

BATE Borisov Made the World Talk about Belarus

Belarusian football is now experiencing extraordinary historic moments.

For the first time ever the Union of the European Football Associations (UEFA) named a club from Belarus as the best team of the week in Europe. This happened after BATE Borisov shocked all football fans and specialists by defeating the German champions Bayern Munich in the UEFA Champions League on 2 October.

Sports media across the whole world made much of BATE's glorious victory. This is one of those few occasions when Belarus features in international news without the tags of "dictatorship", "economic crisis" or diplomatic rows. The team from Borisov has become Belarus's best envoy in the world arena. In spite of its tiny budget and little support from the state, the team is doing more to promote the good image of the country than the whole government put together.

European Team of the Week

The UEFA Champions League is the most prestigious intra-European football championship. Each autumn the best 32 European teams play in the so-called group stage where they are divided into quartets. The two winners of each group then continue competing for the cup in the knock out rounds in spring.

Being among the best 32 clubs on the continent is already a great achievement that few European football squads can boast of. And this is already the third time that BATE Borisov have reached this stage. But this time seems to be special.

On 2 October BATE celebrated a stunning victory against one of the strongest teams in Europe – Bayern Munich. The German club were last year's Champions League finalists and are now widely considered to be leading favourites. But in Minsk this grand team only managed to score once while BATE troubled the German goalkeeper three times.

After this beautiful and unexpected victory UEFA awarded BATE the European team of the week, a title that before seemed completely beyond imagination for a football club from Belarus. The country's place in football rankings is quite modest (currently 87 in the world) and its clubs rarely enjoy recognisable successes internationally.

This is why the European team of the week title is a real landmark for all Belarusian football.

BATE: From Rags to Riches

BATE's history is a spectacular example of how a well-organised and hardworking team with a constrained budget can achieve great successes both nationally and internationally.

The establishment of the club dates back to Soviet times. It was created as the team of Borisov Automobile and Tractor Electronics Works. The word "BATE" is an abbreviation for the Borisov Plant of Auto Crane Equipment.

The team played its first official match in 1973. And already in 1974 BATE won the championship of the then Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Between 1973 and 1981, when the team ceased to exist, it won the national championship three times.

In 1996 BATE was re-established. Successful businessman Anatoly Kapski became their main sponsor and also president. Several unofficial ratings rank him as one of the 50 most influential businessmen in the country. He is currently the CEO of the newly established holding

Autocomponents that unites 12 companies that produce components for different categories of automobiles.

BATE began their glorious march to the Olympus of Belarusian football from the lowest league. It took the club just two years to get into the Supreme League where they immediately won silver medals in 1998 and gold in 1999.

Overall, BATE have so far won eight national champion titles, two Belarus Cups and two Supercups. This is an absolute record for any team in the country.

BATE have also given birth to many Belarusian football stars. The most renowned of them is Aleksandr Hleb. He started his beautiful career in Borisov in 1999 and then played in Stuttgart, Arsenal, Barcelona and Birmingham. He is currently back to his native club to help it in the 2012/2013 Champions League.

“The tractor boys did good”

BATE's outstanding result in this year's Champions League is still viewed by many as pure luck and coincidence. After the match on 2 October Bayern's defender Holger Badstuber said: “I have no idea how this team scored three goals against us!”

This is no wonder. BATE's overall budget is about the annual salary of Bayern's star-players. The team's financing mainly comes from the automobile and tractor electronics works that it represents as well as from a number of sponsors that are modest by European football standards.

And unlike the Belarusian ice-hockey giant Dinamo Minsk, BATE do not receive massive state support. Alexander Lukashenka likes ice-hockey better than football.

One would hardly expect such a poor team to outperform a German or French football giant. And even when such a surprise happens one will usually see it as an accident and comment on

it in a sarcastic way, like a reader of the British *Guardian* did: “the tractor boys did good”.

However, football experts are now talking more and more about BATE’s great defence and skillful counter-attacking style. The names of BATE’s leading players, Andrei Gorbunov, Renan Bressan, Aleksandr Volodko, Vitali Rodionov, and Aleksandr Pavlov are becoming familiar in European football circles.

The team’s play is acquiring its own widely recognisable flavour. As another reader of the *Guardian* put it, BATE’s performance represents “good-old football, which is untouched by merchandising and heavily defined by metallic curtains”.

Football Diplomacy

Through its fantastic performance on the football pitch BATE Borisov has become Belarus’ most successful diplomat in the international arena. After the games with LOSC Lille and especially Bayern, BATE were all over the sports news in outlets around the whole globe.

The world’s leading news agencies published materials with titles similar to that in the Indian daily *The Hindu*: “Belarusian side BATE Borisov caused one of the biggest shocks ever seen in the Champions League football”.

This is one of the extremely rare situations where the world media massively talk about Belarus. What is more important, they do it without any reference to Belarus’ notorious political realities and beyond the usual contexts of electoral fraud, human rights violations or diplomatic scandals.

Thanks to BATE Borisov the world can see that Belarus has much more to offer.

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