in-the-sand approach to far-right thuggery seems ominous in a country that only relatively recently emerged from under the jackboot of fascism.

The ghost of fascism haunts Italian football too. In the Stadio Olimpico, home of the unfortunately, but not entirely inappropriately, named SS Lazio, flags bearing the swastika and other symbols of fascism are not an uncommon sight.

Paolo Di Canio, a self-professed admirer of Mussolini, has, on three

occasions, given a right-arm salute to Lazio supporters. For this, he has received a couple of meagre fines and a short suspension. Like Eto'o's threatened walk-out, Di Canio's blackshirt hand signals were dramatic and visually arresting and so received a corresponding level of media coverage.

However, Di Canio's behaviour is illustrative of a much wider problem in Italian football. In his 2002 book, *A Season With Verona*, Tim Parks wrote:

"The ragazzi gialloblu [Verona's hardcore support] never forget to make their monkey grunts when a black from an opposing team touches the ball."

Although Lazio and Verona are particularly notorious, the problem extends far beyond these clubs, as Juventus's Lilian Thuram has testified. Meanwhile, the Italian authorities, like their Spanish counterparts, impose only half-hearted sanctions, or none at all. Against this backdrop of apparent indifference from national federations, FIFA has been talking tough. New anti-racism measures introduced by football's governing body carry the threat of match suspension, points deductions or disqualification from a competition.

Introducing this kind of law is one matter; enforcing it in the face of potential opposition from powerful clubs is quite another. FIFA president Sepp Blatter initially made this remarkable statement about countries whose fans are found guilty of racism at World Cup 06: "At the first sign of racism there will be a deduction of three points." The consummate football politician then backtracked on this, saying merely that "action will be taken" on racism, a pronouncement so vague it could mean almost anything.

Blatter and the German authorities will be well aware of the heavy symbolism of the politics of race coinciding with the staging of a World Cup in the country that was the breeding ground of Nazism. Racist incidents may, or may not, blight the tournament. FIFA's response to any such incidents will be some measure of how seriously they are really taking the problem.

However, it is only after the World Cup carnival has packed up and left town for another four years that FIFA's mettle will be tested.

Is their anti-racism stance for Germany '06 a PR gimmick, or do they mean it this time?

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'The media's tendency to focus only on the racial abuse suffered by big-name players masks the true extent of the problem'

Eto'o, is not African footballer of the year, and Messina are no Barcelona. The media's tendency to focus only on the

has said that racist behaviour in Spanish football grounds can be seen "every week and all over the country". Spanish Football Federation (RFEF)

racial abuse suffered by big-name players masks the true extent of the issue. The experiences of Eto'o in Spain and Zoro in Italy are symptomatic of a wider problem in football, particularly in southern Europe. Compared to the stance on racism adopted in England, the football authorities in