

# [***Subjected to racist abuse, AC Milan star Mike Maignan now finds himself being kicked around like a political football***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B7W-2N01-JBSS-S00B-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; A leading soccer goalkeeper, who is Black and was subjected to [*racist abuse*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/20/europe/ac-milan-football-match-racist-chants-italy-intl-hnk/index.html) during a match in Italy's top league last month, now finds himself being kicked around like a political football.

AC Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan, who also plays for the French national team, led his team off the pitch after Udinese fans [*allegedly*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/23/sport/udinese-racism-ban-mike-maignan-spt-intl/index.html) and other alleged racist chants towards the Frenchman during a Serie A match at the BlueEnergy Stadium in Udine, Italy - the latest in a long line of racist abuse incidents in Italian soccer.

AC Milan coach Stefano Pioli said the player was "serene and strong" at a media conference before Milan's Serie A home match against Bologna at the San Siro on January 27. CNN has reached out to AC Milan, Udinese and Maignan's representatives who declined interviews.

Maignan received widespread support from the football world and FIFA President Gianni Infantino called for automatic forfeits for teams whose fans have racially abused players.

However, if a week is a long time in ***politics***, the last few days must feel like an eternity for Maignan given Italian political parties seem to be more intent on scoring party points about the appropriate response to the abuse he endured.

After initially ordering Udinese to play its February 3 match against AC Monza in an empty stadium, Italy's football federation, the FIGC, overturned the decision after the Udine-based club appealed.

Instead, the punishment was reduced to playing the next two matches without fans in the Curva Nord section - where the five people identified by the club as perpetrators of the January 20 racist incident were seated.

Those five fans have been banned from Udinese's BlueEnergy stadium for life, according to the club.

In an attempt to offer support to Maignan, Udine city mayor Alberto Felice De Toni offered the 29-year-old honorary citizenship as a gesture of friendship.

But when the city council voted last week in what was thought to be a largely ceremonial vote, members of the far-right political party Lega voted against the measure, meaning Maignan's honorary citizenship in the city where he was racially attacked was denied.

"I note with regret that the center-right was not at our side in this delicate moment," De Toni said after the failed vote on his Facebook page.

"The opportunity was missed to demonstrate that our city is united and that it clearly distances itself from what happened, which, although frequent in different stages and implemented by a few individuals, does not represent the city in the slightest. Nor our fans," added De Toni.

Pietro Fontanini, a member of the Lega party along with Italy's minister of transportation, Matteo Salvini, said Maignan didn't deserve citizenship for being a victim.

"I am convinced that citizenship should not be conferred because it could seem like a reparative action for a fault that the Friulians do not believe they have," Fontanini said in a statement after the vote, referring to the area in Italy where Udine is located.

"By practice and tradition, honorary citizenship is awarded to personalities who have concretely contributed to the socio-cultural well-being of citizens. The Maignan affair does not fall within this case," Fontani added.

Tobias Jones, an investigative journalist and author of the book "Ultra: The Underworld of Italian Football," told CNN that for years, players were condemned for their reaction to the abuse rather than the other way around, which emboldened racist fans.

"The excuse soccer fans and ultras especially always use regarding racist chanting is: we denigrate any aspect of opposition players to wind them up, to put them off their game," adds Jones.

"They're not racist, they say, just strategic. They'll abuse red-heads, players who have been cheated on by wives, any nationality - it's all fair game [according to them]."

But Jones says the difference in Italy is that institutional figures often inadvertently echo the racism by saying things like, "We have too many Black players, and so on." Jones was speaking generally rather than about a specific incident.

"There's a sense here that other skin colors are sub-human in some way - rarely given citizenship, often exploited by gang masters and openly derided by the majority of right-wing politicians to gain votes,"Jones says.

'Simply shameful'

The Maignan incident comes 11 years after another AC Milan star - midfielder Kevin-Prince Boateng - made history by walking off the pitch during a friendly match after suffering abuse for 25 minutes.

At the time, the FIGC vowed to implement zero tolerance measures, but the abuse shows no sign of going away.

In 2014, then FIGC Vice President Carlo Tavecchio was sanctioned for racist remarks against Black players. In an address about a lack of opportunity for young Italian players, he lauded England for identifying talent at an earlier age.

"Here instead we get 'Opti Poba,' (a fictional player) who previously ate bananas and then suddenly becomes a first-team player with Lazio," the 71-year-old was reported to have said by Reuters.

The remark did not go unpunished and Tavecchio was banned for six months from FIFA leadership roles.

He was appointed head of Lega Seria A in 2017, resigning a year later when Italy failed to qualify for the World Cup in Russia. He died in January 2023.

However his comment, sparked a new phase of racism against Black players, which included fans throwing banana peels onto the pitch in addition to making monkey sounds.

In 2019, Italian football faced an unprecedented spike in racism across the country and Serie A decided to launch an anti-racism initiative to combat the uptick in incidents.

In what was a widely lambasted move, however, Serie A began an ill-advised campaign featuring artwork of ape faces with various team color schemes. The intent was that all players are equal, but the backlash was immediate.

"These creations are an outrage, they will be counter-productive and continue the dehumanization of people of African heritage," anti-discrimination organization Fare said at the time.

"It is difficult to see what Serie A was thinking, who did they consult? It is time for the progressive clubs in the league to make their voice heard."

Boateng, who has become an advocate against discrimination, said he believes the latest attack on Maignan shows nothing had changed in the country.

"There's been little change? I would say zero," Boateng, now retired, told Gazzetta dello Sport.

"If the Milan goalkeeper has to leave the field, it means that nothing has happened. It's not a sad thing anymore, it's simply shameful."

Lazio, a Rome-based club, made headlines in 2017 when a group of its fans superimposed player faces from bitter rival AS Roma onto pictures of Holocaust victim Anne Frank's body.

They made headlines again in January of this year when they hurled racist insults at a pair of Lecce's Black players: French international Samuel Umtiti - who now plays for Ligue 1 club Lille - and his Zambian teammate, Lameck Banda, who left the pitch in tears.

During the incident, the match was delayed while organizers called on fans to stop the abuse. While those fans didn't stop, Lecce fans instead drowned them out with chants of support.

After the match, Lazio said in a statement: "Lazio fans are not racist and cannot be associated with a few individuals who seriously harm the club's image.

"Lazio has always opposed all forms of racism and discrimination with all the means available. The club will, as always, offer the maximum collaboration to the authorities to identify those responsible."

After the Maignan incident in January, Infantino took to Instagram posting: "Let's shout it loud and clear: NO TO RACISM! May the huge majority of fans, who are good people, stand up to shut up all the racists once and for all!

Infantino also wrote that "good fans" should take more initiative to shame the racist ones.

This week, it was widely reported that Maignan, whose contract with AC Milan runs until 2026, is talking to the Serie A club about a new deal, amid interest from other leading European clubs.

But with moral authority seemingly in short supply, at least in Udine, who could blame the 28-year-old Frenchman if he decides to eventually leave Serie A given the ugly streak that runs through Italy's beautiful game.

By Barbie Latza Nadeau, CNN

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