

Football in Croatia

Football in Croatia is the country's most popular sport.^{[1][2]} The Croatian Football Federation (HNS) is the governing body and is responsible for overseeing all aspects of association football in the nation, both professional and amateur.^[3] The national and club teams are governed by UEFA in Europe and FIFA in global competitions. The history of the sport is delineated by a variety of unofficial sides as Croatia was not an independent entity until the late 20th century.^{[4][5]}

The club teams that compete domestically do so in the top flight, the Croatian Football League (*Hrvatska nogometna liga*), the second-tier, First Football League (*Prva NL*), the third-tier, Second Football League (*Druga NL*), and fourth-tier Third Football League (*Treća NL*). The counties of Croatia likewise compete in a regional league system. Club teams contest their respective league championships, the Croatian Cup, and the Croatian Super Cup. The two largest club teams are Dinamo Zagreb and Hajduk Split, who share a rivalry.

The national team of Croatia is a major sporting franchise in European and international football.^{[2][6]} They have qualified for every major tournament with the exception of Euro 2000 and the 2010 World Cup. Croatia has reached the quarter-finals of the UEFA European Championship twice (1996, 2008) and finished second in the UEFA Nations League in 2023. At the FIFA World Cup, Croatia has finished second once (2018) and third on two occasions (1998, 2022), securing three World Cup medals.^[7]

History



A plaque in Rijeka marking the site of the 1873 football game

The earliest record of football in Croatia dates from 1873, when English engineers and technicians for *Stabilimento tecnico Fiumano* played in Rijeka against the engineers building the local railway line,^[8] with local Fiumans also taking part in the game.^[9] The first recorded football match in the Kingdom of Croatia was played in 1880 in Županja, between English workers of The Oak Extract Company and local youths.^[8] In 1890 the first school-based football clubs are founded by high school students in Rijeka.^[9] The sport was further popularized in Croatia by Franjo Bučar in the 1890s.^[10] The Croatian translation of the sport's name, *nogomet*, was coined by the linguist Slavko Rutzner Radmilović in 1893 or 1894.^[11] The name was adopted into Slovenian as well. In 1896, the first edition of the Rules of the Football Game in Croatian was printed in Zagreb.^[12]

Football in Croatia	
	
Home stadium of club Hajduk Split, a club on the coast of Split	
Country	Croatia
Governing body	Croatian Football Federation (HNS)
National team(s)	men's national team <div>women's national team</div>
National competitions	
HNL	
1. NL	
2. NL	
3. NL	
First County	
Croatian Cup	
Croatian Super Cup	
Club competitions	
UEFA Champions League	
UEFA Europa League	
UEFA Europa Conference League	
UEFA Super Cup	
FIFA Club World Cup	
International competitions	
FIFA World Cup	
UEFA European Championship	
UEFA Nations League	

The earliest officially registered association football clubs were founded in Pula before the turn of the century, when in August 1899 the locals founded *Club Iris* and later in the same year *Veloce Club*,^[13] both multi-sport association with very popular football sections.^[14] The first clubs to be founded in the then Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia per se were *HAŠK* and *PNIŠK*, in 1903. In Rijeka, the Hungarian-leaning *Fiumei Atletikai Club* was founded in 1905 and the multicultural *CS Olimpia* in 1904, but Olimpia's football section may have held its first seating only in 1906 (the date is still debated among historians). In the same year, the *Giovine Fiume* club was founded by the Italian irredentist youth of the city and *HŠK Concordia* was established in Zagreb. između HAŠK-a i PNIŠK-a.

The first public football match in Croatia was played on Marulić Square in Zagreb on October 28, 1906 between HAŠK and PNIŠK and ended with a score of 1:1. This match was played according to the then only valid English rules. The HAŠK team then consisted of the following players: Hinko Würth, Josip Besednik, Hugo Kuderna, Josip Novak, Ivo Lipovšćak, Anđelo Grgić, Marko Kostrenčić, Dragutin Albrecht, Marko Kren, Vladimir Erbežnik, Zvonimir Bogdanović; while the following played for PNIŠK: Dragutin Baki, Jan Todl, Veljko Ugrinić, Schreiber, Kiseljak, Pilepić and Uhlr.^[12]

Among the other early clubs are *Victoria* and *Olimpija Karlovac*, created in 1908. 1908 also saw the first recorded win by a Croatian city-based club against an English side, when *CS Olimpia* beat the official football team of the Cunard Line ship RMS *Brescia* 1-0.^[9] In 1909 *GŠK Marsonia* started playing in Slavonski Brod and Rijeka's then strongest side *Fiumei AC* was invited to play officially in the Hungarian Championship, but turned down the offer. In the same year, *Segesta* officially appeared for the first time in Sisak.

In 1910 the club *Forza e Coraggio* was founded in Dubrovnik and the *Società Ginnastica e Scherma* in Zadar officially opened its football section. The two would battle in the first Dalmatian Championship in 1911,^[15] won by *Forza e Coraggio*, which was then forced by the authorities to change its name to *U.S. Ragusa*.^[16] *Hajduk*, *Građanski* and *SK Opatija* were all founded in the same year, 1911.^[17] The first football club to be founded purely by Croats was *Bačka* in *Subotica* in 1901, in what was then the Kingdom of Hungary and is today Serbia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Zrinjski Mostar* was founded by Croats in 1905 and was the first club to be founded in that country. The Croatian Football Federation (HNS) itself was created in 1912, which was also the year of the first Croatia and Slavonia championship.^[18]

The football section of HŠS 1912-13. organized the first Croatian football championship, in which clubs exclusively from Zagreb, Građanski, HAŠK, Concordia, AŠK Croatia and Tipografski športski klub Zagreb participated. This first championship was not completed due to unsportsmanlike behavior, and the new one was interrupted in 1914 due to the war.^[12] In 1912 the Dalmatian championship was won by *Società Bersaglieri* and in its third season by *Calcio Spalato*, who then played and lost against the strongest club from the Trieste region, *Edera*.^[15]

After World War I, Croats played a major part in the founding of the first football federation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later named the Football Association of Yugoslavia. Its headquarters were initially in Zagreb before moving to Belgrade in 1929. This was an era when great talents like Ico Hitrec dominated the national fields. In 1927, Hajduk Split took part in the inaugural Mitropa Cup, a tournament dedicated to the best Central European clubs.

Croatia itself played its first international football match as a representative team of the Banovina in a match held on April 2, 1940 against Switzerland. During World War II, the Croatian Football Federation joined FIFA as a representative of the Independent State of Croatia, but this was contentious and short-lived, as was the fascist puppet-state of which it was part. After the war, football was resumed within the institutional framework of the second Yugoslavia. The communist regime in the new state quickly moved to apply a damnatio memoriae to all club names and brands involved in the Croatian or Italian championships or which bore obviously Croatian or Italian national names. The government in Belgrade justified the rearrangement of all local football clubs with its plan to copy the Stalinist model of athletic organisation, merging all local clubs into omni-comprehensive sport unions—often forcing local institutions and party representatives to enact a total rebranding of the local clubs' identities—and thus bring them into line with communist goals and ideals.^[19]

Following these policies, Građanski was rebranded into NK Dinamo Zagreb, U.S. Fiumana (CS Olimpia's name under the Italian fascist regime) became S.C.F. Quarnero in Yugoslavia, ŽŠK Victoria became NK Lokomotiva in Zagreb, and dozens of other less famous clubs followed suit. Most clubs had henceforth to explicitly display loyalty to the new regime, and it was common for them to feature the communist red star as part of a new emblem, often paired with proletarian sounding and appealing identities.^[20] Among the victims of these changes, some clubs were completely disbanded, including top sides Concordia, PNIŠK and HAŠK, as well as major ethnic Croat clubs in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina, SAŠK and HŠK Zrinjski Mostar. One of the very few large Croatian clubs to avoid restructuring was Hajduk Split, who had refused to participate in the fascist Croatian competition and had strong links with the partisan army of Tito.

As Tito broke with Stalin, in the 1950s most sport unions reverted to purely football clubs. Over the following decades, Croatian clubs performed well in the Yugoslav First League and the Yugoslav Cup. Hajduk and Dinamo formed one half of the Big Four of Yugoslav football (the other two being FK Partizan and Red Star Belgrade). Rijeka won 2 Yugoslav cups. In 1967, Zlatko Čajkovski of German club Bayern Munich became the only Croatian manager to win the European Cup Winners' Cup. After Croatia gained independence in the 1990s, the football federation was reconstituted and joined the international associations.^[21] The Croatian internationals from the 1987 FIFA World Youth Championship-winning team went on to achieve more success, spawning the "golden generation" who finished in third place at the 1998 FIFA World Cup.^[22] Since then, Croatia has continued to produce top players. At the more recent Euro 2008, they famously beat 2006 FIFA World Cup bronze medalists Germany 2–1 in a shock win but exited the tournament courtesy of a penalty shoot-out defeat to Turkey in the quarterfinals. The national team's best performance came at the 2018 World Cup, where they finished as runners-up, losing 2–4 to France in the final. Croatia followed the achievement by again finishing third in the 2022 World Cup, after a 2–1 win over Morocco.



Earliest clubs in Croatia

Club	Year	City, Region	Description	Dissolution
<u>Club Iris</u>	1899	<u>Pula</u> , <u>Austrian Littoral</u>	Football section opened in August 1899. Dissolution date unknown.	?
<u>Veloce Club Polese</u>	1899	<u>Pula</u> , <u>Austrian Littoral</u>	Football section of cycling club. Dissolution date unknown.	?
<u>PNIŠK</u>	1903	<u>Zagreb</u> , <u>Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		1909
<u>HAŠK</u>	1903	<u>Zagreb</u> , <u>Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		1945
<u>Club Sportivo Olimpia</u>	1904	<u>Rijeka</u> , <u>Corpus Separatum</u>	Later renamed to <u>NK Rijeka</u> .	Still Active
<u>Fiumei Atletikai Club</u>	1905	<u>Rijeka</u> , <u>Corpus Separatum</u>	Dissolution date unknown.	?
<u>Segesta Sisak</u>	1906	<u>Sisak</u> , <u>Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		Still Active
<u>Giovine Fiume</u>	1906	<u>Rijeka</u> , <u>Corpus Separatum</u>		1912
<u>HŠK Concordia</u>	1906	<u>Zagreb</u> , <u>Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		1945
<u>Törekves SE</u>	1907	<u>Rijeka</u> , <u>Corpus Separatum</u>	Dissolution date unknown.	?

AŠK Croatia	1907	<u>Zagreb, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		1945
HŠK Victoria Sušak	1908	<u>Sušak, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		1948
GŠK Marsonia	1909	<u>Slavonski Brod, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		Still Active
Associazione Sportiva Edera	1910	<u>Pula, Austrian Littoral</u>		1926
Forza e Coraggio	1910	<u>Dubrovnik, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>	In 1912 renamed Unione Sportiva di Ragusa. Dissolution date unknown.	?
Società Ginnastica e Scherma Zara	1910	<u>Zadar, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>	Dissolution date unknown.	?
NK Zmaj	1910	<u>Zadar, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>	Later renamed in NK Arbanasi.	Still Active
Calcio Spalato	1910	<u>Split, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>	Dissolved in the '20s	'20s
<u>Nogometni Odjel Sokola Opatija - Volosko</u>	1911	<u>Opatija, Austrian Littoral</u>	Later renamed NK Opatija.	Still Active
<u>1. HŠK Građanski</u>	1911	<u>Zagreb, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>	Later renamed to NK Dinamo.	Still Active
Unione Sportiva	1911	<u>Dubrovnik, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>	Dissolution date unknown.	?
NK DAVOR	1911	<u>Dubrovnik, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>	Dissolution date unknown.	?
HŠK Hajduk	1911	<u>Split, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>		Still Active
DFV Vorwärts Abbazia	1912	<u>Opatija, Austrian Littoral</u>	German minority club. Official dissolution date unknown.	?
Tornai SE	1912	<u>Rijeka, Corpus Separatum</u>	Hungarian minority club. Official dissolution date unknown.	?
<u>HRŠD Anarh</u>	1912	<u>Split, Kingdom of Dalmatia</u>	Later renamed to RNK Split.	Still Active
HŠK Slaven	1912	<u>Koprivnica, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		Still Active
Olimpija Suhopolje	1912	<u>Suhopolje, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>		1916
<u>SK Lav</u>	1913	<u>Knin, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>	Later renamed to HNK Dinara.	Still Active
<u>HŠK Šparta</u>	1913	<u>Zagreb, Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia</u>	Later renamed to NK Šparta-Elektra.	Still Active

Clubs in European competitions

- Hajduk Split is the only Croatian club to date—either during the Yugoslav period or since independence—to have played in the knockout stages of the European Cup or UEFA Champions League, having reached the quarter-finals on three occasions (in 1975–76, 1979–80 and 1994–95).
- Dinamo Zagreb have qualified for the Champions League group stage on eight occasions (in 1998–99, 1999–2000, 2011–12, 2012–13, 2015–16, 2016–17, 2019–20 and 2022–23) but have yet to progress further.
- Both Dinamo and Hajduk have advanced past the round of sixteen of the UEFA Cup or UEFA Europa League, Hajduk played in the semi-finals in 1983–84 and the quarterfinals in 1985–86. They also reached the UEFA Cup's last sixteen in 1981–82 and 1986–87, while Dinamo Zagreb reached the quarterfinals in 2020–21 and the last sixteen in 1997–98 and 2018–19.

- Dinamo Zagreb had success winning the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup in 1967 which is the only European trophy won by Croatian clubs. Dinamo also reached the final four years earlier in 1963 but suffered a loss to Valencia. In 1970–71 season, they reached third round. Croatian clubs also had success in the defunct UEFA Cup Winners' Cup. Both Dinamo Zagreb (1960–61) and Hajduk Split (1972–73) reached the semi-finals of the competitions. Dinamo have also reached the quarterfinals in 1964–65 and 1969–70, while Hajduk were eliminated at that stage in 1977–78. UEFA Cup Winners' Cup is also the only European competition that has seen Croatian clubs other than Dinamo and Hajduk reach the advanced stages. Rijeka reached the quarterfinals in the 1979–80 edition, while Varteks advanced to the quarterfinals in 1998–99, the last edition of the competition.

Best results

The table below lists Croatian clubs' best results in elimination rounds of European club competitions:

Competition	Season	Round	Team 1	Agg.	Team 2	1st leg	2nd leg
<u>UCWC</u>	<u>1960–61</u>	SF	<u>Fiorentina</u> 	4–2	 <u>Dinamo Zagreb</u>	3–0	1–2
<u>UCWC</u>	<u>1972–73</u>	SF	<u>Leeds United</u> 	1–0	 <u>Hajduk Split</u>	1–0	0–0
<u>EC</u>	<u>1975–76</u>	QF	<u>Hajduk Split</u> 	2–3	 <u>PSV Eindhoven</u>	2–0	0–3 (aet)
<u>EC</u>	<u>1979–80</u>	QF	<u>Hamburger SV</u> 	3–3 (a)	 <u>Hajduk Split</u>	1–0	2–3
<u>UC</u>	<u>1983–84</u>	SF	<u>Hajduk Split</u> 	2–2 (a)	 <u>Tottenham Hotspur</u>	2–1	0–1
<u>UCL</u>	<u>1994–95</u>	QF	<u>Hajduk Split</u> 	0–3	 <u>Ajax</u>	0–0	0–3
<u>EL</u>	<u>2020–21</u>	QF	<u>Dinamo Zagreb</u> 	1–3	 <u>Villarreal</u>	0–1	1–2
<u>UCWC</u>	<u>1998–99</u>	QF	<u>Varteks</u> 	1–3	 <u>Mallorca</u>	0–0	1–3

Footballers in international club competitions

The following table lists all Croatian players who are credited to win an international final (either appeared in the final, being unused substitutes or were in the squad in earlier rounds of the tournament). It does not include Croatians who were considered Yugoslav players prior to Croatia's independence in 1991.

As of 2022 a total of eleven Croatian players are credited as winning the Champions League: Alen Bokšić, Zvonimir Boban, Davor Šuker, Dario Šimić, Igor Bišćan, Mario Mandžukić, Luka Modrić, Ivan Rakitić, Mateo Kovačić, Dejan Lovren and Ivan Perišić, although Šimić, Bišćan and Lovren did not appear in the finals.^[23] In terms of appearances, fourteen players have played in the final (Bokšić, Boban, Šuker, Boris Živković, Marko Babić, Igor Tudor, Dado Pršo, Ivica Olić, Mandžukić, Modrić, Rakitić, Lovren, Perišić and Kovačić), but only five players appeared more than once – Bokšić (1993, 1997), Boban (1994, 1995), Olić (2010, 2012), Mandžukić (2013, 2017) and Modrić (2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2022). Two Croatian players have scored a goal in the final match, Mandžukić in the 2013 and 2017 final, and Rakitić in the 2015 final.

As of 2023 a total of eight Croatian players are credited as winning the Europa League: Mario Stanić, Ivica Olić, Ivica Križanac, Darijo Srna, Ivan Rakitić, Šime Vrsaljko, Mateo Kovačić and Kristijan Jakić – although Stanić did not appear for his club in the final. The only Croatian player to have scored a goal in the final match was Nikola Kalinić in the 2015 final.^[24]

Ranking	Name	Team(s)	Years	CL	EL	SC	FCWC	CWC	IC	Total
1	<u>Luka Modrić</u>	<u>Real Madrid</u>	2014–2023	5	0	4	4	0	0	13
2	<u>Mateo Kovačić</u>	<u>Real Madrid</u> , <u>Chelsea</u>	2016–2021	4	1	3	3	0	0	11
3	<u>Ivan Rakitić</u>	<u>Sevilla</u> , <u>Barcelona</u>	2014–2023	1	2	1	1	0	0	5
4	<u>Dario Šimić</u>	<u>Milan</u>	2003–2007	2	0	1	1	0	0	4
5	<u>Alen Bokšić</u>	<u>Marseille</u> , <u>Juventus</u> , <u>Lazio</u>	1993–1999	1	0	0	0	1	1	3
	<u>Mario Mandžukić</u>	<u>Bayern Munich</u>	2013	1	0	1	1	0	0	
7	<u>Zvonimir Boban</u>	<u>Milan</u>	1994	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
	<u>Davor Šuker</u>	<u>Real Madrid</u>	1998	1	0	0	0	0	1	
	<u>Igor Bišćan</u>	<u>Liverpool</u>	2001–2005	1	0	1	0	0	0	
	<u>Ivica Križanac</u>	<u>Zenit Saint Petersburg</u>	2008	0	1	1	0	0	0	
11	<u>Robert Jarni</u>	<u>Real Madrid</u>	1998	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	<u>Mario Stanić</u>	<u>Parma</u>	1999	0	1	0	0	0	0	
	<u>Niko Kovač</u>	<u>Bayern Munich</u>	2001	0	0	0	0	0	1	
	<u>Robert Kovač</u>	<u>Bayern Munich</u>	2001	0	0	0	0	0	1	
	<u>Ivica Olić</u>	<u>CSKA Moscow</u>	2005	0	1	0	0	0	0	
	<u>Darijo Srna</u>	<u>Shakhtar Donetsk</u>	2009	0	1	0	0	0	0	
	<u>Šime Vrsaljko</u>	<u>Atlético Madrid</u>	2018	0	1	0	0	0	0	
	<u>Nikola Kalinić</u>	<u>Atlético Madrid</u>	2018	0	0	1	0	0	0	
	<u>Dejan Lovren</u>	<u>Liverpool</u>	2019	1	0	0	0	0	0	
	<u>Ivan Perišić</u>	<u>Bayern Munich</u>	2020	1	0	0	0	0	0	
	<u>Kristijan Jakić</u>	<u>Eintracht Frankfurt</u>	2022	0	1	0	0	0	0	

Abolished competition

Format

The governing body of football in Croatia is the Croatian Football Federation.^[25] It oversees the organization of:

- Leagues:
 - HNL
 - Prva NL
 - Druga NL
 - Treća NL
 - Regional leagues
- Cup tournaments:
 - Croatian Cup
 - Croatian Supercup

- **National teams:**
 - [Croatia national football team](#)
 - [Croatia national under-21 football team](#)
 - [Croatia national under-19 football team](#)
 - [Croatia national under-17 football team](#)
 - [Croatia women's national football team](#)

Seasons

The following articles detail major results and events in each footballing season since the early 1990s, when the [Croatian First Football League](#) was established. Each article provides final league standings for that season, as well as details on cup results, [Croatia national football team](#) results, and a summary of any other important events during the season.

1990s	1990–91	1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
2000s	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10
2010s	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20
2020s	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24						

Teams

According to many surveys conducted by multiple newspapers, the most popular club in Croatia is [Dinamo Zagreb](#) which is also the most successful club. Their main rivals are [Hajduk Split](#), followed by [HNK Rijeka](#) and [NK Osijek](#).

Futsal

[Futsal](#), called *mali nogomet* (lit. "small football") in Croatia, is also widely played and is sometimes considered as a mini football league. It is often taught in schools and also played by football professionals as a pastime.

The [Croatian First League of Futsal](#) is the top-tier futsal competition where majority of [Croatia national futsal team](#) is selected.

There are also national competitions in other [minifootball](#) versions.

Fans

The Croatian football fans organize in various fan groups such as the [Torcida](#) ([Hajduk](#)), [Bad Blue Boys](#) ([Dinamo](#)), [Armada](#) ([Rijeka](#)), [Kohorta](#) ([Osijek](#)), etc.

On the international games, the Croatian fans usually wear the checkerboard colors red and white, as they are on the [Croatian coat of arms](#).

See also

- [Football in Yugoslavia](#)
- [Croatian football league system](#)
- [First Croatian beach soccer league](#)

- [Croatia at the FIFA World Cup](#)
- [Croatia at the UEFA European Championship](#)
- [Croatia at the UEFA Nations League](#)

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