

■ BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

A tale of two clubs

Mostar, the unofficial capital of Herzegovina, is a city divided by history, nationality, religion – and football



Derby day...players of HSK Zrinjski and FK Velez step out onto the pitch Credit: HSK Zrinjski

The Mostar derby is like no other. Despite an enforced hiatus between 1939 and 2000, this is a rivalry that means a lot more than mere bragging rights. The oldest derby in Bosnia and Herzegovina encapsulates a century of political, ethnic and religious division, set against a staggering backdrop of soaring mountains and lush greenery.

There was an added spice to the latest edition, after hosts HSK Zrinjski became the nation's first club to reach a European group stage. However, not everyone in Mostar was pleased by this pioneering feat, not least city rivals FK Velez.

One of their major grievances relates to the venue for their October encounter. The Bijeli Brijeg stadium was Velez's home during the club's glory years until they were evicted at the outbreak of the Bosnian War in 1992. But to understand their expulsion, you have to go back to the break-up of

Yugoslavia, which began a year earlier. "At the end of the day, Bosnia is very much in a frozen conflict rather than having had peace sorted out," explains Balkans football expert Richard Wilson.

Mostar is divided almost exactly in half, with mainly Catholic Croats in the west and Muslim Bosniaks in the east, but you might not know it from walking around the city today. The unofficial capital of Herzegovina offers clues, such as Croatian and Bosnian flags only flying in the west and east respectively.

Bullet holes streak bombed out husks of abandoned buildings, and construction work whirrs around every street corner. It is said that around 70 per cent of all property was heavily or entirely destroyed in the Bosnian War, making Mostar the worst affected area in the country.

During the civil conflict, former friends and neighbours became enemies almost overnight; Croat

and Bosniak came together to break the Serbian siege in 1992, and then turned on each other.

Intense fighting culminated in the famous Old Bridge – or *Stari Most*, from which Mostar gets its name – collapsing into the Neretva River after standing for 427 years. It took more than a decade for the iconic structure to be rebuilt brick-by-brick, and it has come to symbolise peace and reconciliation between the two halves of the city.

Unfortunately for Velez and their fans, their former stadium is located deep inside Bosnian-Croat territory. Even worse for them, their forgotten enemy, Zrinjski, were re-established 47 years after being banished. Having participated in the football league run by the Ustase regime during World War II, Zrinjski were at the mercy of the newly-formed



Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. "After 1945, any club that was seen to have nationalist connotations by the new government was basically wiped from existence," explains Wilson.

"Depending on how much they disliked the club, their records were straight up burned." This included HSK Zrinjski, who saw over 40 years of history go up in smoke.

ABOVE: A tale of two clubs...players of HSK Zrinjski and FK Velez clash during the most recent Mostar derby Credit: HSK Zrinjski

LEFT: Unlikely hero... Slobodan Jakovljevic heads towards goal Credit: HSK Zrinjski

In the meantime, a multi-ethnic Velez became a force to be reckoned with in the Yugoslav First League and on the European stage. In 1974, the *Rodeni* (The Born) stunned eventual English champions Derby County 5-4 in the last 16 of the UEFA Cup, while the likes of Borussia Dortmund, Spartak Moscow and Rapid Vienna were all defeated at the Bijeli Brijeg in the 1970s and '80s.

But times have changed. Zrinjski took over Bijeli Brijeg in 1992 and remain there to this day. Thousands of Velez's Croat supporters switched allegiances. An 18-year-old Luka Modric made his senior career debut at Zrinjski and duly won the league's Player of the Year award in 2004. A season later, the club clinched their first title on their 100-year anniversary.



The Old Bridge
...Mostar's most famous landmark



Ultras Mostar...
supporters of Zrinjski make their presence felt inside the Bijeli Brijeg stadium
Credit: HSK Zrinjski

over the Australian shortly after, and Aldin Hrvanovic's piledriver brought Zrinjski level with 20 minutes to play. Shirt off, the Bosnian wheeled away in ecstasy, but the best was yet to come. Kozulj completed the comeback he had started by tapping home a rebound in the 81st minute. Cue

after Mario Cuze had headed in an early free-kick. That's how it finished at Bijeli Brijeg, confirming Zrinjski's biggest league win over Velez since July 1931.

And, despite the overt show of hostilities between the sets of fans during the match – one popular Zrinjski chant goes along the lines of: "Kill, kill, let them run away, Red Army into the underworld!" – plus the hangover from last season's cup final, there was no sign of trouble anywhere in the city. Mostar seems a place tired of conflict and determined to move on.

"I think the media and foreigners want to make it seem worse than it really is," says one Velez fan. "We're normal here, like you can see."

Boras agrees: "In terms of the relationship between the two clubs, we're in good contact. The day before, we had the press conference in the city hall. We always do it together. It's an act of showing respect and you can see that when the players and coaches talk about each other. At the end of the day, all of them live in the same town."

Zrinjski sealed their first domestic double by beating Velez 1-0 in an ill-tempered Bosnian Cup final in May... Referee Luka Bilbija brandished five red cards when a mass brawl broke out after the final whistle

Red Army set off an arsenal of pyrotechnics. Referee Luka Bilbija then brandished five red cards when a mass brawl broke out after the final whistle.

An equally fiery derby was expected when the clubs met for the first time this season in mid-October. Zrinjski ultras revealed they had captured a Velez Red Army banner and burned it shortly after kick-off, much to the delight of the towering, double-tiered west stand. Built into a hill overlooking the Neretva River valley, the stadium resembles an ancient Greek amphitheatre. And given the quality of football on show, it is the unrelenting Ultras Mostar that take centre stage on the opposing terrace, with co-ordinated flare routines, call-and-response refrains, and even catapulted red fireworks.

But, as Zrinjski's content manager Marko Boras acknowledges, the club have bigger fish to fry this season.

"Obviously we're very excited about the European games now, but it's only through the domestic competition that you can reach it again next year" says Boras. "We prepare for this match just like every other. But of course, it has a much bigger meaning for the fanbase, the whole city and for the other club.

The town's reputation is in question?"

The club even decided to postpone their first three league games to focus fully on the lucrative European qualifiers that began in early July. Victories over Urartu of Armenia and Bredablik from Iceland ensured Europa Conference League group stage qualification and a €2.9 million windfall.

With limited investment in the Premijer Liga, this sort of money is season-defining, not least because it gives Zrinjski at least six group-stage games to potentially earn a cool €500,000 win bonus. That looked like a lost cause in their first match though, as they went into the half-time break trailing last season's semi-finalists AZ Alkmaar 3-0.

"The atmosphere was very positive even though we were losing. The fans were making jokes that we didn't come for the result, but just to have fun," recalls Boras. "And then it started."

A direct free-kick from Zvonimir Kozulj caught out Mat Ryan in the 48th minute to give the hosts hope. Josip Corluka's overhit cross looped

ranks number one in the history of Zrinjski. It was an historic promotion of our club and city."

At the derby a month later, Zrinjski put in their most accomplished performance since they reacquainted with their neighbours at the beginning of the millennium. A rare brace from stalwart Serbian centre-back Slobodan Jakovljevic made it 3-0 by half-time,



Zrinjski captain...
Nemanja Bilbija heads towards goal during October's derby
Credit: HSK Zrinjski

And while the *Plemici* (the Nobles) have been making up for lost time in the new Premijer Liga, Velez have been stuck in reverse. The two-time Yugoslav Cup winners have been relegated twice, are yet to win a league match at their former home, and Zrinjski have picked up a record eight championships in the interim.

"Zrinjski's recent dominance has to do with planning more than anything," says Wilson. "In 2019, just before COVID,

they sat down and said: 'What are we going to do in these next five years?' And everything has been building and building towards that."

Their latest success was the sweetest yet: Zrinjski sealed their first domestic double by beating Velez 1-0 in an ill-tempered Bosnian Cup final in May.

Before the game, Zrinjski ultras turned their back when the national anthem was played, and the match was stopped in the second half when Velez's



Red Army Mostar...
Velez supporters
Credit: HSK Zrinjski