

Owen Milewski

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

10 November 2021

### Racism in European Football

Football, or soccer, is known as “the beautiful game”. With a following of approximately half the world’s population, football is loved around the globe. However, sports tend to reflect society (Bell) and with football having such a large following, there is no doubt both desirable and undesirable societal aspects appear in the game. So, along with history, unity, capital, entertainment, passion, and joy—all things that make football known as “the beautiful game”—comes nationalism, greed, corruption, hatred, bigotry, and discrimination. One of the most prevalent and detrimental yet also attackable problems in football, especially in Europe, is racism. Although racism is likely impossible to completely exterminate, there are many necessary actions, mainly adjustments to current codes that address discrimination, to be taken to decrease intolerance in the sport.

Racism has existed in football forever. But over the past 20 years, few signs of improvement have been shown. According to Kick It Out, English football’s equality and inclusion organization, there was a 42% increase in reported discrimination in English football from 2018 to 2020. Furthermore, there was a 53% increase in reported racial abuse. However, this increase in racism and discrimination can be seen without analyzing statistics. We need to acknowledge the prevalence of abuse more; the statistics merely confirm what is already happening right in front of us. For example, in late 2019, Italian team Lazio’s fans marched

through Glasgow making Nazi salutes before a game against Scottish team Celtic. Not much later, Bulgarian fans made the same gestures while using racially abusive language toward England players at a Euro 2020 qualifier (Wahl). Earlier this year, on March 18, during a game between Scottish side Rangers and Czechian side Slavia Prague, Slavia Prague defender Ondřej Kúdela whispered into Ranger's midfielder Glen Kamara's ear. Kamara immediately protested to the referee against Kúdela's words, claiming what he said was racist. Sadly, the incident did not end there. Slavia Prague ultras, extremist fans who go to drastic lengths to support their team and players, later posted a photo on Instagram of masked individuals belonging to the group holding a banner that read, "Kamara - just a nigger". The club says they "distance themselves from authors of the racist photograph" and will file a criminal complaint against those involved in the post. It can clearly be seen through broadcasted footage, media reports, social media, or possibly our very own eyes, that racism is endemic in European football (Kenmare). In order to formulate a resolution, it must be understood how and why discrimination's still present in "the beautiful game".

Both FIFA, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, and UEFA, the Union of European Football Associations, have named nationalism, identification with and support for one's own nation to the exclusion of other nations, as one of the main culprits for racism in the sport (Davies). In this context, the nationalism falls more along the lines of an ethnicity-based belief of superiority. An idea discussed by George Orwell in "The Sporting Spirit", nationalism does not have a good reputation when in sports. Orwell says "...international sporting contests lead to orgies of hatred..." in paragraph three and "At the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare" in paragraph four. Orwell gives many examples of 20th century sporting events and competitions that increased hatred, international tensions, and political conflicts. Orwell

believes at the heart of it all is nationalism. Similarly, although more recently, Guy Davies, an associate producer for ABC News and freelance writer, said “Across Eastern Europe you can look at Hungary, Poland, Slovakia—where populist governments have a far-right agenda. They are often using language of intolerance, scapegoating minority communities. A lot of this is spilling over into football.” Although blaming radical conservatism more than nationalism, by identifying specific *nations* that he believes hold some responsibility for discrimination in football, there’s no doubt ideologies of these nations’ governments trickle down to people in football and give them a sense of patriotic xenophobia. Sam Blum, in his article “Why Racism Is on the Rise in Soccer Again” for GQ, gives a similar explanation: “The larger cultural climate in Europe engenders the racist behavior that’s debased the game in recent seasons. Leaders of national political parties have trumpeted anti-immigrant sentiment and nativist rhetoric, fashioning it into mainstream discourse,” he says. It is agreed upon that, at the deepest level, racism in football can be traced to historical conflicts and disagreements between nations as well as political influence among specific European countries.

With this in mind, what has been done and what can be done about it? Firstly, it must be established that a national reformation of any of these countries that supposedly contribute to the racist climate in football via politics or government would be difficult and unlikely to succeed. Many organizations and leagues are enacting simpler and more plausible measures or campaigns to spread their message of antiracism. The Premier League, the top league of English football, in their No Room For Racism campaign, emphasizes unity and togetherness to fight against discrimination. “There is No Room For Racism. Anywhere. Not online, not in the stands, not at home and not on the streets,” states their campaign. Crystal Palace defender Joel Ward says he understands, “how important it is to stand shoulder-to-shoulder alongside his team-mates on and

off the pitch.” Racism can only be fought if people come together as a whole, a main point of the No Room For Racism initiative. “We all must come together as fans, as players and as clubs to combat discrimination wherever it exists in society,” is a message the Premier League is spreading by having players, coaches, and officials take a knee before every game, funding education to teach about racism and racism prevention, and providing and detailing methods to report racism. Working with the Premier League for their No Room For Racism campaign is Kick It Out. Kick It Out have their own objectives when it comes to antiracism. Their goals are to “significantly increase the awareness of inclusion and diversity, and the consequences of inappropriate behaviour across all levels of football”, “share good practice, critical actions, and partnership working to empower and support football organisations to develop their own responsibility toward greater equity and fairness”, and “show the importance of exposing inequalities and the positive value and impact that can be made through collective preventative action.” Kick It Out also reports data and statistics on discrimination in English football and offers a platform to report it. Unfortunately, small charity organizations like Kick It Out or specific leagues are limited in their ability to make an impact. The change needs to come from large, powerful, far-reaching governing bodies in football, most notably FIFA and UEFA.

Although these bodies do have measures in place, such as a three-step procedure for referees to address biased fan behavior (Wahl) as well as fines, suspensions, and bans for players and clubs who violate the rules, this is not enough. Furthermore, their punishments and enforcement of the laws are too lenient. Instituting a policy doesn’t mean much if it isn’t enforced (Wahl). FIFA and UEFA need to put new measures in place to combat racism and be stricter in their punishments.

Fines are the most common forms of punishment for any entity in football. Clubs can fine their individual players or staff just as governing bodies or leagues, like UEFA or the Premier League, can. Although, governing bodies and leagues hold more power because they can fine anyone at all or even entire clubs. For example, the English Football League fined Leeds United £200,000 (\$271,020) for a staff member's involvement in a spying scandal. UEFA fined former Arsenal striker Nicklas Bendtner £80,000 (\$108,404) in 2012 for wearing sponsored underwear and Beşiktaş £30,000 (\$40,653) for allowing a cat to run on the pitch in 2018. During a match between England and Bulgaria in 2019, Bulgarian supporters were making Nazi salutes and monkey noises; the game had to be stopped twice in the first half as protocol. UEFA fined Bulgaria €75,000 (\$85,089.38) and ruled they had to play one game with no fans in the stadium. Criticism was directed at UEFA for this as many believed they failed to tackle the issue. Kick It Out called for them to "overhaul its disciplinary process in response to racism" and said the punishment was a "missed opportunity" (Hurst). To eradicate an issue as disgusting and unacceptable as racism, it first must be treated like one. Governing bodies need to increase fines to amounts that will financially hurt those who violate rules regarding racism. This is tough when it comes to extremely rich clubs such as FC Barcelona, Real Madrid CF, FC Bayern Munich, or Manchester City F.C., which are each valued at four to five billion dollars. So, bans and suspensions for players who express racism also need to be longer. Gelson Martins, AS Monaco FC winger in France's Ligue 1, was suspended for six months for pushing a referee. Ondřej Kúdela was banned for only ten games as a result of his incident with Glen Kamara. Increasing severity of punishments for racism to the point that they are comparable to or greater than those for other, arguably less serious, offenses is necessary to punish racist entities and send the message that racism's more heinous than any other wrongdoing in football.

Additionally, new penalties need to be enacted to combat racism. Teams need to be deducted points in standings or disqualified from competitions if their players, staff, or coaches are convicted of racism. Surrounding Ondřej Kúdela's suspected racism against Glen Kamara, talkSPORT host Hugh Wozenecroft posed questions: "What happens to Slavia Prague? Should they be in the competition?", "What happens if they win the Europa League? What does that say to the rest of sport? What does that say to us as the sports watching public?" he asked. "We get to maybe see Ondřej Kúdela with a medal round his neck. These are the things for me that I think are head-scratching" (Dawnay). Wozenecroft is right. Slavia Prague should have been eliminated from the competition the second Ondřej Kúdela made racist remarks toward Glen Kamara. Likewise, teams should be deducted points in their league's standings if their players or coaches are racist. Raheem Sterling, a Manchester City F.C. winger who's experienced racism himself, calls for an immediate nine-point deduction if fans take part in racist behavior (ESPN). Sterling's concept is flawed because punishing teams to such a degree for the actions of what could be a single person is overboard. Anyone, whether actually a fan of a team or not, can go to a match and take part in racist behavior and there is nothing the club can do about it. I support a nine-point deduction if players or coaches engage in racist behavior, however. Players' and coaches' livelihoods are directly affected by the success and failure of the club they represent, so deducting points or disqualifying them from competitions is the perfect way to serve justice and discourage them from being racist.

Lastly, certain regulations can be enacted into football to help identify cases of racist language. Players and coaches should get yellow cards for covering their mouths to speak to opponents. Manager and retired player Clarence Seedorf proposed the rule to European lawmakers in a forum on hate speech in April. Ondřej Kúdela covered his mouth when he made

comments at Glen Kamara; why would he not want those around him to hear what he said or viewers and spectators to be able to read his lips? “We are talking about sport, it has to be transparent—so why would I cover my mouth if I need to say something to my adversary?” Seedorf says. Players and coaches should not be booked for covering their mouths to speak to teammates because confidentiality of tactics is an important aspect of football. Also, broadcast and referee audio should be more commonly utilized as evidence in cases of suspected racism. On April 4, 2021, in a Spanish league game between Cádiz CF and Valencia CF, Cádiz CF forward Cala was accused of verbally abusing Valencia CF defender Mouctar Diakhaby with racist language. Chiefs of La Liga later said they were unable to find any evidence of racist abuse and therefore could not punish Cala (BBC). However, in an English broadcast of the game, a player can clearly be heard saying “Negro de mierda, ¿vas a llorar?”, which roughly translates to “Black piece of shit, are you going to cry?” So, despite an incriminating piece of evidence against Cala, La Liga chose to either ignore the audio or incorrectly claim it is inconclusive and not punish anyone. Former Chief Executive of the Football Association, Mark Palios, called for “the output of the on-pitch referees’ microphone to be broadcast and recorded as part of the television and radio coverage of matches,” back in 2012. He feels if referees’ mics were part of the broadcast in the same way it is in coverage of rugby union matches, campaigns to stamp out abuse would benefit (SVG Europe). If match audio were standard for situations involving racist behavior, outcomes would be more conclusive, legitimate, and clear. It will heavily discourage players from making racist comments if they are unable to cover their mouths and/or match audio is taken advantage of.

Racism in football occurs far too often across Europe. This does warrant concern; however, the situation is as corrigible as it is detrimental. First, understanding that the problem is

characterized by invisible forces just as much as visible ones is vital. Realizing that discrimination is deeply rooted in societal, structural, and cultural factors is the first step in making improvements (Liew). Then, uncomplicated changes can be introduced to football by bodies with legislative power, particularly FIFA and UEFA, to deter racism and work toward its complete eradication. On an individual level, we can all contribute to the solution, whether it be voicing support for victims of abuse, reporting acts of abuse we witness, or simply making an effort to fully comprehend what racism means. The efforts needed to drastically decline intolerance in the sport will be gradual and require patience but be worth it for the betterment of the game that so many love.



## Works Cited

- Associated Press. "Players Should Be Punished for Covering Faces in Battle against Abuse Seedorf." *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 14 Apr. 2021, [www.espn.com/soccer/blog-uefa/story/4359865/yellow-cards-to-be-used-to-combat-racist-abuse-seedorf](http://www.espn.com/soccer/blog-uefa/story/4359865/yellow-cards-to-be-used-to-combat-racist-abuse-seedorf).
- Bell, Rick. "A Red Card on Racism." *Workforce*, vol. 93, no. 6, June 2014, p. 54. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=96996869&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=96996869&site=ehost-live).
- Blum, Sam. "Why Racism Is on the Rise in Soccer Again." *GQ*, 29 Jan. 2020, [www.gq.com/story/soccer-racism-on-the-rise](http://www.gq.com/story/soccer-racism-on-the-rise).
- Davies, Guy. "Racism in Soccer an 'Epidemic' That Mirrors Disturbing Trends in Europe: Advocates." *ABC News*, ABC News Network, 1 Feb. 2020, 5:03 AM, [abcnews.go.com/Sports/racism-soccer-epidemic-mirrors-disturbing-trends-europe-advocates/story?id=67850877](http://abcnews.go.com/Sports/racism-soccer-epidemic-mirrors-disturbing-trends-europe-advocates/story?id=67850877).
- Dawnay, Oliver. "Kudela given Ban for Racially Abusing Kamara, Rangers Star Also Punished." *TalkSPORT*, TalkSPORT, 14 Apr. 2021, 2:59 PM, [talksport.com/football/865392/ondrej-kudela-ban-racist-abuse-glen-kamara-rangers-slavia-prague-hugh-woozencroft/](http://talksport.com/football/865392/ondrej-kudela-ban-racist-abuse-glen-kamara-rangers-slavia-prague-hugh-woozencroft/).
- Hurst, Luke. "Racism Campaigners 'Disheartened' by UEFA Punishment of Bulgaria." *Euronews*, 30 Oct. 2019, [www.euronews.com/2019/10/30/racism-campaigners-disheartened-by-uefa-punishment-for-bulgaria-fans](http://www.euronews.com/2019/10/30/racism-campaigners-disheartened-by-uefa-punishment-for-bulgaria-fans).
- "Juan Cala: La Liga Says No Evidence of Racist Abuse by Cadiz Defender." *BBC Sport*, BBC, 9 Apr. 2021, [www.bbc.com/sport/football/56689861](http://www.bbc.com/sport/football/56689861).

Kenmare, Jack. "Slavia Prague Ultras Target Rangers Player Glen Kamara With Vile Racist Banner." *SPORTbible*, SPORTbible, 21 Mar. 2021, 10:19, [www.sportbible.com/football/news-reactions-slavia-prague-ultras-aim-vile-racist-banner-at-rangers-star-glen-kamar-20210320](http://www.sportbible.com/football/news-reactions-slavia-prague-ultras-aim-vile-racist-banner-at-rangers-star-glen-kamar-20210320).

Liew, Jonathan. "Left Field." *New Statesman*, vol. 148, no. 5491, Oct. 2019, p. 42. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=138948212&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=138948212&site=ehost-live).

SVG Staff. "Should on-Pitch Referee Mics Be Broadcast and Recorded?" *SVG Europe*, 31 Oct. 2012, 13:27, [www.svgeurope.org/blog/headlines/should-on-pitch-referee-mics-be-broadcast-and-recorded/](http://www.svgeurope.org/blog/headlines/should-on-pitch-referee-mics-be-broadcast-and-recorded/).

Wahl, Grant. "On the Offensive." *Sports Illustrated*, vol. 130, no. 31, Nov. 2019, pp. 12–14. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=139383943&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=139383943&site=ehost-live).