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A NEW DAWN FOR NATIONAL TEAM COMPETITIONS





BECAUSE EVERY
CHILD IS A CHAMPION





Theodore Theodoridis
UEFA General Secretary

UEFA COMPETITIONS – THE ENGINE DRIVING OUR MISSION

The 2022/23 European football season is set to enter its final decisive months. By the end of July, no fewer than 15 glittering UEFA trophies will have been raised – from London to Batumi, Majorca to Eindhoven. Together, they highlight how our competitions give so many footballers, male and female alike, the chance to pursue their dream of performing at the highest level for club or country.

I'm not just thinking of our sport's top professionals. UEFA's most prestigious finals help to fund countless other competitions covering different age groups and formats. This season they include the European Under-21 Championship, the Women's Futsal EURO, the men's European Under-19 Futsal Championship, the Futsal Champions League, men's and women's Under-17 and Under-19 Championships and the Regions' Cup for amateurs.

As this 201st issue of UEFA Direct reveals, these competitions do far more than maximise access for players. The expansion of the next edition of the Nations League, for example, to include promotion/relegation play-offs and a quarter-final round, shows how we constantly evolve formats to raise competitiveness. These changes will build on the Nations League's success in boosting the game's status in some of Europe's smaller countries, both through inspirational performances on the pitch and increased revenue available for national associations to invest off it.

For Georgia and Romania, the opportunity to jointly stage the Under-21 finals in June and July has brought added value that will outlast the tournament. Both countries have invested in building or renovating infrastructure in the five host cities, laying solid foundations on which to develop the national game.

When the Futsal Champions League finals take place in Majorca in May, the impact will stretch beyond the Balearic island. The event is one of four UEFA futsal competitions spearheading our efforts to expand the sport to new countries and audiences. This season, the Futsal Champions League kicked off with 56 clubs from 52 member associations, more than double the number of participants in the inaugural 2001/02 Futsal Cup.

Whatever UEFA final you watch this season, whether it's the Regions' Cup in Galicia or the Champions League in Istanbul, take a moment to reflect on the bigger picture. By raising standards, inspiring players, exciting fans or generating income to reinvest in the game, UEFA competitions are the engine that drives our mission to grow European football.

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EVOLVING THE MEN’S NATIONAL TEAM GAME

As of September 2024, a new knockout round for the UEFA Nations League and smaller groups for the European Qualifiers should help these competitions flourish further.

Italy's Francesco Acerbi in action against England in the Nations League.

The introduction of a new knockout round of UEFA Nations League action and the creation of a more compact format for the European Qualifiers. These were the key actions taken by the UEFA Executive Committee in January after it met to approve the new formats for its men’s national team competitions, which will come into effect from September next year.

The amendment to the UEFA Nations League comprises a knockout round to be played in March, which will act as a bridge between the group phase ending in November and the finals which are played in June.

These modifications followed an extensive consultation process with UEFA’s national associations and the belief within UEFA is that they will lead to more compelling and exciting competitions without – crucially – adding any fresh dates to the international calendar. Instead, the existing dates will remain in place and the size of the groups for the European Qualifiers will be switched to four or five, rather than five or six.

Commenting on the revamped competitions, UEFA president Aleksander Čeferin said: “The introduction of the UEFA Nations League was a success story, replacing friendly games with more competitive matches. And now, by introducing the new knockout phase, teams will be given even more opportunities to progress, while keeping the same number of games within the international match calendar.

“The predictability of the European Qualifiers has also been addressed and tackled, with a fresh new format that will offer all the teams an equal chance to qualify for major tournaments.

“The new format promises to bring more excitement to Europe’s national team football competitions, which continue to grow from strength to strength.”

UEFA is highly conscious of the importance of national team competitions in boosting the resources of national associations – a significant matter when these associations are still recovering from the impact of the pandemic.

Without any increase in the overall number of matches, these adjustments should bring more meaningful matches, which are not only to the benefit of players but will generate more interest among supporters, media and commercial partners.



Nations League knockout round

To focus on the expansion of the Nations League, there will now be a March quarter-final round involving the League A group winners and runners-up. These teams will face each other in home-and-away quarter-final ties, with the winners advancing to the finals.

Additionally, there will be promotion/relegation play-offs between the third-ranked teams in League A and the runners-up in League B, as well as between the third-ranked in League B and the runners-up in League C. As with the quarter-finals, these ties will take the form of a home-and-away double-header.

The expansion of the Nations League into the international match calendar window of March will only concern a selected number of teams and the remaining teams will already be available to start their European Qualifiers. As mentioned, the new format of the European Qualifiers for both the men's EURO and the World Cup final tournaments will be more consolidated, with teams being drawn into 12 groups of four or five teams.

“The system of four leagues with a chance to be promoted and relegated was also a great idea not just for the teams, since they have something to win or lose in each game, but also for the fans as it gives them more excitement.”

Marco Rossi
Hungary's men's national coach

Teams will still face every other group rival both home and away, and UEFA hopes that the smaller groups will spell greater competition. There can certainly be no complaints about the qualifying process being too long given that the groups made up of four teams will play out their entire qualifying campaigns over three months, between September and November.

Teams drawn in groups of five will kick off the qualifiers in March, or in June if they are still competing in the Nations League quarter-finals or are involved in promotion/relegation matches.

The group winners of the European Qualifiers will qualify directly for the EURO or World Cup, whereas the second-placed teams will either qualify directly or participate in play-off matches (together with Nations League teams for qualification for the EURO). This new format will be implemented after next summer's EURO 2024 in Germany.

Two promotions in a row for Hungary

The expansion of the Nations League marks another evolution in the brief history of a competition that UEFA established in 2018 – a decision that has paid dividends.

The competition was set up with the purpose of replacing friendly dates with matches with real meaning – and quite often a sizeable slice of jeopardy too – and this aim has certainly been fulfilled.

Thirty-three different nations have earned at least one promotion since the competition's inception, which highlights the argument that teams are able to generate momentum, and a sense of progression, via the Nations League. As well as climbing the Nations League ladder, they also improve their prospects of a more favourable draw when it comes to the European Qualifiers, thus creating a virtuous circle.

There is no greater example of this than Hungary, who started out in League C in 2018/19 and earned two successive promotions to League A, before then maintaining their position in League A in 2022/23. In that most recent campaign, they finished second in their group, having beaten England home and away and also won in Germany.

Hungary's national coach, Marco Rossi, said: “The creation of the Nations League was a very smart idea by UEFA. Nations League matches have much more importance than friendly games and

they also influence the ranking position, which also indicates the pot for the draw. We managed to be drawn for the next European Qualifiers from pot 1 as a result of our Nations League performance.” Over the period in question, Hungary's ranking has risen from 31st at the end of the 2018/19 league phase to 20th after 2020/21 and up to eighth after this most recent league phase – a climb of 23 places.

Hungary have not been the only beneficiaries. Seven other national teams have managed two promotions since 2018/19. They are Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Scotland and Serbia.

Rossi added: “The system of four leagues with a chance to be promoted and relegated was also a great idea not just for the teams, since they have something to win or lose in each game, but also for the fans as it gives them more excitement.”

To underscore the point, when the 2024/25 campaign gets under way, Rossi's Hungary will be one of four teams playing League A football who were in League C for the inaugural campaign in 2018/19 yet have worked their way up two divisions, the others being Israel, Scotland and Serbia.

Another positive of the UEFA Nations League format is the guarantee it brings of competitive fixtures between teams who are more evenly matched.

To offer an illustration of this competitive balance, consider the fact that two-thirds of all League A matches have either been draws (22.69%) or single-goal victories (43.70%). In League B, that figure is even higher with 25.66% of matches ending in draws and 44.79% in one-goal victories – almost three-quarters of the 113 fixtures played. The corresponding figures for League C, meanwhile, are 25.36% and 41.30% which, as with League A, comes to two-thirds.

The evidence is encouraging and, with the modifications approved by the UEFA Executive Committee, the UEFA Nations League should see even more intriguing contests in the years ahead. 🌐

(Top) Sweden, in action here against Slovenia, did not do enough to avoid relegation to League C. (Opposite) Robert Lewandowski's Poland made their mark against Andorra with a 4-1 win in the 2022 World Cup qualifiers.



NETHERLANDS TO HOST FINAL FOUR

The Netherlands will host the 2022/23 UEFA Nations League finals from 14 to 18 June. Will the Oranje win on home soil, or will it be Croatia, Italy or Spain who lift the trophy for the first time?

The crème de la crème of European football and a quintessential competition, with two semi-finals, the match for third place and the final all packed into a five-day period. What more could the fans ask for, especially with ticket prices starting at an affordable €20, as fans and the hosts alike gear up for what promises to be an exciting and action-packed few days. The matches

will be played in Enschede and Rotterdam, which will host another prestigious final following those of UEFA EURO 2000 and numerous UEFA club competitions.

Despite reaching the 2022 World Cup quarter-finals, the Netherlands will perhaps be seen as underdogs in view of the recent records of the other three teams that qualified for the finals by topping their League A groups. Croatia, who came

within a whisker of lifting the World Cup in 2018 (finalists) and 2022 (semi-finalists); Spain, EURO 2020 semi-finalists and 2020/21 Nations League runners-up; and Italy, EURO 2020 winners, all have what it takes to follow in the footsteps of previous winners Portugal (2019) and France (2021).

Here we preview the semi-finals, the draw for which was held on 25 January.



Luka Modrić and his Croatian team-mates are still at the top of their game after two successful World Cups.



The Netherlands (Vincent Janssen against Belgium) finished the group stage unbeaten.

Netherlands v Croatia Wednesday 14 June, Rotterdam A battle between Argentina's World Cup victims

Despite maintaining consistently high standards, the Netherlands and Croatia share the same inability to go all the way. The Dutch victory at EURO 1988 is the only time either of these nations has ever won a major title. The 2022 World Cup symbolised the two countries' shared tendency to fail in the latter stages of tournaments, when Lionel Messi's Argentina eliminated the Netherlands (2-2, 4-3 on penalties) in the quarter-finals and Croatia (3-0) in the semi-finals on their way to winning the ultimate prize.

With their shortened format, the Nations League finals are a golden opportunity for either the Dutch or the Croatian team to win a title. Frenkie de Jong and his team-mates will have the home advantage after having totally dominated the group stage to finish as League A's top scorers (14 goals) and accumulating more points than any other team in any of the leagues (16 out of a possible 18).

Cody Gakpo, Denzel Dumfries, Wout Weghorst... As is often the case, the list of talented Dutch players is a very long one and their campaign in Qatar proved that the new generation is ready to compete at the top international level. Ronald Koeman, who managed the team

from 2018 to 2020 – a spell that saw them lose the Nations League final to Portugal in 2019 – is back at the helm after replacing the legendary Louis van Gaal. He will bring all his tactical nous to the table, just as he did at FC Barcelona in the interim period.

Koeman's experience will be crucial if the Netherlands are to overcome a Croatian side whose run to the 2022 World Cup semi-finals owed much to their defensive solidity. After losing their way somewhat following their defeat in the 2018 World Cup final, the Croats made a successful return to the global stage with a magnificent campaign that saw them narrowly qualify from their group ahead of Belgium before beating Japan on penalties in the round of 16 and the tournament's hot favourites, Brazil, in the quarter-finals.

Croatia's strategy is a familiar one, relying on a hard-working team built around the genial Luka Modrić, who has decided to stay on with the national team at the age of 37. Will he be rewarded with the Nations League title?

Spain v Italy Thursday 15 June, Enschede Yet another rematch

Is it possible to imagine a major European competition without a match between Spain and Italy? The rivalry between these two countries is almost becoming an obsession. Their most recent clash, in the 2021 Nations League semi-final,

which Spain won 2-1, followed an incredible run of four knockout matches between the two teams in four successive men's EUROs between 2008 and 2021! The winners of three of those four encounters went on to lift the European title: Spain in 2008 and 2012, Italy in 2021.

Having started the tournament as one of the favourites, Spain endured a disappointing 2022 World Cup, struggling in the group phase before suffering a shock defeat at the hands of Morocco (0-0, 3-0 on penalties) in the round of 16. The Roja, who snatched their place in the Nations League finals with an 88th-minute goal by Álvaro Morata in their final group match in Portugal, will be led by Luis de la Fuente, who coached the Spanish Under-21 side before taking over from Luis Enrique.

In contrast, continuity is the watchword in Italy, where Roberto Mancini has coached the national team since 2018 and remained in post despite their failure to qualify for the 2022 World Cup, having also missed out in 2018. The former Manchester City FC coach held on to his position thanks to some excellent results in the interim period, including victory in the EURO 2020 final, a 37-match unbeaten run (ended by Spain in 2021) and qualification for the 2022/23 Nations League finals.

By winning their group ahead of Hungary, Germany and England, the Italians demonstrated their ability to handle the big occasion, which could well be an important asset as they contest a title alongside three giants of the European game. 🇮🇹

Sunday 18 June Match for third place – Enschede Final – Rotterdam

Spain (Álvaro Morata in action against Portugal) made it through in the final moments of the match against their Iberian neighbours.



A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

Georgia and Romania share hosting roles for the second 16-team final tournament of the European Under-21 Championship from 21 June to 8 July.

Israel beat the Republic of Ireland in the play-offs to secure a place in the final tournament.



Reigning European Under-21 champions Germany will have their sights set on a fourth title.

Let's face it. Sharing a final tournament between two countries is nothing new. And, of course, the venues for the last senior men's EURO were scattered all over the continent. But the 2023 Under-21 final tournament in Georgia and Romania is set to add another dimension to co-hosting. In 2021, when Hungary and Slovenia jointly laid out the welcome mats for the first 16-team event, the distance from Budapest to Ljubljana was something like 380km. This time, a crow flying from Bucharest to Tbilisi would need to travel about four times as far.

Neither teams nor fans, however, will be required to do much flying. The contestants drawn into Groups A and C can set up shop in Georgia and stay there. Those in Groups B and D will only need to move from Romania to Georgia if they reach the final – something they would readily accept. Logistically, the tournament evidently requires two nerve centres and, for that matter, two distinguished

ambassadors. Aleksandr Iashvili played nine games for the Under-21s as a prelude to 67 matches for Georgia's senior team. He also topped 400 appearances in Germany after starting his career with hometown Dinamo Tbilisi. His counterpart in Romania is Ianis Hagi, the playmaker (like his father Gheorghe) selected for UEFA's team of the tournament at the Under-21 finals staged in Italy and San Marino in 2019.

All players born in 21st century

Whereas Georgia is a relative newcomer as a host of UEFA events (the UEFA Super Cup in 2015 and the men's Under-19 finals two years later) Romania's organisational track record stretches back to the Under-21 final tournament in 1998 when Spain, in the final, defeated a Greece team that contained the core of players who would become champions of Europe in Portugal six years later. For this year's tournament, scheduled to run from Wednesday 21 June to Saturday 8 July,

both hosts are using four stadiums: two each in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca in Romania, and in Georgia, two in Tbilisi and one apiece in Batumi and Kutaisi.

For the first time, only players born in this century will be eligible to showcase their ability in the 31 fixtures. Or, maybe, 32. The 2023 tournament determines Europe's qualifiers for the men's football tournament at next year's Olympic Games: three teams, along with France who, as hosts, qualify automatically. Depending on how events unfold in Georgia and Romania, an additional play-off match, in Bucharest, might need to be injected into the match schedule.

The starting grid features 11 of the countries that disputed the previous edition, along with Belgium, Israel, Norway, Ukraine and Georgia – the co-hosts poised to make a debut in the final tournament. Norway, who previously qualified only twice but reached the semi-finals on both occasions, return after a ten-year absence. Ditto Israel,

participating for the first time since they hosted the event in 2013. In fact, rummaging through the archives of the previous 23 editions turns up some surprising trivia. France, despite all the successes at senior level, have not won the Under-21 title since 1988. And England last lifted the trophy in 1984. By contrast, Spain have been champions five times alongside Italy, who hold the record of 22 appearances in the final phase of the competition. Germany, the current titleholders, had to wait till 2009 for the first of their three successes, while Portugal, the team they beat 1-0 in the 2021 final, are still waiting in the wings, having lost the three finals they have reached.

Five unbeaten teams

As it happens, Portugal were one of five nations (the others were Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Spain) to cruise unbeaten through a marathon qualification process comprising 255

matches spread over more than a year and featuring 778 goals at a healthy average of 3.05 per game. Gonçalo Ramos, who was in Portugal's World Cup squad in Qatar and hit a hat-trick against Switzerland in his first start, emerged as top scorer with 12 of his team's 41 goals (the highest total in the qualifying round), five ahead of his nearest pursuers.

The qualification rounds inevitably produced some hard-luck stories. The proceedings got under way with eight groups of six teams and one of five, with the nine group winners and the best runner-up (Switzerland) automatically earning tickets for Georgia or Romania. The other eight runners-up went into play-offs where Croatia, Czechia, Israel and Ukraine completed the line-up for the final tournament, while Denmark and the Republic of Ireland suffered the cruellest of fates, losing to Croatia and Israel respectively in penalty shoot-outs after the home-and-away ties had gone to extra time.

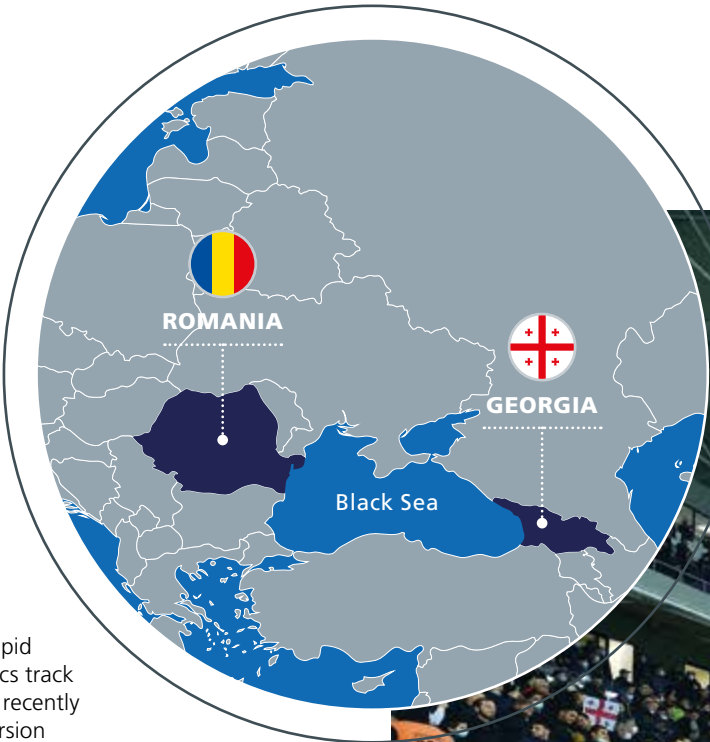
An unpredictable tournament

The draw, staged in Bucharest last October, has thrown up some fascinating contests, such as France taking on Italy on the opening day of Group D fixtures and defending champions Germany facing England on the final matchday in Group C. Antonio Di Salvo's Germany go into action aiming to lift the trophy again and break a long-standing hoodoo of only two successful title defences in the 25-year life-span of the Under-21 competition. England strung together successive victories in 1982 and 1984 when the final was disputed on a home-and-away basis. And Italy did likewise in 1994 and 1996 – the first two titles to be contested in a final-four format.

Predicting the winner of the Batumi final is a risky business. But it is a safe bet that the tournament in Georgia and Romania will live up to the competition's reputation for shining spotlights on the stars of future men's EUROs and World Cups.

'We share a common border: the Black Sea'

The tournament will no doubt leave a lasting legacy for football in both Georgia and Romania.



In the last U21 EURO, Romania held Germany, the eventual winners, to a draw in the group stage.



The U21 EURO final will be held at the Batumi Arena, where Georgia beat Sweden in the 2022 World Cup qualifiers.



renovated with a brand-new stand, media facilities and playing surface. "The city really deserves to have a top-class stadium," Mujiri commented.

A huge boost for development
Substantial renovation work has also been undertaken at the Meshki Stadium in Tbilisi, where Belgium, Portugal and the Netherlands will play two games apiece, while the 54,000-capacity Paichadze Stadium (where Barcelona and Sevilla disputed the UEFA Super Cup in 2015) will be the venue for Georgia's three group games. "It will be our first participation in the final tournament," Mujiri said, "so you can imagine the excitement and expectation."

"Ticket prices, by the way, have been pegged with a view to playing to full houses. As in Romania, a great deal of work has been done at training facilities, including the Meshki-2. Capacity has been increased to 3,000, which means that, in the future, it can be used for men's and women's league matches," Mujiri explained. "It is a good example of the legacy that this tournament is going to leave us to help us to develop the game. It is the best thing that could happen to Georgian football and we are determined to demonstrate that we are a good hosting nation. Our aim is for everybody to go home with lasting good memories. Also it will give a lot of people – including our volunteers –

international experience and equip us, in the future, to stage events with 16 teams or more. I am sure our colleagues in Romania will share our views." They do. "There will be well-known players on show," Zaharia said, "and I am sure this will be a boost for young players and promote development. It is also an opportunity to promote Romania. At the same time, we will gain pitches of optimum quality and this will benefit local clubs. We will also gain lasting infrastructure and expertise in hosting major events. A lot of volunteers will be involved and I am sure this tournament will be a life experience for young and old."

"We share a common border: the Black Sea", to quote Paul Zaharia, whose longevity at the national association of Romania reaches right back to the final tournament of the European Under-21 Championship in 1998. He was talking about the teamwork that has emerged from the long-distance co-hosting relationship with Georgia. From a UEFA perspective, there might have been a temptation to regard the event as two eight-team tournaments. But this approach was immediately and categorically rejected. All meetings – most of them online – have involved both hosts – Georgia was well represented on stage at the draw ceremony in Bucharest in October 2022, and all the preparatory work has been conducted on the basis that the twin hosts form a single team.

"The meetings have been immensely positive," Zaharia added, "because we have been able to exchange information, experience and know-how. They have been mutually beneficial." And agendas have been enriched by the fact that the two hosts have been bringing very different issues to the table. Not all of Zaharia's colleagues go back as far as 1998. But many of them gained previous experience at the all-Spanish final of the UEFA Europa League between Atlético Madrid and Athletic Bilbao in Bucharest in 2012, the men's European Under-19 Championship finals a year earlier, or when Bucharest was one of the host cities for EURO 2020.

Brand-new venues in Romania...
"It is also an advantage," Zaharia reflected, "that we are playing in Bucharest and Cluj – two big cities with all the necessary infrastructure on which to build the event. And the two stadiums in Bucharest are practically brand new."

The Giulești Stadium, home to Rapid București and featuring an athletics track under the stands, was opened as recently as March 2022, while the new version of the Steaua Stadium, the venue for Romania's three group games and a semi-final, was inaugurated a year earlier. Over in Cluj-Napoca, both the CFR Cluj Stadium and the Cluj Arena, with its attractive sweeping contours, have regularly staged men's and women's internationals as well as UEFA club competition matches. It means that the emphasis has been on replacing or reconditioning playing surfaces rather than hard-hat construction work. This includes the pitches at training centres – notably the three not used by league clubs. UEFA pitch specialists have lent a hand in bringing all of them up to standard. "It's a pity that our best training facility," Zaharia lamented, "cannot be used as it is too far away to be paired with a team hotel."

... and in Georgia
On the other side of the Black Sea, the story is radically different. The final tournament has provided a cue for extensive construction work and infrastructure improvements in the three cities with, as the national association's general secretary David Mujiri was keen to emphasise, "unstinting support from the Georgian government." The main challenge in Georgia is to complete work in time to allow pilot games to be played at the refurbished venues before the tournament kicks off. The new Batumi Arena, the venue for three group games (including England v Germany), a semi-final and the final, is a modern stadium. Kutaisi's Shengelia Stadium, named after Georgia's illustrious footballing son Ramaz, is being completely

BRIGHT FUTURE FOR ASSISTANT REFEREES

UEFA's latest course for European assistant referees, held in Rome in February, provided the perfect opportunity to emphasise the value of the men and women with the flag. Assistant referees give vital support not only to referees, but also to the video assistant referees (VARs) introduced in recent years as an important enhancement of the on-field decision-making process.

In discussions at the course, UEFA's senior refereeing officials and the top assistant referees present were in full agreement that the assistant referee has a full part to play in the future of the game, especially through their involvement in game management and control, providing 'extra pairs of eyes' for incidents and situations, sharing pressures and improving the overall refereeing performance in a match.

Cooperation and support

UEFA's chief refereeing officer, Roberto Rosetti, responded to the doubts expressed in some quarters about the future worth of assistant referees, given the ongoing development of the VAR system.

"We've no doubts about the role of the assistant referees and will continue to promote their development," Rosetti said. "First of all, they're still extremely important for all the offside situations during the match and a crucial source in terms of cooperation and support for the referee."

"The assistant referee often has a different perspective to a referee on the field," Rosetti added. "They can sometimes be very important in situations where, for example, the referee is surrounded by players and is focusing on the technical decision to be made. The assistant referee is 'outside' these situations – they have a 'colder' perspective and can give backing and advice to referees on how to act and react, what to say and not to say."

'Colleague and friend' to referees

The assistant referees themselves gave important feedback to UEFA on how they perceive their role, especially in lending mental support to referees in stressful situations – one work group spoke of the need to be 'a colleague... and a friend' in working together with a referee.

The officials who run the line also underlined their value in, among other things, sharing responsibility, having an additional vision of game-changing

situations, reinforcing the image of the refereeing team through their presence and actions, and providing clear and calm communication to the referee and – when on duty – the VAR team.

When to raise the flag – and when to keep it down

The course not only looked to the future but also reviewed how the assistant referee's role has developed recently, especially as a result of the VAR system.

One particular aspect where the assistant's job has changed through the advent of VAR is timing when raising the flag for offside. "If they raise the flag at the wrong moment, problems can arise as far as the final decision is concerned. We've worked hard on the 'flag delay' concept at the course," Rosetti said. When the VAR system is in place for a match, assistant referees are being advised not to raise the flag if in doubt about a potential offside situation.

Other key differences for assistants officiating with the VAR system include the need for clear and short communication, even greater alertness in anticipating situations and reading the game, and personal mental strength after a VAR intervention – reacting in a positive manner if VAR overturns a decision.

Consistency and preparation

The assistant referees, who also undertook a stringent fitness test in Rome, were given a clear message of encouragement by Roberto Rosetti as they look forward to a challenging spring in UEFA's club and national team competitions. Decision-making consistency, he said, was a key weapon in an assistant referee's armoury. 🧠



New UEFA referees given sound career advice

A group of 34 male and 12 female officials from across Europe who have earned their international badges through their performances at domestic level were prepared for this challenging new stage of their fledgling refereeing journey at the UEFA introductory course for new international referees in Rome.

In addition to fitness training, practical sessions, discussion group work and learning the ropes about UEFA's refereeing guidelines, the referees heard crystal-clear words of wisdom from former international referees that were designed to give them the recipe for success and prime them for what UEFA expects from them as top match officials and representatives of European football both on and off the field.

The course in Rome also gave UEFA the opportunity to remind the referees of their crucial role as both footballing ambassadors and diplomats, as well as the behaviour that is expected from refereeing teams on their assignments.

Guest speaker David Elleray, a former international referee from England, explained to the referees that their responsibilities at international level were greater than in domestic football. "International refereeing for UEFA is more than just 90 minutes," he said. "You play an important role. You're representing a senior organisation and leading a team." Elleray advised the referees about the need for exemplary conduct when on a UEFA mission. "Anything that you do can be photographed and quickly put on the internet," he said. "You don't know who is watching you and listening to you. Be careful who you talk to – and how you talk. Watch your bearing and appearance, especially at airports, because you will be noticed."

LIONESSES RETURN TO WEMBLEY

European champions England take on South American counterparts Brazil in the first Women's Finalissima on 6 April.

England v Brazil. A sell-out crowd at Wembley Stadium in London. Ingredients for a feast of football. And, licking their lips, the fans soon snapped up tickets for the first-ever Women's Finalissima, to be played on 6 April. To be scrupulously politically correct, that should read 'UEFA-CONMEBOL Women's Finalissima' as the event fits into the renewed and extended memorandum of understanding signed by the European and South American football confederations in December 2021, and follows the men's Finalissima between Argentina and Italy, along with a similar futsal contest and an intercontinental competition for Under-20 club teams.

Brazil earned the trip to Wembley on 30 July last year, when a Debinha penalty sealed a 1-0 win over host nation Colombia in an entertaining finale to a Copa América Femenina tournament that Brazil negotiated without conceding a goal and putting the ball in the net 20 times at the other end. The goals were shared among nine different players, with Debinha and Adriana hitting five apiece. Whereas England's extra-time victory over

Germany in the Women's EURO 2022 final the following day allowed them to don the continental crown for the first time, Brazil extended their life at the top to eight wins in nine editions of the Copa América Femenina.

Since then, the emphasis for both teams has been on preparations for the imminent FIFA Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. In late February, Brazil suffered a narrow 2-1 defeat by the world champions, the USA, in their final game in the SheBelieves Cup, having previously lost 2-0 to Canada and beaten Japan 1-0. Simultaneously, England were winning all three matches at a four-team tournament involving Italy, Belgium and South Korea, thereby extending the Lionesses' unbeaten run to 29 games – a sequence that a talented Brazil team featuring many players familiar to fans of European club football will be keen to terminate.

And so will their head coach. The summit meeting at Wembley brings together two exceptionally successful coaches – two women different in character but equally charismatic and first and third respectively in the voting for The Best FIFA Women's Coach award in 2022.

England's Dutch coach Sarina Wiegman will renew her acquaintance with one of the living legends of European women's football, Pia Sundhage, scorer of 71 goals in 146 appearances for Sweden and now in charge of the Brazilian team after a long run of successes with Sweden and the USA. She might spare a moment for nostalgia when she walks on to the turf at Wembley Stadium, having become the first woman to score an international goal at the venue when Sweden beat England 2-0 way back in 1989.

The attendance figure for that game was given as 3,150. The Women's Finalissima will attract a crowd not far short of the record-setting 87,192 who watched the Women's EURO final nine months earlier. The grandiose event at Wembley is sure to provide another showcase for the explosive growth of women's football. 🌟



FUTSAL SETS SAIL FOR MAJORCA

Palma is poised to stage the final four of the UEFA Futsal Champions League from 5 to 7 May.

The final four of the 2022/23 UEFA Futsal Champions League is about to make history as the first UEFA tournament to be disputed in the Balearic Islands. Since the final-four tournament was introduced in 2007, five Spanish provincial capitals – Murcia, Lleida, Guadalajara, Zaragoza and Barcelona – have been selected to host the denouement of Europe's top futsal club competition. But Majorca goes into the annals as the first venue not to feature in Spain's mainland geography. In fact, a trawl through the history of UEFA finals of any description yields a net result of one single mention of the island – when the men's football team RCD Mallorca travelled to Villa Park in Birmingham to take on SS Lazio in the last-ever European Cup Winners' Cup final way back in 1999.

Twenty-four years later, Palma Futsal will be the hosts for the event to be played from 5 to 7 May. But not on the club's home court, as the 3,920 capacity at Son Moix does not measure up to such a major tournament. Instead, the four matches are to be played at the impressive Palma Arena, opened in 2006 as the venue for the UCI Track Cycling World Championships. Moulding the velodrome into futsal shape is the major logistical challenge. However, regardless of the configuration, games in the futsal-mad city will inevitably be played to capacity crowds.

Two debutants

Curiously, Palma Futsal are one of two debutants in this year's final-four line-up, alongside Sporting Anderlecht (known as Halle-Gooik in the Belgian club's previous incarnation), who are bidding to break an Iberian stranglehold on the title over six seasons that have produced four wins for Spain and two for Portugal. Outsiders they may be against Palma and Lisbon arch-rivals Benfica and Sporting CP, but they are respected as serious contenders after dramatically eliminating titleholders Barcelona in the elite round, coming from 5-2 down to draw with the Catalans and

then, with a penalty 17 seconds from time in their final match, edging them out on the slenderest margin of goal difference.

Their coach, Luca Cagnaz, knows what it is to win the title. He was in goal for Action 21 Charleroi when they notched up the sole previous win by a Belgian club by beating FC Dynamo in the two-legged 2005 final with two goals in the dying seconds of extra time in Moscow. Belgium's coach of the year

will be pitting his wits against equally highly respected opponents in the home team's Antonio Vadillo alongside Sporting CP's Nuno Dias and Benfica's José María Pazos (affectionately known as 'Pulpis'), both of whom can field star-studded arrays of Futsal World Cup and Futsal EURO winners as Portugal bid to add club competition glory to their run of national team successes in what promises to be a spectacular event on the Mediterranean island. 🌊



SURVEYING THE SCENE

Player opportunities, domestic club competitions and transfer market activity all go under the microscope in the latest UEFA Club Licensing Benchmarking Report, which also covers in-depth financial benchmarking and club ownership trends.

How has the pandemic affected the way football clubs across Europe are building their squads? How has the recent introduction of five substitutes changed the allocation of playing time? How does transfer spending differ across the continent's domestic leagues?

These were just a few of the questions asked by the UEFA data intelligence centre during the creation of its latest survey of the European club footballing landscape.

The UEFA Club Licensing Benchmarking Report analyses the finances of over 700 clubs and includes KPI tables for 54 UEFA member associations, yet – as the following pages illustrate – it also offers detailed analysis of the European football landscape with regard to players and to domestic competitions too.

Indeed, as football emerges from the pandemic, this latest report is a timely analysis at a time of new or expanded competitions – and 33 leagues, representing 60% of top divisions, have been adapted in the past three seasons – as well as calendar adjustments that include a 2022/23 campaign condensed by the midwinter FIFA World Cup.

And it is not just the men's game that is being monitored; the women's club game and its evolution are analysed, with specific questions asked about the way that clubs are organised around Europe.

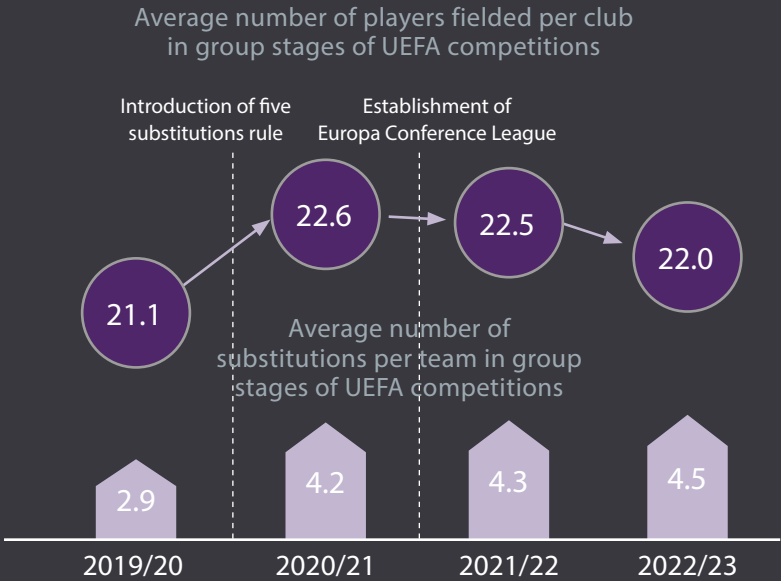
The UEFA data intelligence centre has worked with both the international professional footballers' organisation FIFPRO and the European Club Association (ECA) on recent projects and this report puts playing minutes under the spotlight, assessing in which countries young players are getting the most opportunities. It also provides insight into transfer-market activity in Europe during the summer 2022 and January 2023 windows, highlighting the contrast between spending in England – at an all-time high – and elsewhere in Europe, where a slow recovery continues after the pandemic.



PLAYERS

Player landscape: increased player usage in UEFA club competitions
More players than ever have been fielded in UEFA's club competitions over the last four years, with an increase recorded in player numbers of around 25–28% between 2019/20 and 2021/22 – from 1,688 to 2,157.

One factor behind the increase is the number of clubs – there are now 96, rather than 80 – though UEFA found that coaches have tended to rotate their squads more, making use of the five substitutions now available to protect players from excessive workloads at a time when the calendar has witnessed considerable disruption.

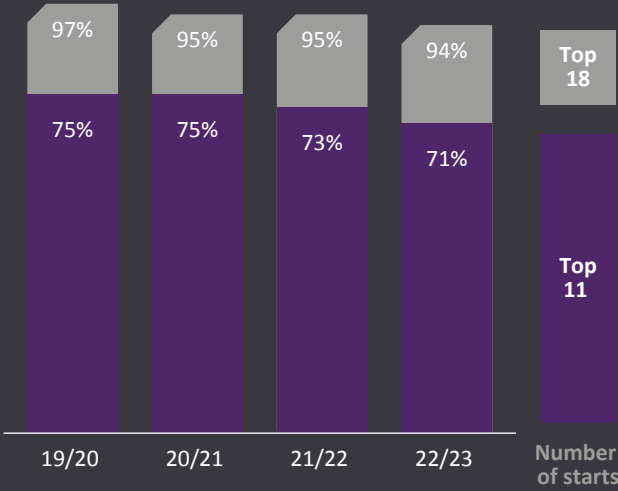


Core player appearances fall

Over the last four seasons, the percentage of total minutes being played by clubs' 11 most-fielded players in the men's Champions League group stage has fallen slightly, from an average of 75% in 2019/20 down to 71% in 2022/23. This is a sign of the impact of the new five-substitution rule, allowing for the possibility of reducing the burden on a team's core players.

It is worth noting too that the average percentage of total minutes played in the group stage by players outside a club's core group of 18 has increased from 3% to 6% in the last four seasons, indicating deeper use of squads.

Percentage of total minutes played by clubs' core players in group stage of Champions League



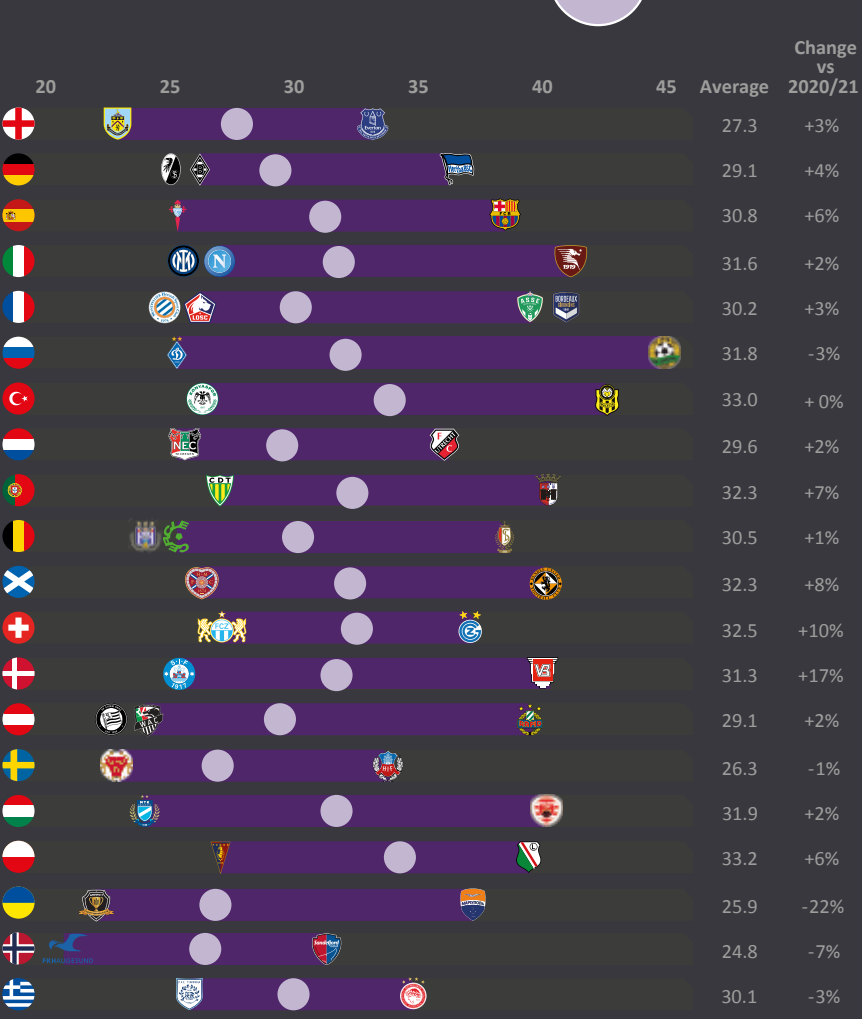
Number of players used, country by country

Across Europe, the average number of players fielded by a club during the 2021/22 season was 30. As this table of 20 countries shows, a significant majority saw an increase between 2020/21 and 2021/22.

The table also shows how the number varies between countries. Clubs in Norway used the fewest players during their 2021 league season: 24.8 on average. Swedish and Ukrainian clubs also fielded relatively low numbers of players, with averages of less than 27 in both countries. In the case of Ukraine, this was a sharp drop relative to the previous season, when its clubs had fielded an average of 33.4 players – the highest figure seen across the various countries under review. At the other end of the spectrum, Polish clubs (33.2) and Turkish clubs (33.0) fielded the highest average numbers of players during 2021/22.

Among the 'Big 5' leagues, Italy's Serie A clubs used the most players, fielding an average of 31.6 players, which was 4.3 more than clubs in the English Premier League.

Number of players fielded during 2021/22 domestic league season



Where youth gets their chance

This graphic of domestic league squad profiles shows the total domestic league minutes played by age. The UEFA data intelligence centre had noted a growing percentage of transfer spending on younger players in recent transfer windows and was curious to see if there was a corresponding rise in opportunities for youngsters.

Age profiles can be analysed using numerous metrics – and each offers a different slant. For example, teenagers were responsible for only 5% of total domestic league minutes in 2021/22. Yet 13% of all players in this age group made at least one league appearance. And the average of 5% conceals significant variations across countries: teenagers accounted for more than 9% of total minutes in Austria and Denmark, but just 0.7% in Greece and 1.7% in Türkiye.

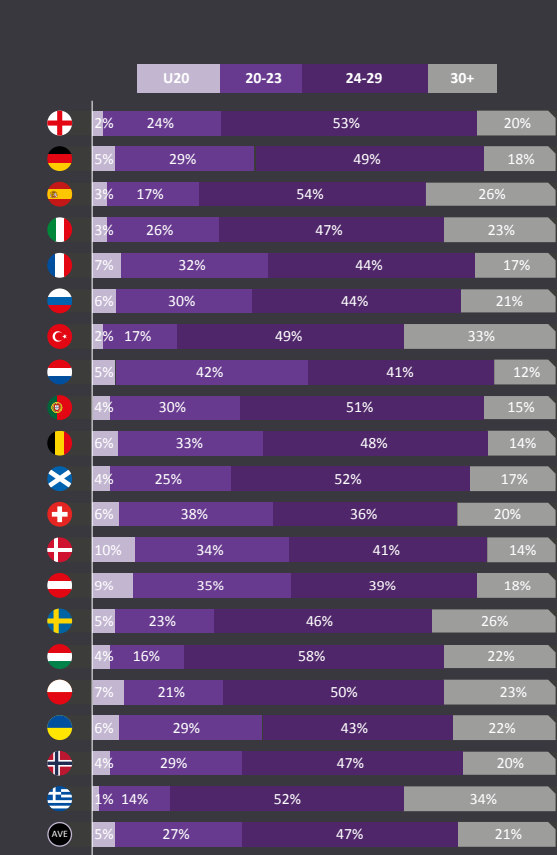
If the definition of young players is expanded to include all those under the age of 24, the Dutch league saw 47% of total minutes played by players in this age category, compared with just 15% in Greece and 19% in Türkiye. When it comes to older players – 30 or older – these accounted for 34% of total minutes in Greece and 33% in Türkiye, compared with 12% in the Netherlands, 14% in Denmark and 14% in Belgium.

TRANSFERS

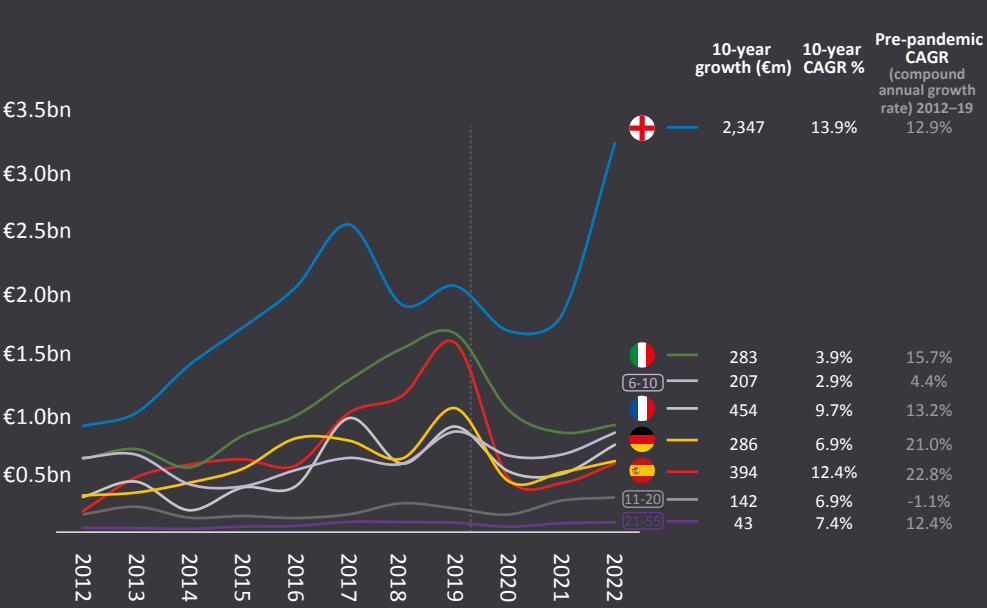
Player landscape: transfer market review

The biggest markets grew significantly in the few years leading up to the pandemic, yet the levels of resilience witnessed since have varied significantly from country to country. This line graph of spending across the past ten years highlights above all the gap between activity in England and the rest of Europe. Indeed in England, the pace at which transfer activity accelerated in 2022 is unprecedented: activity grew by almost 80%, year on year, and England is the only 'Big 5' country that has outpaced its 2019 activity level. Whether this is a one-off peak as clubs restructure their squads post-pandemic or evidence of a notable change of behaviour is a moot point. The situation is much different outside England, with clubs adopting a much more cautious approach and transfer activity well under pre-pandemic levels in other 'Big 5' countries.

Breakdown of total domestic league minutes played by age



European leagues' spending evolution in the last ten years – summer and winter windows



English clubs dominate winter window

This pie chart shows the scale of Premier League clubs' spending in the winter 2022 window. English clubs accounted for an estimated 53% of all global transfer spending along with 31% of global transfer activity and 8% of global transfer earnings.

Summer transfer flows show 'Big 5' dominance

This chart of transfer activity in summer 2022 highlights the dominance of the 'Big 5' countries, with eight of the ten largest transfer flows involving players being bought by English clubs. Overall, the 'Big 5' accounted for 72% of global spending in summer 2022 and 34% of global transfer earnings. European clubs outside of the 'Big 5' received the largest share of global transfer earnings (44%), while another 21% went to non-European clubs.

COMPETITIONS

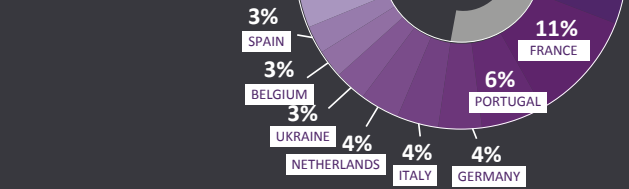
Men's competition landscape: changing formats

This illustrates that over the last three years, more than 60% of national top divisions in Europe altered their formats or competition structures – a process accelerated by COVID-19. That said, there have been no changes to any of the 'Big 5' leagues, though France's Ligue 1 is planning to reduce from 20 to 18 teams.

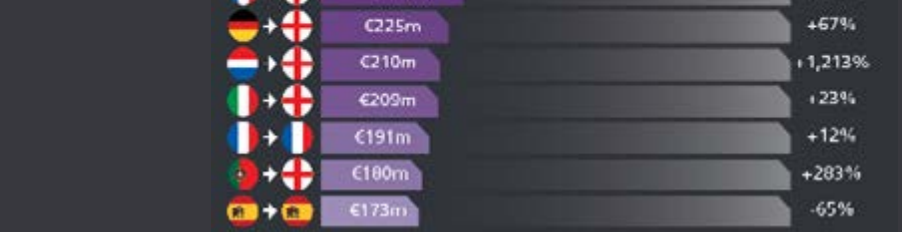
Women's competition landscape: who runs the clubs

This diagram shows that under 40% of women's top-flight clubs operate independently of men's clubs, though there are regional variations in the administration of senior women's football. Clubs in south-eastern Europe, for instance, tend to operate independently of clubs that run men's teams. By contrast, in a spread of countries in northern and western Europe – Belgium, England, Estonia, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway and Switzerland – all women's top-flight clubs collaborate in some way with the men's section of the club.

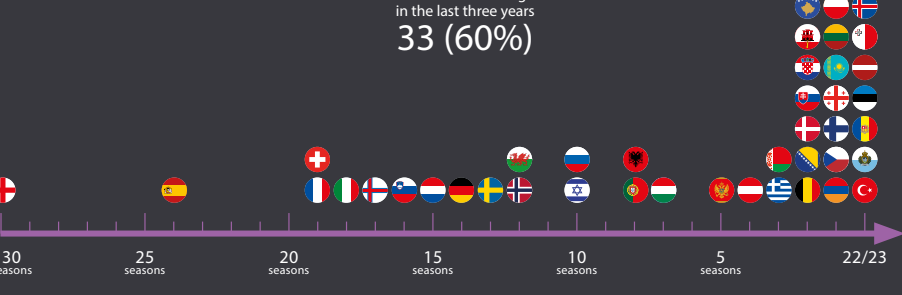
Breakdown of transfer activity by country



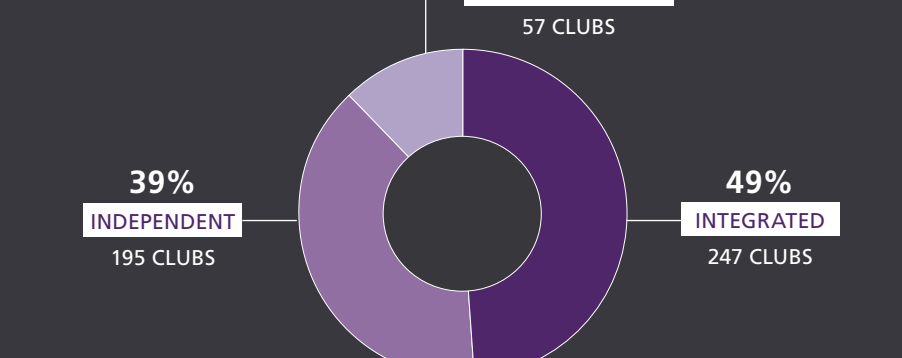
Ten largest transfer flows in summer 2022 (and a comparison with 2019)



'Big 5' leagues have not changed in nearly 15 years



How women's clubs are organised





A MIP session in Dortmund in 2018.

ACADEMY HELPING FOOTBALLERS PLAN THEIR NEXT STEPS

The UEFA Academy's broad range of courses provides rich learning opportunities for footballers plotting a post-playing career.

Anybody pondering the merits of the UEFA Academy and its educational mission should consider the following couple of statistics.

They come from the Academy's store of data and they concern the crossing of the line from active to retired footballer.

The first is that within five years of hanging up their boots, 40% of ex-footballers struggle financially, irrespective of their level of income during their playing days. The second is that only 50% actually choose when their career will end; for the other 50%, it is a decision forced upon them and comes as a

cold, sharp shock. As one member of the UEFA Academy team remarks: "This means they need to prepare. We don't want them to wait until the last minute to start having a plan."

This last word – plan – is fundamental and it explains UEFA's eagerness to spread the word about the learning opportunities that are open to players from across the continent.

The UEFA Academy offers a range of initiatives. Its most high-profile course is the two-year Executive Master for International Players (MIP) – whose most recent group of graduates include

former Brazil playmaker Kaká and the current president of the Norwegian Football Association of Norway, Lisa Klaveness – yet it is just the tip of the iceberg.

To spread the word about the variety of courses and programmes now available, UEFA has recently sent letters and emails to clubs and associations as well as contacting players, coaches and agents directly. Academy staff estimate that of the 40,000 professional players in Europe, no more than 10% are aware of the breadth of courses on offer – hence this effort to convey the message about the learning opportunities available.



Former French international Florent Malouda is a graduate of the MIP class of 2019–21.

The MIP, a two-year master's programme run in collaboration with the University of Limoges and Birkbeck College at the University of London, is the best-known offering and comprises seven week-long sessions. Yet it has a 30-person limit per programme and is exclusive to former international players. The high demand for MIP places led to the creation of other courses, such as the Career Transition Programme – run together with UEFA Assist – which offers a first step for active or newly retired players considering their future. Among the courses for retired players are the UEFA Elite Scout Programme and the UEFA Player Agent Programme.

The Career Transition Programme is a week-long programme where active or newly retired players are encouraged to think about what they want to do next and create an action plan for a second career. It can be taken either fully online or in person and it includes a session with a mentor to offer direction – no small thing when you bear in mind that many players are simply unaware of the range of roles available within the football industry today. To cite an example from one session, course participants were told of the existence of 50 different jobs in the football industry yet many could not even name five. The career transition programme opens their eyes to a whole world of opportunities.

Another potential staging post on the pathway is the Certificate in Football Management (CFM), a foundation programme organised together with the University of Lausanne in Switzerland for any active player, coach or referee seeking a managerial position within the game. This is a nine-month course delivered online and its modules include various aspects of management together with other areas such as marketing and media.

Current CFM students include Ivan Rakitić, Raphaël Varane, Juan Mata and Jan Vertonghen. There are younger players involved too, such as Josh Clarke, a teenage goalkeeper at Celtic who has already registered for the CFM. In short, it is never too early – or too late – to start planning ahead.

Interestingly, course leaders have had feedback from active players who feel their involvement with education – having something on which to focus their minds away from the pitch – has actually improved their performance on it. Equally, the discipline and good habits instilled by their profession have helped many with their return to the classroom.

Course leaders have been struck by the work ethic of many former players and their ability to translate that to their studies. The competitive fires that burned out on the pitch have been noticeable too – in a positive way as players aspire to excel in the classroom.

The goal of UEFA is to ensure that former players are not lost to the game and there are positive signs already. Of around 100 MIP graduates, roughly 80% have got a job or gained a promotion – for example Nigel de Jong is the director of professional football for the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB), Sebastian Kehl is the sporting director at Borussia Dortmund, and Jason Roberts is CONCACAF's (Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football) director of football development.

The UEFA Academy is now recruiting for the fifth edition of the MIP, which begins in October, as well as for the next CTP cohort. Late May is the deadline for applications and there is optimism that the example of those luminaries who have passed through the Academy already will encourage others to follow.

As one course leader puts it: "When you have Kaká and other players of that profile doing one of the programmes, hopefully others will think, 'If someone like them is gaining more education after retirement, maybe I also need to think about what I'll do next'."

For further information about the Academy's programmes, visit www.UEFACademy.com.

Appetite for education

The UEFA For Players app provides immersive educational content in ten different languages and is entirely free to use – for players of any level and even for football fans. It is used each season with players in the UEFA Youth League to provide a taste of UEFA's educational offerings and its modules cover subjects from match-fixing to doping as well as social media and finance. For the Youth League teams, each player who does a module wins points for his side – with prizes given to the highest-scoring club at the end of the campaign.

Funding support

There is a cost involved in enrolling for a UEFA Academy course or programme but financial support is available for those who need it. Fees vary, ranging from €27,000 for tuition fees for the MIP to €1,900 for the CTP, and €7,900 for the majority of the other programmes. For prospective MIP participants, there are scholarships available to support female players, futsal players and referees. The same goes for the CFM, for which a number of female players have received a discount, while other participants have received help from their club, national association or players' union.



PUTTING PLAYER WELFARE FIRST

Player safety, avoiding injury and tailoring medical care to the needs of the individual were among the central topics at the 8th UEFA Medical Symposium, which was held in Frankfurt from 31 January to 2 February.

The 400-strong audience at the headquarters of the German Football Association (DFB) heard from a range of experts across the sports medical world on the most pressing issues facing football doctors in an ever more competitive environment.

Edwin Goedhart, chief medical officer at the Royal Netherlands Football Association, outlined the key steps in evaluating head impacts and identifying the signs and symptoms of concussion, stressing that each instance is unique and should be treated on an individual basis. Claus Reinsberger from the DFB medical committee then addressed the question of how heading the ball may affect the brain. He explored the scientific difficulties in making any direct correlation between heading and neurodegenerative disorders,

while stressing the importance of applying proper guidelines for heading technique and practice frequency.

Specific considerations for female players

The various aspects of player workload, the associated injury risks and the need for tailored recovery strategies were dissected in detail. For instance, Ron Maughan, chair of the IOC Medical and Scientific Commission’s nutrition working group, examined the effects of playing football in extreme heat and stressed the importance of heat mitigation strategies that take individual player traits into consideration. Christopher Carling from the French Football Federation looked at the reasons why elite footballers may be at risk of excessive overload, including congested

match schedules, limited squad rotation, training rhythms, and regular and/or long-distance travel.

Specific considerations for female players were also examined in depth. The symposium heard Rita Tomás from the Portuguese Football Federation explain how the menstrual cycle has historically limited the inclusion of female subjects in medical studies, and how more research is required to establish guidelines on injury risk, nutrition and related topics that are fully adapted to girls and women. Eva Ferrer from FC Barcelona looked at how recommendations on physical activity for pregnant women should be applied to a contact sport such as football, and how a special phased return to play programme should then be applied post-pregnancy for the welfare of both mother and baby.



A cooling helmet for treating concussion was one of the medical innovations presented at the medical symposium.

The importance of trust and communication

The closing session of the symposium was a round-table discussion on health care for players in club and national teams, featuring former footballers Thomas Hitzlsperger, Niko Kovač and Josephine Henning alongside the doctor of the Belgian women’s team, Elke Van den Steen. Hitzlsperger explained how moving clubs, and countries, over the course of his career meant adapting to new methodologies on the pitch and in the treatment room. He also underlined the importance of trust in the relationship between a player and a physio.

Kovač revealed how as a player he was fully focused on maximising his physical performance through proper diet, rest and recovery. From a coach’s perspective, he reiterated the importance of open communication and detailed advance planning with the medical staff to ensure proper management of player workload and recovery from injury.

Henning recounted the mental strain of suffering a serious knee injury while playing abroad, and noted the progress made in recent years to improve the level of sports science and medical care in the women’s game. Van den Steen emphasised the importance of understanding the specific physical

conditions that affect female players, such as a heightened risk of ligament injuries, and adapting training and recovery routines accordingly.

Zoran Bahtijarević, UEFA’s chief medical officer, described the symposium as an enormous success, saying: “Participants were extremely satisfied with the quality of the lectures and the unique opportunity to meet and network with the core stakeholders in football medicine. The most important message was that doctors, coaches and other personnel involved in player care and preparation should base their decisions not on emotions but on scientifically proven, evidence-based methods. This is the only way to truly bring benefit for the health of players.”

CPR training at the heart of a new campaign

The medical symposium also served as the platform to launch a new training and education partnership between UEFA and the European Resuscitation Council (ERC).

During the course of the year, UEFA and the ERC will organise CPR training for the teams competing in the Women’s Finalissima at Wembley, the Nations League finals in the Netherlands and the European Under-21 Championship final tournament in Georgia and Romania, as well as the various UEFA youth and futsal competitions.

It will also be extended to the staff of UEFA and its member associations, as well as the staff and volunteers working at EURO 2024 in Germany. The target is to provide in-person training to over 12,000 people in total.

Among the first trainees was the UEFA president, Aleksander Čeferin, who said: “The role of medicine in football is more important than ever, and UEFA takes great pride in launching this new initiative in cooperation with the ERC. Each of us can be a bystander to a sudden cardiac arrest, and when it happens, every second matters. We want to use football’s powerful voice to raise awareness of this problem and encourage people to educate themselves, step up, and save lives.”

Professor Koen Monsieurs, chair of the ERC and one of the speakers at the symposium, added: “The European Resuscitation Council is thrilled about our collaboration with UEFA. Through this partnership we will be able to reach a very large number of people with a crucial message: all of us can save a life by spending a little bit of time on learning resuscitation.”

The training roll-out will be complemented later in the year by an awareness campaign encouraging members of the public to become CPR-trained.

PARTNERSHIPS KEY TO KEEPING SPORT CLEAN

UEFA is working closely with partners worldwide to ensure that education and awareness remain at the heart of the fight against doping.



UEF A, the Council of Europe (CoE), international sports federations, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), and national anti-doping organisations (NADOs) share a commitment to keeping football clean at all levels of the European pyramid.

The CoE hosted an anti-doping education workshop at UEFA's headquarters in Nyon, Switzerland, in February, which provided an opportunity for Sophie Kwasny, head of the council's sport division, and Liene Kozlovskā, senior programme manager in its anti-doping unit, to explain why a joined-up approach and education are critical to combating doping and protecting sporting integrity.

What is the Council of Europe's role in the fight against doping?

Sophie Kwasny: We are an intergovernmental organisation, which means that we support government actions and ensure that the policies and practices in place comply with laws and match the standards and principles we promote in the fields of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. When it comes to sport and anti-doping, we typically exchange with sports ministries, national and international anti-doping agencies or sports organisations such as UEFA. Our role is to bring all the stakeholders together and make recommendations to advance policies and practices.

How important is it for UEFA, the Council of Europe and other sports organisations to have a common approach to protecting clean sport?

SK: It's crucial. You cannot fight doping alone; you need to involve all sports organisations. We communicate and share practices with those directly involved on the ground as well as with the governments enforcing the rules. **Liene Kozlovskā:** When tackling trafficking of doping substances, the criminal responsibilities of those who promote doping, as well as corruption and manipulation in sport, you need a very strong link with government agencies such as law enforcement. One instrument of cooperation is the anti-doping convention introduced in 1989. We regularly exchange on anti-doping policies with countries that have ratified the convention and organise specific subgroups if there is an emerging topic to tackle.

Do the same rules apply to all?

SK: The generic rules of integrity are the same for everyone and every sport. Then you have some specificities on how you achieve integrity depending on the different sports. Let's say the key message is universal, but the way you deliver it is then adapted to specific environments.

Why are education and awareness on the subject so important?

SK: In the past, the focus was mainly put on sanctioning. Nowadays, the approach has shifted and we are increasingly focusing on education. We often see cases where support staff or even parents surrounding young athletes are providing them with doping substances either intentionally or unintentionally. Even if it's done in good faith, because they have a small injury for example, it is still considered as doping. That's why educating parents, coaches, athletes and young people is important.

What is the main objective of the education workshops organised by the CoE and what improvements result from them?

SK: I think sharing good practices is crucial. Here, we have such an amazing group of experts from different countries and various sport organisations, who come with their experience and ideas and provide inspiration to others. For sports organisation representatives these meetings are an opportunity to engage with a network of specialists and to get involved in the drafting of education norms that will then be applied by all organisations.

LK: It's also interesting to see how smaller organisations with limited funding think outside the box to reach out to their target groups. This lack of resources often feeds

their creativity, and they are an inspiration for all of us.

How do you foresee the future of clean sport?

SK: If you look at the average age of today's top-level athletes, and especially the next generation, they are the Gen Z. If we don't know how to talk to them today, we cannot expect them to be knowledgeable once they start their professional careers. The sooner we get the message across, the better the chances that they will be capable of saying no to doping substances. If we use the right methods, it will be already ingrained in their brains that it's something they shouldn't even consider. We need to understand their codes and find the right arguments and message to get their attention.

Can you tell us more about UEFA and the Council of Europe's joint work to prevent doping in football?

SK: Back in 2018, the Council of Europe signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with UEFA to strengthen cooperation, notably in sports integrity, governance and human rights. This is a commitment to work together and it sets our joint high-level priorities.

But UEFA was part of the Council of Europe's bodies even before the MoU was signed, with observer status in our sport convention. More recently, UEFA formally joined the CoE's work in the fight against manipulation of sports competitions under the Macolin Convention [Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions], which came into force in 2019.

This workshop is a good and practical example of the close and really fruitful cooperation we have on a number of different topics. 🌱



The CoE anti-doping education workshop held at UEFA's headquarters in February.

LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES OF COACHES IN THE ELITE GAME

The journey of leadership: from player to coach with **Giovanni van Bronckhorst**

In early 2013, Giovanni van Bronckhorst was among the latest group of students on the UEFA Pro Licence Student Exchange Programme at UEFA HQ in Switzerland, where up-and-coming coaches from four European national associations come together to discuss, debate and learn from some of the top names in the game.

A decade on, Van Bronckhorst now sits on the stage, sharing his own experiences of life at the sharp end of the game with the next generation, represented by students from Azerbaijan, Czechia, Denmark and Iceland.

Having made the decision to hang up his boots after the Netherlands' 1-0 defeat to Spain in the 2010 World Cup final, Van Bronckhorst wasted no time reflecting on what had passed, and quickly enrolled in a combined B and A licence course for meritorious players, going on to take the Pro licence after being appointed as assistant coach at his former club Feyenoord.

Four years in charge at De Kuip were to follow, as well as a stint in China with Guangzhou R&F and, most recently, with another of his former playing clubs, Scotland's Rangers FC, who he led to last season's UEFA Europa League final.

Below, he reflects on the transition from player to coach and the lessons he has learnt from some of his own mentors over the past 30 years in the game.

Giovanni, which coaches had a big impact on you as a player?

For me, the coach who gives you the first chance to play is very important. For me, it was Willem van Hannege, a true Netherlands and Feyenoord legend.

I had the privilege to work with a lot of big coaches – Guus Hiddink, Frank Rijkaard, Dick Advocaat, Louis van Gaal, Bert van Marwijk, and I really liked the way Arsène Wenger worked at Arsenal. He was the first coach who not only

concentrated on football, but also your life besides football – your diet, your sleeping; we already did yoga at the time before we played games. He was the total package and that really opened my eyes.

You learn from every coach you have, but I think the biggest impact for me came from Rijkaard at Barcelona and Dick Advocaat, who was a coach of mine when I played Under-16s for the national team, and the senior team, and with Rangers as well. So you learn from every coach you have.

At what point did you decide to go into coaching?

After I retired in 2010. I just wanted to study for the UEFA A licence to stay involved in football, to see if it's something for me and maybe find the passion for coaching as well. It was really strange to be playing the World Cup final and then four weeks later to be a student.

I learnt a lot, more on the A licence than the Pro, which is really going to be preparing you for a head coach role, and I got the passion for coaching.

And after I finished my A licence, Ronald Koeman became coach of Feyenoord and asked me to be his full-time assistant, and I think from that moment, when you're there every day, talking about football, giving training sessions, the passion only becomes bigger, but it takes a lot of passion, time and energy to be a coach.

What would you say to players who want to become a coach immediately after hanging up their boots?

I don't think that's smart. I think you see it everywhere in life; we want in the shortest time the biggest output, we want the outcome. We want to do less, but we want to get more. But, if you want to be a coach, you have to put the energy in, but also the time to develop yourself. I really learnt a lot from my time studying

for my UEFA A licence with the KNVB [Royal Netherlands Football Association] in the Netherlands. I was very humble, you couldn't notice from seeing me in the class that I had a playing career; I was just one of the students.

I remember [England men's head coach] Gareth Southgate telling me where he was a player at Middlesbrough and the next day, he was the coach, and he didn't know how to prepare the team to give training sessions.

He just had to work from one day to learn to be a coach, be in front of the team and lead the team meetings, which can be very difficult for a lot of people. But you know, I think eventually he developed really well and he's now a really good coach.

How difficult was the transition from player to coach, and then to head coach?

The toughest change was being on the pitch as a coach. When I did the UEFA A licence, I had to take my first session, and at this stage you are learning new things, how to do the drills, where to be on the pitch. I didn't know but they filmed my session, and when I got my diploma, I was given a DVD with my first-ever session. I never watched it back, because I think it would be terrible!

That transition from being one of the guys to the one delivering the message is tough, but with experience, you become more competent and comfortable.

Becoming a head coach, the biggest challenge was being the one who was responsible. As an assistant, you might sometimes think it's easy to be the main coach, the man in front of the squad and responsible for the staff. But it's so different. The first time I felt the responsibility of being head coach of Feyenoord it was very tough indeed, but the UEFA Pro licence prepares you really well for being a head coach. →



Giovanni van Bronckhorst in action against Juventus in the Champions League in 1997.

When I took over at Feyenoord, the only thing I did outside of the courses was to have media training with a friend of mine in the Netherlands. I had a couple of sessions on how to do interviews and press conferences, to make sure you have a good dialogue.

That's because it's when people at home will see you as a coach, in the couple of minutes you do the interviews before or after a match. So you have to do well; if you're really bad in the media, you know, it really affects your image, even if you're a good coach on the training pitch.

How would you describe your own leadership style?

The experience of playing so many years at the highest level helps me understand how players feel in the locker room, because I've been there as well, so that gives you credibility, but as a coach you have to know that you are not a player anymore.

Authenticity is important and you have to be yourself, because if you're not, players will see that. You have to be honest because players will see when you're performing an act. You must never lie to your players or say things to them you cannot fulfil.

I was brought up in the Dutch system with a lot of discipline, so for me, that is also very important. You have to make sure you are doing things right when you train, when you're at home; you must remember you always represent the club or the nation. The coaches I am closest to in that regard are Guus Hiddink and Frank Rijkaard.

I am also a family man and this is one of my core values. We are together as a club and so I treat my players also as family and, it's important to know who has a partner, who is single, who has a wife and kids. If one of the players is single and lives alone, you need to know they're eating well, so at Rangers, we gave them food to eat at home to make sure they were well prepared to play the games.

How do you deal with delegating responsibility to your staff?

When you're first a coach, you want to do everything. At Feyenoord, I would go in at eight o'clock in the morning, come home at five, say hi to my wife and kids, and then go to the office and prepare training sessions and watch videos until ten o'clock that night, go to bed and the next day do the same.

My wife said, 'Well, if this is your routine every week, after a couple of months, you're going to be exhausted', and so I had to learn to build a team of staff around me and make sure that they had the right qualities and responsibilities. That way, you can have a helicopter view and make sure everyone is doing everything to make sure you have the result on matchday. Everyone has the responsibility to be a leader in their area to ensure that. And it's very important at a new club to have people in your staff who know the club.

Last season, you coached Rangers in the UEFA Europa League final, which went all the way to penalties. How do you reflect on handling those moments of extreme pressure?

I think the most important thing is to focus on the things you have to address. You develop that skill as a player. I remember being more nervous in my first friendly game as a youth player with Feyenoord than I was in the Champions League final. It's because you're not used to it, but eventually with all the games you play, you learn to block everything out.



“I always say, ‘Before players play the game, they should already have played the game’. That’s your role as a coach, with your training sessions and meetings.”

It's the same as a coach. You block everything and focus on the game and focus on the right things in the moment, the things that matter.

How do you continue to develop as a leader and a coach?

I am watching a lot of games and making a lot of analysis, both in my own time and as a UEFA technical observer. I sit with my staff every one or two weeks to discuss trends and tactics in football, because it's different from the past.



When I was a player, you had your style of play, maybe 4-4-2, and that was it. Now, the game has developed with systems and subsystems within games, so as a coach you have to be ready. You can't just have one way of playing or one system.

With Rangers against Borussia Dortmund last season, I prepared the team with three systems, because Dortmund are so dynamic in the way they play. And we had to use those three systems.

I always say, 'Before players play the game, they should already have played the game'. That's your role as a coach, with your training sessions and meetings. You have to develop yourself every day as a coach and that's why I watch a lot of games. You're never the finished article. The best example is maybe Pep Guardiola. He was different in Germany from Spain, and is different now in England from Germany. Top coaches keep developing themselves and that's what I try to do. It never stops.

I was lucky enough to visit Guardiola at Bayern when I was studying, and was able to ask him about his methods. Now, I have time to travel and watch big games. I try to visit my former team-mate Xavi to see his set-up, and this only helps you become a better coach. 🌱

Sir Alex Ferguson's tips for transition



Legendary former Manchester United and Aberdeen manager Sir Alex Ferguson is among the stellar cast of coaching experts to have lent words of

advice to the next generation on the UEFA Pro licence student exchange programme, and as a former Rangers striker, also spoke with Giovanni van Bronckhorst during his time in charge of the Ibrox club.

The two-time UEFA Champions League winner took his first managerial role at the age of 32 and still empathises with coaches today.

"I really have a great affection for people who are learning the game and want to be coaches and managers," Ferguson said. "I started at 32, and, of course, in the time from there on, you do learn. But I honestly would say that going into management at 32, there were a couple of things that I knew that were useful: one, I could make a decision; two, I played the game; and three, I had my coaching qualifications."

"I think that it's really important that coaches go through all the courses they can, even the refresher courses and keep attending them, because there's always something, little bits, you learn all the way down. Other things, I developed [over time] by the learning process, particularly communication. And I think when you're in charge of a football team, you're not just in charge of 11 players on the pitch."

The Scot also believes UEFA plays an important role in providing a platform for coaches to develop their skills and experience.

"UEFA leads the way in terms of the directions of coaches and the avenues they can afford and offer them to improve themselves as coaches. And I think it'll always be UEFA that is the most important organisation in terms of creating the right platforms for young people to do well."

LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

What makes an effective leader when it comes to coaching?

When we look at some of the modern greats, we see a range of personalities and styles, but there are qualities that consistently shine through. This is just as true elsewhere, with common themes also uniting great leaders in business and industry.

Matt Crocker is Southampton FC director of football operations, having previously been head of development teams at the English FA, helping to create the strategy and culture that has seen England’s men reach the final of UEFA EURO 2020, while the women went a step further by winning UEFA Women’s EURO 2022.

Leaning on more than 25 years’ experience in the game, Crocker recently presented students on the UEFA Pro licence student exchange with ten characteristics of an effective leader.



1 Lives humility

Crocker identifies the ability to put the needs of the group before their own individual needs as an important trait for a leader, who should be open and honest, down to earth, friendly and caring.



2 Gets results

An effective leader will do the extra work to get the job done and hit deadlines when it is required. They will also be process-driven, with a high level of organisation.



3 Focuses on what matters

A good leader should be able to prioritise the most important tasks facing them and their team, setting smaller issues aside. They will also be able to influence others to do the same.



4 Highly skilled in critical conversations

This means being able to have difficult discussions in a consistent, calm and confident manner. It may not be enjoyable, but an effective leader recognises the need for progress and can provide constructive feedback to others.



5 Strong decision-maker

The effective leader will listen, filter the key information and react decisively. They will understand that not everybody may agree with their decisions, but can proceed confidently with their calls. They can also hold their hands up and accept responsibility when things don’t go as planned, and will learn quickly from their mistakes.



6 Positive and effective communicator

Comfortable in formal and informal situations, the effective leader can use different styles of communication depending on the circumstances. Using simple and effective language, they will also ensure others understand their message, and will take regular time out to provide organisational updates.



7 Authentic style

Comfortable in their own skin, a good leader will be true to their own values and won’t try to be something or somebody they are not. They can demonstrate consistent behaviours irrelevant of the situation or external pressures.



8 Energiser

A strong leader will display a positive personality, identifying the opportunity in situations and seeing good in others. They will be trusting, motivate others when required and display their belief in the team to succeed.



9 Never makes assumptions

If in doubt, a good leader will reach out to ensure they understand the opinions of others, and is not afraid to ask the most basic of questions to achieve that aim, even if the answer is not what they wish to hear.



10 Outstanding coach

The effective leader will not simply take over a situation to solve problems or provide answers for others, but instead facilitate self-learning in others. This means giving team members responsibility, asking questions and coaching their ability to learn for themselves and reach their goals.

Five key characteristics of serial winning coaches

Think of the top coaches in sport. Those who regularly lead their teams and athletes to glory on the domestic, European, international or world stage. What do they have in common that sets them apart from others?

Professor **Sergio Lara-Bercial** of Leeds Beckett University has been leading sports teams for more than 25 years and sits on the International Council for Coaching Excellence. Together with Professor Cliff Mallett from the University of Queensland in Australia, he has studied the traits and behaviours of 17 winning coaches across multiple sports around the world to find out the answers to this question.

By identifying these characteristics, Professor Lara-Bercial believes it can help promising coaches such as those he spoke to at the recent UEFA Pro licence student exchange to adapt their own behaviours to reach their full potential. “There are no magic recipes,” he stresses, “but with time and experience in certain situations, you can make [better] decisions. To be the best coach we can be, we really need to understand who we are – our personality, our motivations, how we react when things go well or when things go wrong.” He explains that while there are individual differences between serial winning coaches, there are a number of traits that bind them.

Emotional stability

“Serial winning coaches understood very clearly that the job was complex and that the job was difficult. They were not surprised by it,” he says. “Although, of course, they can get upset when things go wrong, they are not extremely anxious,” he continues. “They don’t overreact and are good at bringing themselves back from a bad situation to a level where they can function again.”

Motivations

“Your motivations are another big element,” Professor Lara-Bercial says. “What motivates you when you get up in the morning? What are you hoping to achieve? Are you doing it for yourself? Or because you want to achieve something? Or because you want to support others to achieve their dreams or goals? It’s a trick question because it can be for all those reasons. Most serial winning coaches have a burning desire to win, they love winning, but at the same time, they have a very genuine desire to support athletes in achieving their goals and to look after the athletes.

“Motivations can also change as you get older – when you’re young you want to succeed and get on the ladder – or the culture can change. Some cultures are more about helping others; some are more individualistic.”

Proactive

Professor Lara-Bercial sees that serial winning coaches are go-getters who seize opportunities when they are presented. “They don’t wait for things to happen; they make them happen. When something is not right, are they the kind of people that are going to grab the bull by the horns and face the problem?

That’s not only reacting to situations; that’s also creating situations. They’re extremely good students. They enjoy learning and go out of their way to learn as much as they can, not only about football or about their sport; they are very avid learners of everything.”

Athlete-centred

Speaking to athletes about their coaches, researchers found the biggest thing keeping them satisfied was that they had trust in their leaders and that they would be treated fairly. “Serial winning coaches use the athlete as a compass,” Professor Lara-Bercial explains. “Whatever they do is always for the benefit of the player. There’s a balance between what’s best for the team and what’s best for the individual athletes, but you can strive to hit both.”

Aware of their own needs

Maintaining the energy to keep being successful does not come easily. Successful coaches know when to take a step back and focus on themselves. “Even though coaching is not a nine-to-five, you have to find a balance that works for you and those around you,” says Professor Lara-Bercial. “If you want to be doing this for a long time, you have to do it in a way that allows you to be there for a long time. If we are going to be any good looking after everybody else, we have to be in good shape ourselves. The moment our energy reserves go down or we are stressed out, invariably, that’s going to transfer to the people that we look after.”



STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS TO PRESERVE THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Communications executives from 18 UEFA member associations gathered in Nyon, Switzerland, to keep pace with the latest trends through a professional certification, while strengthening their network.

At a time when issues can become viral in a matter of minutes and media attention can shift completely overnight, football associations' communications teams need to be ready to respond to fans' concerns in the blink of an eye.

"I was looking forward to switching from carrying out my everyday work to acting according to a strategic plan – and this experience provided insights on how to do so... and much more," said Eva Nõmme, head of public relations at the Estonian Football Association. In January, Nõmme took part in a UEFA Strategic Communications Compact Course together with 17 fellow communications executives from all across Europe, from Greece to Latvia and from Kazakhstan to Scotland.

At a time when issues can become viral in a matter of minutes and media attention can shift completely overnight, football associations' communications teams need to be ready to respond to fans' concerns in the blink of an eye. And they must do so while carrying out their daily tasks for the promotion of the game's image. Having a sound communications strategy in place is therefore more necessary than ever, and UEFA Grow – UEFA's strategic development support programme – offers its national associations constant support to develop their own – with this course being just one of the platforms for continuous training and capacity-building.

The four-day course went beyond strategic planning and covered topics such as political advocacy, crisis communications and measuring the impact of communications efforts. "Even if you know about these things from your day-to-day work, it is important to get exposed to expert insights, success stories and new trends," said Nõmme. "It gave me lots of new ideas and even greater courage to deal with upcoming challenges."

The official UEFA Academy programme was also an eye-opener for Taru Nyholm, head of communications at the Football Association of Finland. "Now I appreciate

even more the things that we were already doing well in our association but, overall, I have a much better understanding of what our priorities should be," she explained.

The sessions included discussions on digital and content strategies with experts from UEFA, clubs and social media platforms such as Meta; presentations and role plays on internal communications; and a group project in which each team had to develop and deliver a compact communications strategy. All these areas of expertise are included in the wide portfolio of support projects that UEFA offers member associations in the field of communications. The unit leading this assistance scheme is constantly listening to national associations to make sure that all programmes and activities are relevant to them.

Strengthening the network

For this fourth edition, the course moved out of the digital learning space and allowed participants to gather at the House of European Football in Nyon, Switzerland. "It is always so inspiring to meet experts and, especially, other colleagues from around Europe," said Nyholm.

For Diego Antenozio, deputy head of communications at the Italian Football Federation, the opportunity to exchange with colleagues and see what others are doing was as important as hearing from the speakers. "It is so enriching to learn from such a diversity of points of view," he said. His colleague Faton Zulfeari from the communications department of the Football Federation of North Macedonia could not agree more: "Those of us coming from smaller federations can learn a lot from the big ones, but I am sure our colleagues from the big associations also found things to learn from us."

The strengthening of this European network of football communications professionals is also very valuable in facilitating collaboration among national associations and providing them with a more aligned voice in the face of current and future challenges. And, from a more immediate and practical viewpoint, "establishing this connection really helps when we have to work with each other on international matches or other events," Antenozio concluded.



INSPIRING YOUNG PLAYERS THROUGH THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Across Europe, Playmakers coaches are providing a new generation of girls with an introduction to football through fun, imagination and the magic of Disney characters.



The UEFA Playmakers programme uses an innovative storytelling approach featuring much-loved Disney characters such as Moana or Elsa from Frozen to help girls see the fun in football and regular physical exercise. The programme is specifically designed for girls aged 5–8 who have never played football before, meaning coaches play a key role in kick-starting a life-long love of football and physical activity.

Who are the Playmakers coaches?

Playmakers can be found in 44 national football associations all over Europe, with over 4,600 UEFA Playmakers coaches (also known as deliverers) leading its success and giving young girls their first opportunity to engage with football through a Disney narrative. The Playmakers coaches are people-oriented individuals who care about children and their development first and foremost. They can be parents, teachers, passionate football fans or people getting involved in football activities for the first time alongside the girls.

To ensure that Playmakers coaches are equipped with the necessary skills to inspire and motivate young girls, UEFA has developed a comprehensive training programme. Since its inception in 2020, 237 coach educators across Europe have been trained in the specific storytelling techniques and methods used to encourage girls to play football through their favourite Disney characters. These coach educators then train local coaches in their own countries, providing a sustainable and scalable approach to promoting girls' participation in football.

Aspiring Playmakers coaches can reach out to the football association in their country to learn more about open positions and upcoming training sessions.

How does a Playmakers session work?

Each session begins with a warm welcome from the coach and the distribution of colourful football bibs and adventure passports. The adventure passport serves as a guide for the girls' progress throughout the day, providing a sense of achievement and purpose.

The coach then leads the girls in a group reading activity, setting the scene for the day's adventure. Using captivating

stories from Disney's rich and varied universe, the coach seamlessly integrates football skills with adventure, keeping the young players engaged and motivated throughout the session. From exploring the high seas with Moana to battling evil villains with the Incredibles, each adventure is designed to spark the girls' imagination and creativity.

Over the course of ten sessions, coaches build the girls' confidence in their movement, communication, teamwork and basic football skills. At the end of each session, the girls are encouraged to reflect on what they have learned and the skills they have developed, creating a safe space for open communication. This approach allows the coaches to quickly build a positive relationship with the girls, fostering the confidence needed for active participation. To keep the girls excited, every session ends on a cliffhanger, ensuring they cannot wait to come back and continue the story! 🌟



"The storytelling element of sessions has benefited many girls as they find it easier to process instructions if they are familiar with a certain subject. The girls are also starting to continue developing their football skills at home and it has been very rewarding to see their parents support this movement."

Katarina, Playmakers coach in Slovakia

"I believe that the programme has taught many important life skills in addition to improving movements and technical ability. The girls have also learned how to control their emotions, support their friends as part of team, make brave decisions and ultimately develop more confidence."

Milica, Playmakers coach in Serbia

"We see a notable difference in the number of participants who have grown in confidence and progressed in key skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving. There were girls who sat on the sidelines initially but by week ten they were fully engaging without any encouragement from staff."

Nichola
Playmakers coach
in Scotland

"I really enjoyed giving young girls their first glimpse into the world of women's football. The UEFA Playmakers programme has helped to improve the girls' skills; they have also become more confident, less afraid of making mistakes and, most importantly, they have had a lot of fun learning how to play football."

Maciej
Playmakers coach in Poland

"I really like the inspiration behind the UEFA Playmakers programme as children love Disney and its storytelling, which gets girls excited about coming to the sessions. It has been evident across the programme that this is a great way to engage with young girls and increase their involvement in this amazing sport."

Laura, Playmakers coach in Sweden

FOOTBALL CHANGES LIVES

The UEFA Foundation for Children's latest activity report, published at the end of last year, demonstrates how it works throughout the year to support children in need around the world, using football as a catalyst for change.

The UEFA Foundation for Children invited four children with cerebral palsy to the UEFA Super Cup held in Helsinki in 2022.



The Hope Cup, a charitable tournament for children aged between 14 and 17, was played ahead of the 2021 UEFA Super Cup in Belfast to raise awareness of the impact of online hate in sport and among young people.

Last season was marked by great news for football in Europe and beyond: the end of strict health measures linked to the pandemic, the return of fans in the stands and a successful record-breaking UEFA Women's EURO 2022. These happy occasions were, alas, clouded by the ongoing war in Ukraine, a rising energy crisis and extreme drought over the summer, affecting millions of children, who need our help more than ever.

The European football community, supported by the foundation, mobilised quickly to provide emergency relief to civilians affected by the conflict in Ukraine. Tonnes of material were transported from Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, and thousands of people were taken in and cared for, with local football clubs stepping up to help their communities.

This conflict should not, however, overshadow the many others of which so many children are the victims. The foundation therefore continues to support the best projects safeguarding the rights of children all over the world, whatever their origins.

Aleksander Čeferin, the foundation's chairman and UEFA president, said: "This report brings hope, reflecting humanity's ability to win through even in the most challenging times. I am genuinely proud of the reaction from the European football community, which, with our foundation's support, quickly mobilised to provide emergency relief to civilians affected by the conflict in Ukraine. The testimonies presented in the report will tell you a story of joy, love and hope that football brings to

"The testimonies presented in the report will tell you a story of joy, love and hope that football brings to their lives. They also give us the strength and determination to keep fighting for them."

Aleksander Čeferin
UEFA President

their lives. They also give us the strength and determination to keep fighting for them."

Protecting minorities against discrimination

The 133 projects detailed in the report have helped 624,377 beneficiaries across all continents, promoting inclusion and hope and protecting minorities against all forms of discrimination.

The foundation gives the most vulnerable children a brighter outlook, using the beautiful game as an incentive for personal development and social cohesion. Supported projects are designed with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in mind, targeting key areas of action:

- Access to sport
- Personal development
- Protection for children with disabilities
- Protection for victims of conflicts
- Gender equality
- Employability
- Healthy lifestyle
- Environmental protection
- Strengthening partnerships
- Infrastructure/equipment

Champions on and off the pitch

In 2022, more than 450 child beneficiaries of projects supported by the foundation were invited to attend one of the prestigious UEFA club competition finals, and 78 of them had the chance to act as player or referee mascots or ball carriers. The happy memories of this unique experience will no doubt remain with them for many years to come.

Funds to help earthquake victims in Türkiye and Syria

UEFA and the UEFA Foundation for Children have made an initial donation of €200,000 to support the vast humanitarian operation assisting victims of the devastating earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria.

UEFA has made a donation of €150,000 to the Turkish Football Federation, while the foundation has committed €50,000 to the Bonyan Organization and Tiafi (Team International Assistance for Integration), two non-governmental organisations working on the front lines of the disaster response in southern Türkiye and Syria.

European football's governing body is also coordinating efforts by its member associations to contribute to a joint UEFA-UEFA Foundation for Children disaster relief fund.

"UEFA is making this initial donation to help the immediate humanitarian response to this horrendous tragedy," said UEFA president Aleksander Čeferin. "I also want to thank our member associations for their quick and compassionate reaction and support offered to those affected by this terrible event."

UEFA is also exploring the organisation of additional fundraising activities during the week of this season's men's Champions League final, which will take place in Istanbul in June. Further details will be announced in the coming weeks.

In 2022, the foundation also welcomed children with cerebral palsy at the UEFA Super Cup in Finland, giving them the opportunity to watch the world's biggest stars in a spectacular season opener and raising awareness of disability football. 🌐

Executive Committee decisions



THE UEFA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE took a number of decisions at its meeting on 25 January, starting with the relocation of the 2023 UEFA Super Cup from Kazan, Russia, to Athens, Greece. The game will be played at the Georgios Karaiskakis Stadium in Piraeus on 16 August.

Looking further ahead, it appointed the Slovak Football Association as host of the 16-team final tournament of the 2023–25 European Under-21 Championship. The matches will be played in eight venues in eight cities across the country in the summer of 2025.

The Executive Committee also approved the discontinuation of the UEFA Return to Play Protocol given the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current overall developments around Europe,

where most, if not all, countries and domestic leagues have completely lifted all the measures previously in place. Following on from this decision, the Executive Committee also decided to discontinue the annexes related to special rules applicable due to COVID-19 that had been included in UEFA competition regulations. UEFA will nonetheless continue to closely monitor the evolution of the pandemic, and, should the situation change significantly, will propose appropriate measures to ensure the safety of all those concerned and the smooth running of its competitions, including, if necessary, reintroducing any relevant obligations and hygiene measures.

UEFA and CONMEBOL sign coach education agreements

LAST DECEMBER, UEFA and CONMEBOL signed an operational agreement on the mutual recognition of coaching qualifications and competencies, and a technical agreement for coach development. The operational agreement sets out the minimum requirements and the procedure for the recognition by UEFA of coaching qualifications issued (currently with a focus on the Pro licence, A licence and Goalkeeper A licence) in accordance with the CONMEBOL Coaching Convention, and by CONMEBOL of coaching qualifications issued in accordance with the UEFA Coaching Convention.

The technical agreement outlines the principles of cooperation and aims to harmonise many of the criteria for coach education and development. As a result, in addition to agreeing to exchange best practices and regularly inform each other on matters relating to coach education, UEFA and CONMEBOL will standardise minimum key requirements such as admission criteria and the standards, duration and content of all diploma courses delivered under their respective coaching conventions. Exchanges will also be organised between coach educators and coaches, as well as conferences, workshops and webinars.

Fostering women in football: 2023 leadership programme launched

THE 2023 WOMEN IN FOOTBALL Leadership Programme has kicked off with talented women from football associations across the world converging in Switzerland. The week-long annual course (6–10 March) is run by FIFA, UEFA and the IMD Business School, and is designed to enhance the leadership skills of female decision-makers and potential senior executives in football. This latest edition brings together an impressive cohort of 36 leaders who hold senior management positions in football, including general secretaries, executive board members and directors. The participants have been proposed by their respective member associations and represent all six football confederations.



150 YEARS SINCE FIRST INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL GAME

On 30 November 2022, the Scottish FA marked 150 years since the first official men’s international football game – Scotland v England at the West of Scotland Cricket Ground in Partick, Glasgow.

On St Andrew’s Day, 30 November 1872, teams representing Scotland and England took to the field in front of thousands of spectators to play out a 0-0 draw – a significant moment in the development of international football. The size of the crowd that day is uncertain; estimates range between 2,500 and 4,000. All 11 players for the Scotland team were selected from the membership of Queen’s Park FC.

In honour of the anniversary, teams of schoolboys and girls from nearby Hyndland Primary School took to a specially laid pitch at the West of Scotland Cricket Ground to walk in the footsteps of history, playing out an entertaining recreation of the original match. Scotland player Craig Gordon surprised the schoolchildren by joining in with the match.

Colin and Alex Taylor, great-grandsons of Joseph Taylor, who represented Scotland that day, attended the event alongside representatives from the Scottish FA, Scottish Football Museum and Queen’s Park. Joseph Taylor played at full-back for Scotland in the first six international matches and featured in all three of Queen’s Park’s Scottish Cup wins between 1874 and 1876.

Birth of modern football

The Scottish FA supported the efforts of the Hampden Collection group of historians, poets and volunteers to arrange the event and match recreation. Graeme Brown from the Hampden Collection teamed up with Glasgow Football Tour to offer historical walking tours of the ‘Three Hampdens’. Graeme has worked to uncover the historical significance of the Hampden Bowling Club as the site of the original Hampden Park, the world’s first enclosed, purpose-built international football ground. The Hampden Collection is also working to have the bowling club and



surrounding areas recognised with UNESCO World Heritage status, and to have it called ‘Football’s Square Mile’. The Scottish FA’s chief executive, Ian Maxwell, said: “It is an honour to visit the West of Scotland Cricket Ground on the 150th anniversary of the first-ever international football game, to walk in the footsteps of the first Scotland team.” Graeme Brown from the Hampden Collection said: “This original ‘Great Match’ provided the ignition switch and launchpad for the explosion of football across Glasgow and Scotland, leading to the trailblazing ‘Scotch Professors’ taking their beautiful game to the world. This match is the foundation stone of modern football, and our #Fitba150 programme ensures it is celebrated and gains the recognition it deserves.” Colin Taylor, great-grandson of Joseph Taylor, said: “Growing up in England, my dad (Joseph’s grandson) always looked out for Queen’s Park’s results. When he passed away, I was inspired to research my family

history and was amazed to discover my great-grandfather’s role in such a significant moment in world football history. It is a humbling experience to stand where he did, 150 years later.” Colin Mair, chairman of the West of Scotland Cricket Club, said: “The West of Scotland Cricket Club has always been very conscious and extremely proud of our Hamilton Crescent ground’s heritage and its highly significant place in Scottish and world sporting history. Very few grounds anywhere can have held internationals in four different sports – cricket, football, hockey and rugby. We are delighted to welcome representatives and supporters of Scottish football to the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the first-ever football international on St Andrew’s Day.” The milestone date was marked as part of the Scottish FA’s calendar of events celebrating 150 years of Scotland’s national game, including the founding of the Scottish FA and the first season of the Scottish Cup. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

ANDORRA www.faf.ad

A REFEREEING PIONEER AMONG SMALL COUNTRIES

IVÁN MOURE


 The Andorran Football Federation now boasts one more international referee and three more assistant referees on the FIFA list for 2023. Antoine Chiaramonti – named by the clubs as the best Andorran referee last season – joins Luis do Nascimento as an international referee, while Rui Miquel Maciel, Ainhoa Fernández and Andrés Vilanova join Joan Guiu and Bruno Filipe Parente as international assistant referees. This increase makes Andorra a pioneer among small countries in terms of refereeing as one of the few of them to have more than one international referee.



AUSTRIA www.oefb.at

INAUGURAL COURSE FOR POTENTIAL FUTURE NATIONAL TEAM PLAYERS

MICHAEL GRASWALD

 In November, the Austrian FA (ÖFB) ran its first-ever course for potential men's senior national team players. Head coach Ralf Rangnick

and his coaching team, along with Under-21 national team coach Werner Gregoritsch and the ÖFB's sporting director, Peter Schöttel, spent a week assessing potential new recruits born between 2000 and 2005. "We had numerous conversations with the national youth team coaches, who have known the players for years, before deciding who to call up. And when I watched them train and saw how committed they were, I knew we had a chosen an excellent group," said Rangnick. The national team coach was looking for two things in particular: "By working with them

face to face, we wanted to get an idea of potential national team players of the future. At the same time, it was a chance for us to teach them about national team values and principles." The coaching team were very clear about what they hoped the sessions would achieve: "The idea was for the lads to get a feel for how we want the national team to play," said Rangnick. "The coaching team showed the players what they expect by playing video clips from the match against Italy," explained Gregoritsch. "I don't think we've ever had a senior national team coach show so much interest in up-and-coming players. This can only be a good thing." Matthias Braunöder, the Under-21 team captain, agreed: "Every player dreams of being called up for the national team. This was a great opportunity for us to show the national team coach what we can do."



CROATIA www.hns-cff.hr

LEGENDARY COACH MIROSLAV 'ĆIRO' BLAŽEVIĆ MOURNED

NIKA BAHTIJAREVIĆ

 Miroslav 'Ćiro' Blažević, the legendary head coach who led the Vatreni to their first World Cup bronze medal, passed away in early February after a long illness. He was 87. Blažević took on the role of head coach of the Croatian men's national team in 1994, and he will forever be remembered as the head coach who launched the Vatreni on to the world stage at EURO '96 in England and the 1998 World Cup in France. Among his many other coaching successes are the historic championship title he won with Dinamo Zagreb in 1982, his time as head coach of the men's national teams of Iran and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and his time coaching Rijeka, Osijek, Varteks, Hajduk, Zagreb, Grasshoppers, Nantes and PAOK. "Although we were aware that 'Ćiro' was bravely fighting a serious illness, his death still came as a shock to all of us



because he always seemed larger than life. As a coach, he was behind two legendary successes that made him 'the coach of all coaches' – Croatia's World Cup bronze medal and Dinamo Zagreb's championship title in 1982. The Croatian Football Federation will remember him as one of the greatest coaches in the history of Croatian football," said Marijan

Kustić, president of the Croatian Football Federation. A memorial service for Blažević was held in Zagreb on 15 February, attended by a long list of Croatia football legends, as well as by representatives of UEFA, FIFA and many other football organisations that Blažević left his mark on.

CZECHIA facr.fotbal.cz

PRAISE FOR THE NATIONAL DEAF FUTSAL TEAM

MARTIN GREGOR

 The Football Association of the Czech Republic (FAČR) has been supporting its men's national deaf futsal team for a long time, and the team's great success in qualifying for the 5th World Deaf Futsal Championships in Brazil this coming November earned them the prize for the best grassroots social event of 2022. The prize was awarded at a grassroots football gala evening in January, where the FAČR honoured the best players and achievements within non-professional football and futsal. One of the FAČR's objectives is to break down barriers in sport and help everybody to fulfil their potential regardless of their level, age, ability or disability so that they can inspire others.

The association currently has 19 ongoing social projects. One of its prominent partners in this regard is the Czech deaflympic committee, which the FAČR has been assisting with preparations for the World Championships in Brazil. The Czech men's senior football team also got involved in supporting the deaf athletes in September 2022 before their UEFA Nations League match against Portugal, at which the pre-match press conference was also interpreted in sign language. The team also donated 20 tickets for the match against Portugal to children with hearing disabilities. "All children, without exception, who play football deserve our support.



And children with disabilities deserve it even more. When we learned that children with hearing disabilities were coming to support us, we were all really pleased. Hopefully, events like this will help draw attention to these small big heroes," said captain Tomáš Souček.

DENMARK

www.dbu.dk

BETTER FOOTBALL OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGES

MATIAS GABRIEL GABAY-LARSEN



‘En del af holdet’ (Part of the Team) is the name of a new project that aims to provide better football opportunities for children with disabilities and/or special needs in



Martin Hungeberg

Denmark. Currently, fewer than 10% of children with disabilities or diagnoses in Denmark play sport in a club. The Danish Football Association and Parasport Denmark are working together on the project, which is also supported by the Danish men’s and women’s national teams. In June 2022, the men’s national team received the minister of culture’s sports prize and a grant of 100,000 Danish kroner (€13,400). The team’s three captains, Simon Kjær, Kasper Schmeichel and Christian Eriksen, decided to donate the prize money towards efforts to get children with various challenges into sports clubs. “Football can provide unique experiences and a sense of community that mean a lot to all children, including children with challenges. We want all

children to experience football’s solidarity and community regardless of their background, and that is why we are happy to pass the money on to the Part of the Team project,” said the trio of captains. The project aims to create a tailored football concept that encourages more children and young people to participate in football and remain engaged in the sport. The project has received a grant of over 3.6 million Danish kroner (€483,000) from the Novo Nordisk Foundation, which will be used to train coaches, provide equipment and organise local activities. The project also plans to develop a football festival concept to give children an opportunity to experience football and meet like-minded others across clubs and schools.

ESTONIA

www.jalgpall.ee

INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN WOMEN’S FOOTBALL AS A LEGACY OF WOMEN’S UNDER-17 FINALS

EVA-MARIA KRIISA



In May, Estonia will host the final round of the European Women’s Under-17 Championship in the host cities of Tallinn, Tartu and Võru. Eight top European teams will participate in the tournament, including Estonia, who qualified automatically as the host nation. The final draw, when the eight teams will be allocated into two groups of four, will take place on 13 April. It will be the first time that the Estonian FA has hosted or even taken part in a UEFA women’s final tournament. The event will provide an opportunity to raise the popularity of women’s football and create a tournament legacy

in the process. Two main goals have been set to support the development of women’s football in Estonia: to increase the number of female amateur players and female coaches, and to increase the professional competency of female coaches. Throughout the year, the Estonian FA conducts interschool football tournaments, football festivals and school visits in cooperation with clubs across the country. The activities are aimed at girls from first to ninth grade. For the UEFA final tournament, three football festivals will take place ahead of each matchday in all three host cities.



Katariina Peetson

The association also aims to start a girls’ Under-9 league in 2024. On the coaching side, three potential female coach educators will participate in the national football coach education system for the first time. An education programme will begin in April that has been specially created and adapted for future female coaches. The course will give them an initial overview of the profession and is free for all participants.

FINLAND

www.palloliitto.fi

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH ON FOOTBALL IN ONE DATABASE

TARU NYHOLM



Last November, the Football Association of Finland, in cooperation with the University of Jyväskylä, launched a new database that compiles Finnish scientific research on football, futsal and other football-related formats in one place. “The database makes Finnish scientific research on the game more accessible and easier to find for everyone,” said Henri Louste from the FA of Finland. Today, the database contains nearly 1,800 items of football-related scientific research, covering scientific articles, dissertations, books and all types of theses from 1959 to the present day. Most of them are available online free of charge. Football as a scientific field is interdisciplinary, which is reflected in

the wide variety of research subjects. Articles in the database can be sorted by five different themes – playing and coaching football, following football, football as a hobby or a career, football clubs and leagues, and football in culture and society. Louste believes that the diversity of the database benefits many stakeholders in Finnish football. “Students and scientists are able to use the database for their own football-related research and identify where further research is needed, while those involved in the game in a more practical manner are now better able to find the science most relevant to their own particular field in the game,” Louste said. Roughly 1,300 of the works in the database – as well as the database itself



Palloliitto

– are in Finnish, with the remainder mainly in English or Swedish. The database can be accessed at: tutkimustietokanta.palloliitto.fi

GERMANY

www.dfb.de

STARS JOIN YOUNG AMATEURS AT THE DFB CAMPUS

NIELS BARNHOFER



Every child dreams of stepping into the shoes of a famous professional footballer for a day. Through its new Best Day initiative, the German Football Association (DFB) is helping to make this dream come true for many young amateur players. The young footballers visit the DFB campus in Frankfurt, where they catch a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes, take part in a training session led by DFB youth national team or academy coaches and have the chance to sit behind the microphone in the press conference room. Their excitement is palpable as they make their way into the national team dressing rooms. In short, they experience what it is like to be one of their idols for three hours and enjoy a truly unforgettable day.

In 2022, more than 100 young amateur footballers visited the DFB campus during the project’s pilot phase. Following this successful trial period, during which the

likes of Benedikt Höwedes, Celia Šašić and Philipp Lahm took to the pitch with the up-and-coming footballers, sessions will be held regularly in 2023.

A total of 25 sessions will be held at the DFB campus for amateur youth team players between the ages of 10 and 16, with clubs invited to apply online at fussball.de. Meanwhile, special editions for referees from the amateur game, for example, are also in the pipeline, giving participants the chance to experience their own ‘best day’.



DFB-Yulia Perekopalko

GIBRALTAR

www.gibraltarfifa.com

MID-TERM CAMP PROVES ANOTHER OVERWHELMING SUCCESS

STEVEN GONZALEZ

With the February mid-term break now a feature in Gibraltar's annual educational calendar, the Gibraltar FA's youth development team set up a camp for children of all footballing abilities up to the age of 12 during the recent school holidays.

The camp ran sessions at the Victoria Stadium every morning (except the bank holiday Monday) during the February school holidays and saw more than 300 children attend daily.

Split into their school year groups, from reception right up to year 8, the children were able to enjoy fun-themed football mixing learning and competitive sessions, with the emphasis on enjoyment, all run by Gibraltar FA coaches.

In a change to recent camps, the mid-term camp was split into two,



with the younger children (aged up to school year 3) taking part in the first of the morning sessions, and the older children (years 4–8) attending the second session of the day.

The camp also proved an excellent learning opportunity for the Gibraltar FA's young new coaches, who were paired up with more experienced colleagues to run the sessions, allowing them to gain valuable experience.

Additionally, among the coaches were current Gibraltar internationals such as goalkeeper Dayle Coleing, all of whom proved to be a huge hit with the youngsters.

The Gibraltar FA's youth football coordinator, Tiago Costa, was thrilled with the way the week went: "It was a really good camp. We made some changes to our usual format by splitting the camp into two sessions but importantly, the kids have loved it, they enjoyed it and they all had fun, which is the main thing! We are already planning ahead and looking forward to our Easter camp, which will take place in the next set of school holidays, and we can't wait to see all of our young stars enjoying their football once again!"

ITALY

www.figc.it

CHANGES TO THE OFFSIDE RULE TESTED IN UNDER-18 LEAGUE

DIEGO ANTENOZIO

The second phase of testing proposed changes to the offside rule is under way in the Italian professional Under-18 league, a competition overseen by the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) junior and schools sector. Instigated by FIFA in spring 2022, the project, developed by Arsène Wenger, FIFA's chief of global football development, examines the possibility of amending certain parameters of the Laws of the Game such that the referee would only stop play when there was a visible gap between the attacking player and the second-to-last opponent. In this situation, the attacker would be in a more advanced position towards the goal than under the existing law. The objective is to encourage attacking play and increase

the probability of goals being scored, with a view to making football more exciting to watch.

The methodology of analysing the results has two strands: a qualitative element, which involves gathering the opinions of players, coaches and referees on aspects of match strategy; and a quantitative element, relying on performance indicators to evaluate the actual impact of the tests. Cumulative data from the first phase of testing, conducted about a year ago in Italy and the Netherlands, showed a limited effect on how the game is played but a general increase in goal-scoring opportunities. "The FIGC is at the forefront of the development of football," said the federation's president, Gabriele Gravina. "We have indicated that we are willing to

continue testing in the Under-18 league because innovation is part of our DNA. We are not afraid of change, whether on or off the pitch. In close cooperation with FIFA, we will continue to study the effects of a change in the offside law that will make football an even more exciting spectator sport."

Matteo Trefoloni, technical director of the Italian referees association, explained that the suggested change would mean that a player would no longer be considered offside if any body part with which they could score a goal was level with the second-to-last opponent. The FIGC and the Italian football community have confirmed their commitment to improving the game through technological innovation, demonstrated by the fact that the federation's board approved the introduction of semi-automated offside technology in Serie A at its meeting on 27 January, following on from the first test of the video assistant referee (VAR) system in September 2016 at a friendly between Italy and France.

KAZAKHSTAN

www.kff.kz

UEFA CERTIFICATE IN FOOTBALL MANAGEMENT COURSE LAUNCHED

MURATBEK BIMANOV

The UEFA Certificate in Football Management (CFM) has been launched in Kazakhstan as part of the UEFA Assist and UEFA Academy programmes.

Representatives of regional football associations, futsal associations and football clubs in Kazakhstan, as well as specialists from football associations in Azerbaijan, Germany, Ireland, Türkiye and Wales are taking part in the event in Astana, which is led by experts from UEFA and the universities of Birkbeck (London, England), Bocconi (Italy), Glasgow (Scotland), Poitiers (France) and Lausanne (Switzerland).

The CFM course consists of six core modules covering all areas of football club and association management: finance, marketing, communications, operations management, human resources and strategic development. The course will consist of 350 hours of study over nine months.

This course is one of the main stages in the implementation of educational projects to improve the managerial competencies of football specialists in accordance with the Kazakhstan Football Federation's (KFF) strategy up to 2034.

Close cooperation with UEFA in all areas of football development underlines UEFA's great trust in the KFF.



The KFF president, Adlet Barmenkulov, said: "I want to express my deep gratitude to the UEFA president, Aleksander Čeferin, for supporting the Kazakhstan Football Federation. The organisation of such a large-scale course as the UEFA CFM in Kazakhstan is of great importance for Kazakhstani sports managers and is a key element in the development strategy of Kazakhstani football. The UEFA CFM is the must-have foundation programme for anyone working in a football organisation. I am sure that this course will not only develop the professional

competencies of our specialists but also strengthen cooperation and friendship between associations."

Birkbeck professor Khamil Shon said: "The purpose of the educational course is to familiarise participants with the global football system, as well as to develop the human capital to ensure efficient use of financial resources. We can see that the Kazakhstan Football Federation is very progressive in this regard and is trying to develop the possibilities for managing and organising football in Kazakhstan."

KOSOVO

www.ffk-kosova.com

PLAYMAKERS MOTIVATES GIRLS TO LOVE FOOTBALL FROM AN EARLY AGE

MAKI BAJRAMI

The Football Federation of Kosovo (FFK) is making sure that everyone has the opportunity to play football regardless of age or gender. Participation in the most popular sport in the world is getting special treatment this year. Through a project made possible by UEFA Playmakers, we are

enabling 5–8-year-old girls to learn about football and experience the emotions that come with it, as well as acquiring important social and physical skills. Girls from all parts of Kosovo are being introduced to football through movement, play and the magic of Disney storytelling.


The programme is proving extremely popular with girls and their parents, who have expressed their gratitude to the FFK for organising these activities.

We hope the programme will inspire girls to remain involved with the game and develop a lifelong love for football.

LATVIA www.lff.lv

VAR DEBUTS IN LATVIA

TOMS ĀRMANIS

 The current season of the Latvian men's premier league (Virslīga), which started in March, marks the introduction of the video assistant referee (VAR) system in Latvian football. During the first months of the new season, VAR will be used once every round, but further into the season the hope is to extend it to 72 matches in total.

The number of games with VAR is dictated by the fact that currently there is only one minibus adapted for VAR use in Latvia, so it can realistically only be used at one game per day. When choosing which matches to cover, two factors come into play – an equal number of matches with VAR for all teams, and the sporting principle.


“The experience gained in these matches, both on the pitch and in the VAR role, will be useful to our referees in order to be given more international appointments. Over time, VAR will gradually become the norm everywhere and our referees need to have experience in using VAR as soon as possible,” said Andris Treimanis, Latvia's top referee, who is responsible for the introduction of VAR in the Virslīga.

Vadims Ļašenko, president of the Latvian Football Federation, added: “The level of our premier league has grown significantly in recent years and our referees need further help with their growth, not only in traditional ways – seminars, training and exchanges – but also in the form of state-of-the-art technological solutions.”

LITHUANIA www.lff.lt

WALKING FOOTBALL GATHERS ENTHUSIASTS

ROBERTAS KAŽDANAS

 On 8 February, the inaugural ‘Futbolas vaikščiojant’ (Walking Football) tournament took place at the Lithuanian Football Federation's training centre in Kaunas. The event attracted not only older enthusiasts but also participants with special needs.

Walking football is a physical activity that people can enjoy despite their age or mobility issues. Step by step, it has gained in popularity across Lithuania as a way to play football at an older age.



As a result of the growing interest, four walking football courses were organised last year by the Lithuanian Football Federation's grassroots project manager, Martynas Karpavičius. Public health officers across the country took an active part in the seminars, and after returning to their local communities, they started to test and promote the game. Walking football activities have since been set up in at least ten district municipalities. These led, in turn, to the walking football tournament in Kaunas.

One of the public health officers, Viktorija Sorė, shared her impressions: “I reckon that walking football is a great initiative, especially for older people. The participants I brought together were very happy and said they would like to participate again in the future. We encourage pupils to invite their grandparents to the activities, and it is football that allows everyone to have a fun and active time.”

MALTA www.mfa.com.mt

A CONSULTATION PROCESS

PAMELA SCHEMBRI

 Improving the sustainability and standard of domestic competitions represents one of the strategic objectives of the Malta FA. After the implementation of reforms in the sporting regulatory framework and the club licensing regulations, the Malta FA is once again reaching out to the main stakeholders in Maltese football for their position on various football matters, which will provide the basis for analysis and discussion in the coming months.

This consultation process is being coordinated by the association's Football Stakeholders Committee, which has launched a survey throughout its stakeholder groups to gather positions on the different areas of interest related to the sporting and competition regulatory framework. The aim of the survey is to provide insights and suggestions that will enable the Malta FA to better assess the impact certain decisions can have on the football ecosystem before proposing any changes.

“The input of the stakeholders is essential for the Malta FA to develop a comprehensive understanding of the different positions and insights on key topics affecting our football, such as regulatory aspects and domestic competitions,” said the Malta FA president, Bjorn Vassallo.

“The creation of the Football Stakeholders Committee underlines the association's commitment to reach out to all stakeholders, offering them a platform to present and discuss their proposals, while enhancing the decision-making process.”


The outcomes and views of every organisation will be analysed and discussed during Football Stakeholders Committee meetings, and the main recommendations will eventually be presented to the Malta FA, with the ultimate objective being to improve the standard of domestic competitions.

In line with its consultative role, the committee discusses matters directly with various stakeholders.

NORTHERN IRELAND www.irishfa.com

APP IS A FIRST FOR FOOTBALL IN NORTHERN IRELAND

NIGEL TILSON

 The Irish Football Association has launched an app to help players, fans, clubs and match officials to keep up to date with the action in matches across Northern Ireland. The free Football NI app provides users with information about fixtures, results, team line-ups, match events and other statistics for all affiliated football in the country.

The app can be used to track teams, players, matches and competitions. It enables players to check their individual profiles and users to receive notifications whenever match events related to their chosen favourites are recorded in the Irish FA's Comet football management system.

Once referees complete their post-match administration, the app automatically populates the relevant information; however, there is also functionality available to enable clubs to update match events in real time during fixtures.




Clubs have the ability to insert goalscorers, substitutions and yellow or red cards, but it remains the responsibility of the referee to complete the reasons for any disciplinary sanctions. Appointed referees are also responsible for checking that any match information input by clubs concurs with their own records before declaring the status of the match as ‘played’.

Andrew Johnston, head of competitions and player status at the Irish FA, said: “The launch of Football NI is a genuine first for Northern Ireland and it reaffirms the association's commitment to being a digital-first organisation as outlined in its current corporate strategy.”

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND www.fai.ie

FEMALE COACHES ON THE RISE

GARETH MAHER

 The number of female coaches in the Republic of Ireland earning UEFA qualifications is at an all-time high – and is set to increase even further. The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) is facilitating the coaching progression of women by hosting new women-only UEFA coaching courses in 2023.

There will be women-only UEFA C and UEFA B diploma courses, which will help to elevate participants to elite-level coaching.

The number of women holding a UEFA licence rose from ten in 2016 to 330 by January 2023. Twenty members of the current women's national team are also involved in UEFA courses in conjunction with the Football Association of Ireland.

The FAI's head of coach education, Niall O'Regan, said: “The key to the success of the development of the number of women working in football is the research we completed in 2016,

which identified the specific barriers to the number of women working in coaching. From that research, it was clear that the development of women-only courses plays a significant part in breaking down barriers. We have seen the number of coaches from the women-only courses progressing in their careers and getting full-time employment in football as managers and coaches. Over the past few years, 16 of the FAI's full-time female employees have completed women-only coach education. This is really important because it can't be just a numbers game; it is all about developing quality coaches and then ensuring there are roles and opportunities to go with the qualifications.”

The FAI hosted its annual conference for female coaches in Donegal in February, with women's national team manager Vera Pauw and the FAI's new head of women's and girls' football, Eileen Gleeson, among those who delivered engaging presentations.



ROMANIA

www.frf.ro

A STRATEGY FOR AMATEUR FOOTBALL AND FUTSAL

PAUL ZAHARIA

With the EURO 2024 qualifying campaign kicking off at the end of March, the men’s senior national team is in the spotlight again. Meanwhile, far away from the public eye, amateur football will be continuing to nurture the professional game, as will futsal, in which Romania has started to become a regular at UEFA final tournaments, including last year’s Under-19 Futsal EURO.

To support development in these two areas, the Romanian Football Federation (FRF) has just adopted a three-year strategy for amateur football and a three-year futsal development plan.

The amateur football strategy is built on four pillars: participation, ecosystem, games and formats, and education and training.

For each pillar, a key objective has been defined.

1. Consolidation of the pathway that players follow, especially from school to club, as well ensuring the most suitable education and training by using the age-adapted methodology.
 2. Implementation of a development programme for all Romanian clubs to ensure good-quality infrastructure, first-aid courses and safeguarding.
 3. Improvement of digital skills, especially in order to interact directly with players and parents, as well as to map all existing clubs and facilities in Romania.
 4. Consolidation of the coach education programme and recruitment of more female coaches and coach educators.
- Talking about the amateur football strategy, the FRF president, Răzvan Burleanu, said: “We believe in the power of football to inspire action; we are confident that football can offer opportunities for all; and we also

strongly believe that amateur football is the basis for spotting talent and laying the foundation for high-level performance. That is why the FRF is committed to leading this collective project. A collective effort, an extended partnership, is crucial if we are to succeed.”

The futsal development plan, the first of its kind in Romania, was drawn up in consultation with all the country’s futsal clubs and with the aim of having a unified approach at national level.

Its clear mission is to ensure that every young player has the opportunity to play futsal as part of their overall development. It should also become the first option for youngsters who want to play indoor football. To achieve that mission, the plan targets increased participation, broader communication and visibility, more futsal competitions and improved education and training.

SLOVAKIA

www.futbalsfz.sk

ROMAN PIVARNÍK APPOINTED AS TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

PETER SURIN

Slovak football has had a new technical director since 1 February. He is former player and long-time coach Roman Pivarník, who played in five leagues in his time (Czechoslovakia, Czechia, Austria, Israel and Germany) and has coached teams in Czechia, Slovakia, Saudi Arabia, Austria and Qatar.

“I’ve spent some time thinking about what direction my professional life should take. Outside my playing and coaching experience, I’m also a graduate of the faculty of physical education and sport at Prague’s Charles University. I have spent decades carefully observing the work of excellent coaches and worked with many capable experts, and I truly think I have gained a lot of knowledge. I have worked

with every age group, moving gradually from the youngest up to senior level. The position of technical director comes to me almost naturally,” he said shortly after his appointment. His contract with the Slovak FA runs until the end of the year to begin with, but if everyone is happy with what he does and how, there will be no need to wait until December before extending his contract. “Being in this position has its difficulties; it’s a long-distance race,” he said, stressing the need for time.

Even though it is 12 years since Pivarník last worked in Slovakian football, he has kept a close eye on its progress.

A large part of his time in his new role will be spent travelling and meeting football people all over the country.



His new role will encompass all the national teams up to the Under-21s, as well as futsal. He will also work with the men’s senior national team coach, Francesco Calzone.

SLOVENIA

www.nzs.si

‘COUNT TO 11’ CAMPAIGN TARGETS HATE SPEECH

MATJAZ KRAJNIK

Hate speech has become a worldwide problem in recent years, with social media and digital outlets full of hateful comments often aimed at a person’s self-worth, integrity and beliefs. Sadly, the situation is no different in football, a sport so full of emotions that hate speech has become almost a normal part of that world. But it should not be like that.

To do something about it, the Football Association of Slovenia has started a corporate responsibility project with the men’s premier league in an attempt to tackle hate speech on digital platforms. Together with professionals who deal with similar topics on a day-to-day basis, the association will organise workshops for the clubs’ youth teams and their parents to help them deal with and avoid online hate speech. The campaign was launched in mid-March with a

promotional video showing a boy getting hurt trying to stop a shot when playing football and his peers making fun of him for it.

The campaign has received support from UEFA, which “thanks the Slovenian Football Association for its leadership and commitment in tackling discrimination

in accordance with UEFA’s football sustainability strategy. We are energised by this initiative and send our best wishes to the Football Association of Slovenia for a successful campaign. UEFA will continue engaging all European football stakeholders in the years to come to protect the game we all love.”



SWEDEN

www.svenskfotboll.se

DIGITAL RECRUITMENT BRINGS IN NEW REFEREES

ANDREAS NILSSON

Refereeing football can be joy, appreciation and love for the game. It can also be jeers, sneers and threats. Göran Engsoo knows all about it. As a young central defender, he was every referee’s nightmare: whiny, angry and questioning every single call. To temper this behaviour, his club demanded he take a refereeing course himself – the start of a 28-year career as a top-flight ref.

Today, Göran Engsoo is head of refereeing at the Swedish FA, and responsible for bringing in new recruits

to fill the gaping holes in the number of referees. The most recent campaign was a big success that was built on changing a few things:

1. Instead of training new refs in the middle of the off-season, i.e. in January in Sweden, courses were given in early spring, once the snow had gone and football in general came back to life.

2. Marketing to recruit referees went digital, with advertising in social media, where the young people are, but also with QR-code posters put up in 500 clubhouses throughout Sweden.

“We were hoping for 300 new prospects through the campaign. We got 1,700 and 500 of them have already received training. Digital recruitment was

important but we also need to offer more online training for the theoretical parts,” said Engsoo.

“Recruiting referees is also only half the job; retaining them is just as important. We need to provide mentoring and help young refs to build a network that will keep them in football for a long time. Because in the end, if there’s no ref, there’s no game.”



SWITZERLAND

www.football.ch

REFEREE TRAINING CAMP IN GRAN CANARIA

MARTINA KÜPPER



During the winter break, the Swiss Football Association took its referees to sunny Gran Canaria to get ready for the resumption of play in Switzerland's top leagues.

The weather conditions in Maspalomas were ideal. A total of 61 referees and assistant referees from the Swiss Football League, the Promotion League and female international referee talent pools completed their preparations for the second half of the season. Focusing on the question 'Am I professional?', the participants were put through their paces



with a variety of exercises to hone their skills and abilities.

The densely packed daily programme included on-pitch fitness training, practical exercises at two VAR stations, theory lessons, workshops, presentations, in-depth discussions on various topics and media training.

UEFA's chief refereeing officer, Roberto

Rosetti, visited the two-day camp, where he presented the international referees with their 2023 badges and held talks with representatives of the Swiss FA's elite-refereeing department.

"All the participants put the time in Gran Canaria to good use in preparation for the second half of the season. Everyone was highly motivated and engaged," said Dani Wermelinger, director of elite refereeing, after the event, which was the 33rd camp to be held in Gran Canaria.

"There were no injuries, the weather was great, the facilities were perfect and the organisation was impeccable. All in all, it was a huge success. In answer to the question 'Am I professional?', we can confidently say that all the participants continue to demonstrate a high level of professionalism," he concluded.

WALES

www.faw.cymru

FAR-REACHING CHANGES APPROVED TO MAKE FOOTBALL IN WALES FIT FOR THE FUTURE

MELISSA PALMER



The Football Association of Wales (FAW) has approved far-reaching changes across its area associations that will lead to improved equality and diversity in governance, investment in grassroots football and increased sustainability.

The 30 recommendations of the independent Area Association Review, which aim to be delivered in the next 18 months, build on the 80 recommendations adopted by the FAW in 2021, as detailed in its Sustainable Association for the Future report.

Key recommendations of the review include:

- Appropriately resourced regional structures that meet the needs of all grassroots football competition across Wales;
- Modern, diverse and well-governed associations with the creation of skills-based boards that are diverse, relevant and effective, with improved decision-making;



- A full-time general manager in each association with a formal link to the core FAW grassroots team, which leads on football development;
 - Dedicated grassroots support.
- The FAW's chief executive, Noel Mooney, said: "Investment in grassroots and ensuring that football in Cymru [Wales] is fit for the future are the

key focuses of our Ein Cymru [Our Wales] strategy.

"The far-reaching changes that have now been approved by the board are a clear demonstration of the FAW's commitment to building a diverse, skilled and welcoming football family that promotes excellence, integrity, inclusivity and fair play."

APRIL**3 April, Hungary**

European Under-17 Championship:
final draw

4 April, Lisbon

Executive Committee meeting

5 April, Lisbon

Ordinary UEFA Congress

6 April, London

Women's Finalissima

10–19 April

Futsal World Cup: European qualifying
main round play-offs

11/12 April

UEFA Champions League: quarter-finals
(first legs)

13 April

UEFA Europa League and UEFA
Europa Conference League:
quarter-finals (first legs)

13 April, Estonia

European Women's Under-17
Championship: final draw

18/19 April

UEFA Champions League: quarter-finals
(return legs)

19 April, Malta

European Under-19 Championship:
final draw

20 April

UEFA Europa League and UEFA
Europa Conference League:
quarter-finals (return legs)

21–24 April, Geneva

UEFA Youth League: finals

22/23 April

UEFA Women's Champions League:
semi-finals (first legs)

26 April, Belgium

European Women's Under-19
Championship: final draw

29/30 April

UEFA Women's Champions League:
semi-finals (return legs)

MAY**2 May, Nyon**

UEFA Women's Nations League:
group stage draw

5–7 May, Palma de Majorca

UEFA Futsal Champions League: finals

9/10 May

UEFA Champions League: semi-finals
(first legs)

11 May

UEFA Europa League and UEFA Europa
Conference League: semi-finals (first legs)

14–26 May, Estonia

European Women's Under-17
Championship: final tournament

16/17 May

UEFA Champions League: semi-finals
(return legs)

17 May – 2 June, Hungary

European Under-17 Championship:
final tournament

18 May

UEFA Europa League and UEFA Europa
Conference League: semi-finals (return legs)

31 May, Budapest

Executive Committee meeting
UEFA Europa League: final

JUNE**3 June, Eindhoven**

UEFA Women's Champions League: final

7 June, Prague

UEFA Europa Conference League: final

9–17 June, Galicia

UEFA Regions' Cup: final tournament

10 June, Istanbul

UEFA Champions League: final

12–20 June

European Under-21 Championship (2023–25):
qualifying matches

13 June

UEFA Champions League: preliminary
round draw

14–18 June, Netherlands

UEFA Nations League: finals

16 June

European Women's Under-19 and
Under-17 Championships: round 1 draws

16/17 June

EURO 2024: European Qualifiers: matchday 3

19/20 June

EURO 2024: European Qualifiers: matchday 4

20 June

UEFA Champions League and
UEFA Europa Conference League:
first qualifying round draws

21 June – 8 July, Georgia and Romania

European Under-21 Championship (2021–23):
final tournament

22 June

UEFA Champions League and
UEFA Europa Conference League:
second qualifying round draws

30 June

UEFA Women's Champions League:
preliminary and first round draws

NOTICES

- **Dragan Džajić** has been elected as the new president of the Football Association of Serbia.
- **Levan Kobiasvili** has been re-elected as president of the Georgian Football Federation.
- **Just Spee** has been re-elected as president of the Royal Netherlands Football Association.
- **Edgaras Stankevičius** has been elected as the new president of the Lithuanian Football Federation.
- **Moshe Zuares** has been elected as the new president of the Israel Football Association.

OBITUARY

Former president of the Italian Football Federation **Carlo Tavecchio** has died at the age of 79. He was a member of the UEFA Youth and Amateur Football Committee from 2002 to 2014.



ONLINE ABUSE LEAVES A SCAR

#REALSCARS



RESPECT