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Excitement ahead of Euro 2024 (and Euro 2025?)

June will see the Swiss men's national football team competing again in the finals of a major tournament. The multicultural squad has been hailed as a success for integration – overshadowing their female counterparts who still struggle for recognition.



BENJAMIN STEFFEN*

Another Swiss men's international football match. Many of us know the routine. Busy restaurants and bars. A cacophony of chanting and cheering. A red sea of Swiss flags and shirts.

September 2023 in the Kosovan capital Pristina. Another Swiss men's international football match.

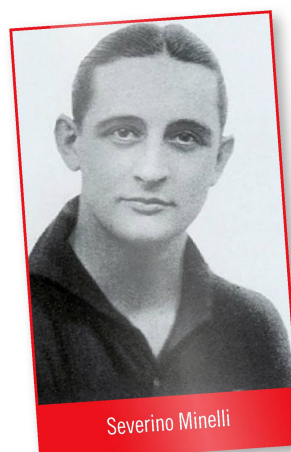
Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri, the most famous Swiss footballers of their generation, are sons of Kosovan immigrants. "Xhaka, you're in the heart of Kosovo," says a placard held by a child in the crowd. Xhaka has told the media that Pristina feels like home from home. His parents moved to Switzerland to give him and his brother a better life.

Younger sibling Taulant plays football for Albania. He and Granit met on opposing sides of the pitch at Euro 2016. Then you have Breel Embolo, who was born in Cameroon but grew up in Basel just like the Xhaka brothers. Embolo played against his country of birth at the 2022 World Cup. He even scored the winning goal. "Breel is like

a little brother to me," said the Cameroon coach after the match.

Football is a vehicle for integration, uniting people and countries. Switzerland jumped on the integration train earlier than other nations.

It started with players like Severino Minelli, who was born in 1909 and whose father had arrived in Switzerland with the first wave of Italian immigrants. Minelli made his debut for Switzerland in 1930 and went on to



make 80 international appearances – a national record at the time. Swiss-Kosovan hero Granit Xhaka is now the most capped Swiss player in history.

The first player with Kosovan roots to pull on the Switzerland shirt was Milaim Rama back in 2003. Members of the Kosovan diaspora in other countries received their first caps later.

Kubilay Türkyilmaz was the first Swiss international of Turkish descent, making his debut for the national side in 1988. It was not until over ten years later that Mustafa Dogan became the first player with two Turkish parents to play for Germany. After Türkyilmaz came the Yakin brothers, Hakan and Murat, the latter now being the national coach. Murat was born in Basel in 1974, but it took almost 20 years for him to obtain Swiss citizenship. The then Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi, no less, called Yakin's naturalisation a matter of "considerable national importance". At least that is how the story went. Admittedly, it was a good story. Ogi



liked his football. But this is not actually what happened. Ogi, on behalf of the Federal Council, was merely quoted as saying that citizenship applications could be “accelerated” in “exceptional circumstances”, primarily if there was “significant public interest” in doing so. But no efforts were made to expedite the naturalisation process in Yakin’s case.

Swiss football’s role as a vehicle for integration is exaggerated at times. Türkyilmaz played for Switzerland but experienced racist verbal abuse. He retired briefly from international duty, although his teammates probably could not have cared less about his Turkish heritage. “Essentially, everyone has the same goal. It makes no difference whether your parents come from Switzerland or not,” Hakan Yakin told the “NZZ am Sonntag” in 2016 after being asked whether things like that were an issue inside the dressing room. “You just focus on the next game when you are with the national team,” he replied. “Or do you get the impression that the players want to sit around a table and talk about it?”

Players like Minelli, Türkyilmaz and Xhaka remind us how much the identity of the national football team is intertwined with real life. War and politics trigger immigration – and Swiss football has been the beneficiary.

Immigration from Eastern Europe, as a consequence of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, has had the most recent lasting impact on the fortunes of the national team. Nowadays, Switzerland regularly qualifies for the World Cup and the Euros. Yakin’s men will also be at this year’s Euro 2024 in Germany, which starts in mid-June. Euro 2012 is the only major tournament that they have missed in the last 20 years. And unlike Spain, Germany, England, Portugal, Belgium and Croatia, the Swiss have survived the group stage at every finals since 2014: the 2014, 2018 and 2022 World Cups; and Euros 2016 and 2020.

Our footballers can more than hold their own in elite company. Take Granit Xhaka, who plays at Bayer Leverkusen, a top team in the German Bundesliga. Or Yann Sommer at Italian Serie A giants Internazionale.

Or Manuel Akanji at 2023 Champions League winners Manchester City in the English Premier League.

Football in Switzerland has been booming in recent years. Junior teams at many amateur clubs now have waiting lists to join. Pitches around the country are booked out most weekends during the football season – shared by young and old with family backgrounds from near and far.

The numbers are impressive on the face of it. Around 300,000 footballers representing 179 different nationalities were registered with the Swiss Football Association (SFA) in August 2022. Some 34 per cent had foreign passports, a proportion of whom were dual citizens. At around the same time, the SFA published the results of a comprehensive study on social integration in Swiss football clubs. Despite the tangible progress that had been made, the study also found that discrimination within football clubs was “much more common” against members from immigrant backgrounds than against those from



non-immigrant backgrounds. Ten per cent of the former had reported it.

Women's football is another issue. Switzerland's female players are not only starved of the limelight but also discriminated against. Gender equality is lacking. But at least the SFA are aware of this. Ahead of the Women's World Cup in summer 2023, they published a promotional video featuring a family at the dinner table. The daughter asks her dad whether they are going to watch the World Cup together. "There is no World Cup this summer." Yes, there is one, says the daughter. Ah, you mean the women's national team. Does anyone even know them?

Does anyone even know them?!

Until recently, Ramona Bachmann scored for Paris Saint-Germain, one of the top teams in the French Division 1 Féminine. She now plays for the Houston Dash (USA) in the National Women's Soccer League. Lia Wälti stars for Arsenal in the English FA Women's Super League. Riola Xhe-

maili signed for serial German Bundesliga winners VfL Wolfsburg in 2023.

Like Murat Yakin's citizenship application, women's football in Switzerland is stuck in the slow lane. No "significant public interest"? Professionalism remains a distant goal for the Swiss Women's Super League. Those in the know say that equal opportunities for girls in terms of access to good-quality coaching and school-and-sports environments are virtually non-existent.

There have been stories of women setting up all-girl teams, only for the male club members to dismiss the idea. Men still get the best training slots, the newest kit and the best pitches at some clubs. Female coaches are still a rarity, because there were far fewer female players 20 years ago than there are today. And there are barely any female coaching courses, despite women stressing repeatedly that a coaching course is not always the most pleasant of experiences if every other attendee is male.

This is the status quo.

And this is where we lag behind other European countries. Switzerland will host the Women's European Championship in summer 2025. It promises to be a celebration of football featuring all the sights and sounds of a major tournament. Euro 2025 will be a litmus test of whether successful integration in Swiss football also applies to the women.

*The author reported on the men's national team as a journalist from 2004 to 2024.

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