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Polish football's racism problem

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Racism may never be fully eradicated from football, but what I found during an investigation into the problem in Poland was truly shocking.

And this in the country that will co-host the 2012 European Football Championship.

I found racism that was strident and in your face in a way it never was in Britain, even in the very bad old days of English football in the 1970s and 80s.

Then, as one of the regular football reporters at the [Sunday Times](#), I spent my Saturdays at football matches and had several first-hand experiences of racism.

Much of it was very unpleasant. But in Poland it was on a different, deeper and much nastier level.

In a street in central Warsaw, not far from the hotel where I was staying, there was a lot of graffiti about 'white power' and the Ku Klux Klan, all associated with the city's main team [Legia Warsaw](#).

And this wasn't the only place where the problem was evident.

One evening, as myself, my cameraman and producer were going about central Warsaw filming our piece for [Inside Sport](#), we were approached by a skinhead who said he was a Legia fan and made it clear that he was a racist and keen to broadcast his view.

[Watch Mihir Bose's Inside Sport report on Polish football](#)

As I interviewed him he told me to go back to my country, meaning India, the land of my birth. He would not look me in the eye as we spoke and at the end of my interview, refused to shake my hand.

He may have been an exhibitionist and, I must stress, Polish passers by were embarrassed by what he said and tried to distance themselves from him.

But talking to many people, including those running football in Poland, he did not seem untypical of a certain section of Polish fans.

Indeed, the president of Legia Warsaw, Leszek Miklas, an impressive and honest man, readily admitted that 15-20% of his club's fans were neo-Nazis.

Legia are banned from Europe because of the violence of their fans. His explanation for such deep-seated racism was that Poles are not used to seeing people of different colours or cultures in their country.

Perhaps the most chilling example of how embedded racism is in Polish football was when I met Jacek Purski of [Never Again](#), the Polish equivalent of [Kick it Out](#).

We had agreed to meet in the Stalin-built [Palace of Culture and Science](#) in central Warsaw, where I expected his offices to be located.

No he said, he did not have his office there or anywhere else in Warsaw. Partly through lack of funding but, more importantly, if they had an office, Jacek was fearful it would be a firebomb target for racists.

We then spent some time driving round Warsaw to find a cafe where we could talk in peace.

He showed me photographs taken during Polish football matches in the last two years where brazen images of neo-Nazi symbols had been displayed.

This not only included the White Legion banner of the infamous skinheads of Legia Warsaw but, most chillingly, a picture of away fans in a lower division league match forming a human swastika in the stands.

He then told me the story of the black player who had been hospitalised by a third division club's supporters, despite scoring two goals. And all because they did not want an Afro-Caribbean in their side.

He told me that I, because of my brown skin, would not be safe in more than two or three grounds in Poland.

I was made very welcome at Legia Warsaw. But there were areas of the ground I was told I could not go into because of the colour of my skin.

This was confirmed when I met Dixon Choto, the Zimbabwean international who plays for Legia Warsaw.

Before meeting him I had spent some time watching his team-mates train. This could have been a training session anywhere - people of different colours united by football.

But, as we walked round the stadium, he pointed to a stand where his friends and family were not welcome because of the colour of their skin.

He also told me I should not go there as I would not be safe. He also said he had his share of monkey chants and bananas being tossed at him. This happened more at away matches now.

Worse still, he said when he reacted to such racism on the field of play, Polish football authorities called him to a disciplinary hearing, where the opposition manager said he did not hear the chants, despite being heard loud and clear by Dixon's wife, who was at home watching on television.

I went to a Legia Warsaw home match at the Polish Army Stadium, where the team fielded black players without any visible problems, although I was not able to go anywhere near the stand, which takes up a whole side of the ground, where the 'ultras' gather.

Before the match I had been to a bar near the ground where the hardcore supporters meet.

It was made clear by some fans, who feared for my safety and that of my crew, I should leave.

I managed to speak to these moderate fans who did not deny that racism existed but insisted that Poland was not alone in having this scourge.

So what does this mean for 2012?

Dixon told me frankly that Poland was not ready to host Euro 2012. Purski agreed, although he hoped the tournament would highlight the issue and help the country tackle its racism problem.

Polish competition organisers accept there is a problem at league level, but say national team supporters do not display racist behaviour, despite photographic evidence I was shown that suggested the contrary.

They are confident that 2012 will pass without incident.

Poland needs heavy financial investment to get its infrastructure ready for 2012. The Polish media are already expressing worries about how this will be done.

But tackling such deep-seated racism in time to welcome a Europe of all colours may be much more difficult than building roads and stadia.



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http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/mihirbose/2008/04/polish_footballs_racism_proble.html