Hipsters vs. football authorities: the start-up which shook Belarusian sport

A newcomer to the top Belarusian football league, FC Krumkachy (or Ravens), from Minsk became the most discussed phenomenon of Belarusian sport in the media in 2016.

The story of the club plays out like a Hollywood movie. A group of enthusiasts founded the club just five years ago, and after three years in minor leagues their dreams came true. Krumkachy earned the right to debut in the country's major professional league.

The way most football clubs in Belarus are run bears many similarities to state-owned enterprises. They are unprofitable, state subsidised, unable to attract spectators, and struggle to compete with European teams at international tournaments. In this context, Krumkachy's bright start symbolises the encouraging developments in Belarusian sport.

How Belarusian football works

Belarusian club football is very different than in Europe. Despite the economic downturn, the Belarusian football federation has been enlarging its top league, while many European top leagues are reducing the number of teams. In contrast to most leagues in Europe, the tournament in Belarus starts in spring and finishes in autumn. Moreover, match attendance has been on the decline for years, and is very much contingent on the results of specific clubs. This make Belarusian fans among the least 'patriotic' in Europe. Why so?

The structure of Belarusian football clubs differs little from
professional football during Soviet times. Most often, founders of clubs represent local authorities. A state-owned company situated in the same region as the club often becomes its only sponsor. A plant which makes electrical tractor equipment owns FC BATE Barysau, SC Belaruskali, which produces potash fertilisers, maintains FC Shakhtsior Salihorsk, etc.

In most cases, managers of clubs are recruited from state industry or thanks to their connections with the authorities. Thus, it comes as no surprise that they rarely bring in much money, instead relying on subsidies to keep up the team. They refuse to work with spectators or the media and do nothing to bring in funds from outside.

Even the web-pages of many clubs are amateurish and rarely updated. Most stadiums are very uncomfortable. There are not enough food vendors and beer is not sold. BATE, the leading Belarusian football club, is perhaps the only exception to this rule.

However, the most striking feature of the largest Belarusian football league is its boringness: games are completely devoid of intrigue. The league's leader, BATE, has won the league championship for 11 years in a row now. The most telling measure of the flagging interest in the Belarus league is probably attendance statistics. There has been a steady decrease in attendance for years, hitting an all-time low in 2016. The average match attendance in the 2016 season was just 1480. For comparison, in 2007 average attendance reached 2512.
The economic crisis has only made matters worse. Already struggling Belarusian clubs became even poorer. The lack of money caused many Belarusian football players to continue their careers in less prestigious leagues in Kazakhstan, Latvia, or Lithuania.

The annual budget of BATE in 2016 amounted to $6m. Its closest rival, Dynama Minsk, has an annual budget of only $3m. In contrast, the budget of Zenit St-Petersburg in the 2015/2016 season was $185m; Shakhtar Donetk had a budget of $85m.

Why hipsters like Krumkachy

In 2016, going to Krumkachy matches in Minsk became trendy: only BATE and FC Viciebsk matches attracted more spectators this summer. Club management succeeded in drawing in young people who had not been interested in football before. Traditional ultras nick-named FC Krumkachy 'the hipster club' and started goading new fans with chants such as 'some things are fashionable, some things are forever'.

Many fans were won over by the remarkable history of the team. The co-founders of the club got to know each other in 2011 on the online forum of the popular sport newspaper Pressball. They decided to establish a football club, and four years later the club advanced to the top league of the Belarusian championship. The club succeeded despite very limited resources. The team's coach, Aleh Dulub, had been out of a job
for about a year. However, he achieved remarkable results with half-amateur players which other clubs had rejected.

Despite having only a $500,000 budget, the smallest in the league, they managed to finish in eleventh place. To maintain public attention, they ran a very aggressive campaign in the media and unlike most Belarusian clubs, they were able to engage sponsors and partners including the largest enterprise in the Belarusian brewing industry, Krynitsa, and one of the country's most popular commercial internet portals, Kufar.by.

The manager

Its club owes much of its success to its General Director and shareholder, Dzianis Shunto. In the beginning of 2016, he owned 85% of shares. Born in 1982, he does not fit the typical profile for Belarusian football managers.

Shunto played for Krumkachy several years ago when the club was established; it has never been linked with state agencies or state business. Although he has given a large amount of interviews to the media, it remains unclear what he did before Krumkachy. Usually, he says he was in business and travelled widely.

Shunto is an outstanding manager and is not afraid to confront authorities to achieve results. Regarding his interaction with the Belarusian Football Federation in an interview from the
end of 2015, he was very critical of football authorities:

*They did not understand where we would get the money from. How we were planning to get through licencing. They clearly see other teams in the league, but they are anxious about us because they cannot calculate or control our team. They do not trust us. In our country it is not normal to trust people and understand their motives.*

Against all odds, Shunto proved that with limited financial resources and with no support from the state it is possible to establish a successful sport club. Krumkachy managed to bring in fans to the dismal Belarusian league. They were able to convince **IT specialists** and hipsters from Minsk night clubs to come to the stands. In 2016, Krumkachy was much more discussed in the media than any other club.

However, it remains questionable whether such a startup can continue to be profitable. There are no profitable sport clubs in Belarus except BATE Barysau. For this reason, nobody knows how long Krumkachy can survive for. **Partysan Minsk**, another promising underdog, was forced to disband after fans failed to sponsor the team.

The club will not be able to keep going if Dzianis Shunto loses interest in the project. Nevertheless, Krumkachy has already entered the history of Belarussian football. Only the future will show if the team will become the Belarusian FC Leicester or if they will repeat the story of many promising football projects which have since been forgotten.