

# Ex-star Boniek leads f

By Rafal Pankowski for NEVER AGAIN Association in Warsaw

A STORM of accusations over football racism hit the Polish media and society in early August.

The flashpoint for the row was the punishment by UEFA of Polish champions Lech Poznan for the display of a nazi banner by its fans at a recent Europa League game in Sarajevo. The banner contained the motto "The Blood of Our Race", a quote from a song by the notorious Polish nazi rock band Konkwista 88.

The match was played on 14 July and UEFA's sanctions – a 50,000 Euro fine and Lech Poznan's next European game to be played in an empty stadium – were announced three weeks later. Lech Poznan has been disciplined for similar offences in previous seasons.

Instead of issuing a forthright condemnation of racism, the chairman of the Polish Football Association (PZPN), Zbigniew Boniek, decided to blame the anti-discrimination FARE network and NEVER AGAIN Association for their alleged role in reporting the banner and launched a public campaign against "snitches" and "spies" via his Twitter

account which has almost 300,000 followers.

For example, he posted a photo of a NEVER AGAIN Association member, Jacek Purski. Comments in response to this from Boniek's followers included, for example: "Stop thinking and smash his mouth", "sometimes euthanasia is the best option" or "no more births of such creatures" as well as countless other hostile and threatening messages.

The next Boniek post included a link to an article on a far right website entitled "Red louse and commie spy Jacek Purski" and ending with the sentence "I just hope somebody will kick his ass properly."

Another posting by Boniek, taken from another far-right website which in its mission statement said it was concerned with the "preservation of the white race", attempted to smear NEVER AGAIN.

Currently Italy-resident Boniek, considered one of the greatest Polish footballers of all time, was a teammate of top UEFA official Michel Platini at Juventus in the 1980s. He is now a powerful figure in both Polish and

international football and he has become especially popular among radical right-wing football fans.

His latest comments have created a storm in the Polish media, several mainstream journalists pointing out the incredible scandal of his behaviour that flagrantly undermines UEFA's efforts to eliminate racism from European football.

Leading sports journalist, Michal Kolodziejczyk, expressed his indignation at Boniek's actions in an article titled "Boniek is looking for blood". Kolodziejczyk stated that Boniek's series of tweets breached the dignity of his official position as Polish FA President. A renowned journalist of Polish Radio One, Dominik Panek, meanwhile, wrote: "I hope no serious acts of violence will happen as a result in the near future."

Also a big article by two top sports writers in the main national daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Rafal Stec and Michal Szadkowski, bore the title: "Boniek is inciting" and stated: "It is not even about decency - that has been scarce in our football for decades. It is about responsibility. With each tweet reaching an

enormous mass of people, the PZPN chairman has incited hatred against a man who did not issue the judgment against Lech or any other club."

Reacting to Boniek's smears, the London-based FARE network expressed "its concern about what appears to be a campaign of vilification by a senior representative of the Polish FA of Fare member group Never Again and of the work of our network." It added: "Comments by the President of the PZPN, Zbigniew Boniek, posted on his Twitter account in reaction to a sanction imposed by UEFA on KKS Lech Pozna go beyond the acceptable terms of legitimate debate about issues of discrimination and are not in keeping with the position of the President of the Polish FA.... It is clear that Never Again have been picked out because of their work in the area of tackling racism and far-right activity in football." The FARE statement also said that "recriminations of this kind by senior people in football should stop immediately."

The credentials of the "NEVER AGAIN" Association in the field of combating racism in sports and beyond are, in fact, very well known. It has existed as an officially registered organisation since 1996 and functions as the Polish sister organisation of HOPE not Hate.

For many years it has conducted the "Let's kick racism out of the stadiums" campaign – the first such initiative in Eastern



Racist banner (centre) of Lech Poznan fans. Photo from the "NEVER AGAIN" Association archives

# Football hate campaign

Europe and is determinedly committed to breaking the silence and raising awareness of the problem of racism and xenophobia. The wide-ranging activity of "NEVER AGAIN" has achieved broad national and international recognition and an emphatic endorsement from Michel Platini himself.

Together with FARE, "NEVER AGAIN" implemented the UEFA EURO 2012 *Respect Diversity – Football Unites* programme. As a result, major educational and awareness-raising activities took place before and during the European Football Championships in Poland and Ukraine.

Boniek, however, remains unrepentant, ignorantly mocking his critics on his Twitter account and posting a message saying "My response to FARE: maybe I will answer you when you learn Polish. Who asks your opinion anyway?"

Zbigniew Boniek  
Photo Roger Gor