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A match against the other homeland

The European Championship encounter on 11 June against Albania means the Swiss national team are not just facing any other opponent. Many of the Swiss players have their roots in Kosovo.

ETIENNE WUILLEMIN

It is a beautiful morning. Berne awakes. The sun lights up the Federal Palace. A few steps further hangs the flag of Kosovo. Mustafe Dzemaili opens the door, invites me into his office and starts to talk. Dzemaili has been the Kosovan ambassador to Switzerland for around a year. He is buzzing with excitement about 11 June, a special occasion for him. It is the day of the European Championship match between Switzerland and Albania. “The match between brothers,” remarks Dzemaili smiling. But it is not quite that simple. Switzerland versus Albania is more than a match. There has probably never been a match like it. Switzerland A against Switzerland B, say some. Albania against Albania, say others. Or Kosovo plus against Kosovo plus. They are all right.

Nobody incorporates the spirit of this match better than the brothers Granit and Taulant Xhaka. Never before have two brothers with the same mother and father faced one another at the European Championship. It is both a joyful occasion and a great challenge. Last autumn, when Switzerland, with Granit Xhaka, as well as Albania, with Taulant Xhaka, qualified for the European Championship, their father Ragip Xhaka said on the telephone: “I’m the proudest father in the world. One son is playing for Switzerland and another for Albania. This is the perfect reflection of our story.” He now says: “It’s lucky I’ve got two hands. One to clap for Granit and Switzerland, and the other for Taulant and Albania. Maybe it will be a draw.”

Granit and Taulant Xhaka have mixed feelings when talking about the forthcoming dual. They make com-

ments like: “It’s hard to play against your own family.” But then, as the conversation progresses, they say: “It’s a game. A special one maybe. But I’m looking forward to it. And I won’t hold back against my brother. At the end of the day, we want to win.” “We”, Switzerland. And “we”, Albania.

The “traitors” as role models

Lots of the Swiss national team have Kosovan roots, including the three key players – Xhaka, Xherdan Shaqiri and Valon Behrami. In their homeland, they are dubbed “traitors” who are not fighting for Albania’s cause. Ambassador Dzemaili is dismissive of such insults. “It’s a game. They are players and are pitting themselves against an opponent. That’s all there is to it. Nobody should misuse football to attribute political intentions or messages to any-

one.” The Swiss players with Kosovan roots did not reject Albania but rather chose to play for Switzerland – “the country that welcomed them and gave them so much in life,” he says.

When talking to Dzemaili you sometimes get the impression that he is ashamed of what Behrami, Shaqiri and Xhaka have been subjected to. He stresses that, “footballers are a prime example of successful integration. They live in a culture of community. They have shown the way, and this approach has long become established in other areas too, whether politics, science or medicine.”

The views from home are just one side of it for Shaqiri, Behrami and Xhaka. They also face a constant struggle for acceptance in Switzerland. People constantly raise the question of whether their identification with Switzerland is strong enough. The debate

The Xhaka brothers will meet at football’s European Championship. Granit (left) plays for Switzerland while Taulant (right) represents Albania.

Photos: Keystone



The new man from Valais in FIFA's top job

Gianni Infantino, the new FIFA President from Valais, is already coming under pressure. What can we expect from him?



Gianni Infantino still has to prove how serious he is about reforming FIFA.

Photo: Keystone

ignites when the players observe the national anthem in silence or sometimes celebrate a goal at their clubs with the double-headed eagle gesture.

Behrami's candidness

Valon Behrami is the most senior Swiss international with Kosovan roots. He has taken the younger players under his wing. He is the first to answer such questions and does so with remarkable candidness. Behrami says: "I sometimes envy the players who were born here. Only they can feel what happens when the anthem is played. I miss out on that. But I always give my all for Switzerland."

One thing is beyond contention: The talent of the second-generation immigrants, combined with their strong will and great self-assurance, has enabled Swiss football to make progress. "We would never be enjoying our current success without them," remarks Ottmar Hitzfeld, the former coach of the national team.

Switzerland celebrated its only ever World Cup title in football in 2009. While it was "only" at under-17 level, it nevertheless marked the start of a new era. This golden generation, characterised by players with more than one homeland, holds great promise for Swiss football. Granit Xhaka was also a member of the World Cup winning team. He now says: "With a bit of luck and a good performance, we could become European champions." Switzerland still has to get used to such a mindset.

His hardest battle took place 46 years ago. As a baby Gianni Infantino suffered from severe jaundice. His life was at risk, and he was in a race against time as only two people in the whole of Europe had the same blood group as Infantino. Only a complete blood transfusion could save him. The procedure was successful. Gianni Infantino is now President of FIFA. The native of Valais with an Italian background, father to four daughters, has acceded to football's throne after being elected at the extraordinary meeting in Zurich at the end of February. His task is to steer FIFA – an association embroiled in scandal – out of the storm into calmer waters.

What can we expect from him? Will his first fine-sounding pronouncements make any difference? They are so familiar that some are already calling Infantino a clone of the former President Joseph Blatter. "I have this weird feeling that Gianni Infantino will pull off his mask to reveal Sepp Blatter," says English foot-

ball legend Gary Lineker. Infantino must now prove he is serious about reform. He wants to strengthen human rights and the position of women in relation to football. He wishes to create greater transparency. He intends to restrict the power of the President – and, above all, the Executive Committee, which has proved to be susceptible to corruption. He also plans to set an age limit on its members. Infantino has already announced that the number of nations taking part in the World Cup will be increased from 32 to 40.

On the election of Infantino, Basel-based corruption expert Mark Pieth said: "Better a 'weather vane' than a misanthrope." Pieth spent several years working at FIFA as a reformer. He proposed these reforms to a large extent and saw how Infantino, then General Secretary of UEFA, opposed all of the changes that he is now advocating. This explains his use of the term "weather vane". Infantino has to prove that he has moved away from his earlier position. The reforms were approved by an overwhelming majority at the extraordinary meeting. The salary of Infantino's predecessor Blatter is now also known – but only for 2015. He received 3.65 million Swiss francs. It was at least twice that in previous years.

Infantino's performance cannot really be judged yet. Those who thought he could quietly set about giving FIFA a new, improved image were mistaken. It took just over a month for Infantino to come under fire. Documents from the Panama Papers have shown that he played a significant role in dubious marketing contracts.

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