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Can football be a vector of citizen awareness? Goals against racism and for diversity: At the Young Boys stadium in Bern, there is no place for homophobia



In May the European football leagues are defined and in June, for a month, the stadiums will be emptied. Therefore, now is the opportune time to begin the balance sheets, both sporting and extra-sporting. Those that will also serve to decant victories, defeats, joys and frustrations.

Five days before the end of the season, the Swiss league already knows the 2023 champion. Young Boys (YB), the team from Bern, with its victory on April 30 against Lucerne by 5 to 1 took 18 points of difference to the current second, when there were only 15 points left in dispute.

Young Boys performed a relevant sports performance. He returns to the top after the 2022 tournament in which he ceded the scepter to Football Club Zurich. And it recovers the hegemony it built with the four uninterrupted titles between 2018 and 2021. In the current season, too, with serious aspirations to win the Swiss Cup (the second most important tournament in the country) on June 4 when it is measured in the final with F.C. Lugano.



On April 31, 30, <> spectators watched Young Boys' match against Lucerne where they were crowned Swiss champions. Photo Sergio Ferrari.

The main Swiss competition, the Super League Suisse, is not among the most famous on the continent. Taking into account the coefficients of team results of the last five years it ranks 13th among the 55 European associations gathered in the European Union of Association Football (UEFA). The top 12 best countries according to the ranking by clubs are: England, followed by Spain, Germany, Italy, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Belgium, Scotland, Austria, Serbia and Turkey.

At the national team level, the position of the Swiss national team is much higher. Last April it ranked 12th worldwide, ahead of nations of great football prestige such as the United States (13), Germany (14), Mexico (15) or Denmark (19).

Anti-racist solidarity

On April 30, Cameroonian attacker [Jean-Pierre Nsamé](#), star and scorer of Young Boys, scored the first goal of the match against Lucerne. The capital's Wankdorf Stadium let its joy explode when it was confirmed with that goal, almost irreversibly, obtaining the title. Nsamé is one of eight black players on [Young Boys'](#) professional roster, which includes 16 players who are foreign or have a second nationality in addition to Switzerland.



The Wankdorf Stadium in Bern and a party of football and against all kinds of discrimination. Photo Sergio Ferrari.

The Cameroonian attacker celebrated his goal in a very particular way, as he had done 20 days ago against Grasshopper Zurich: he put his index finger of his left hand on his lips as a sign of silence and the index finger of his right pointing to his temple, with his eyes closed, in an attitude of reflection and protest. As pointed out by various media, Nsamé was in solidarity with Romelu Lukaku, the outstanding dark-skinned Belgian striker of Inter Milan, who on April 4 had celebrated with the same gesture the goal he scored in the semifinal of the Coppa Italia (1-1 against Juventus in Torino). Lukaku did it in front of the grandstand of the Turin fans from where they had previously come aggressive racist insults against his person.



Jean Pierre Nsame celebrates his goal with the same anti-racist gesture that Romelu Lukaku uses in Italy. Photo sport.ch.

That celebration, interpreted by the Italian referee who directed that match as a provocation towards the Juve fans, earned Lukaku the red card. However, the judge's decision sparked a great deal of debate in Italy. An Inter statement underlined "the great regret (of the club) that the victim has become the sole culprit." Days later, the Italian Football Federation overturned the suspension of a match that would have belonged to Lukaku. He acknowledged, tacitly, that the sanction against the Inter striker had been excessive and inopportune.

While in Italy Lukaku's anti-racist protest earned him the red one, in Switzerland, Nsamé's solidarity with the Belgian attacker (and with his anti-racist gesture), did not provoke any sanction.

Against all forms of discrimination

Young Boys already has a commitment of more than two decades promoting social demands in favor of diversity and against all forms of contempt and disrespect.



Young Boys poster with the rainbow colors of diversity.

On October 8 last year, as promoted at least once in each season, YB called on the fans to participate in their stadium to an action against racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, sexism and discrimination of any kind. That day in the match against St. Gallen, with the slogan "Show your example – for diversity without discrimination" and "in favor of a diverse and open society", the capital team proposed to "raise awareness and strengthen the will to act in a socially responsible way against discrimination". As part of this initiative, YB on its website asked: "Did you witness a racist incident?", giving the possibility of opening a digital window on the same page to "report the case and obtain professional support and advice".



Young Boys against homophobia. Great banner in the popular sector of the fans.

That day, the players took to the field wearing black T-shirts with the slogan "Show your example", alluding to the day, and unfurled, before the game, a banner with the slogan "for diversity without discrimination". They thus sent a strong signal in favour of peace, openness and against all kinds of discriminatory abuse.

This special annual action carried out since 2004 by the now crowned Swiss champion, is also part of the week promoted by the Football Against Racism in Europe Campaign, FARE, (Football Against Racism in Europe), which takes place at the continental level.

In each match in which YB plays at home, anti-racism slogans are projected on the stadium's internal electronic posters. On several occasions, in each season, the band of the captain of the team, as well as the pennants of the corners of the stadium wear the colors of the rainbow, of gay pride, of the LGTB + movement. The commitment to diversity has been systematically installed in the sports policy of the Bernese club in recent decades.



Self-criticism transformed into citizen pedagogy

It was exactly in 1996 when the association "Gemeinsam Gegen Rassismus" (Together against Racism) was born, popularly identified with the name of its headquarters, an open place called Halbzeit (between time or intermediate break). Since then, this association brings together a large group of Young Boys fans. It was in the 1995-1996 season when the association launched its first [Campaign against Racism](#). Those were times when the club had very few resources and that organized group even went to find the necessary resources to finance the club's shirt, recalls Stefan Stauffiger, one of the current heads of communication of YB, who for 20 years has accompanied the capital club, before from the stands of the supporters and then, from the press gallery. "That group had very clear objectives of fighting racist intolerance," he says.



Young Boys Swiss 2023.

As the HalbZeit website recalls, the reason for the campaign was obvious: racist and neo-Nazi hooligans had made the Wankdorf Stadium unsafe for years. The dark-skinned players of the visiting teams were systematically booed, and even, as a mockery, bananas were thrown at them from some sectors of the stands. As the association recalls, given the

official inability to give answers, and as "regular spectators to the matches, we could not accept that situation". "We had to do something", and from this degrading reality, in the perspective of opposing unacceptable values in a football stadium, the campaign against racism emerged. Round tables were promoted, publications on this subject in the club's newspaper, spaces in the media, announcements through the stadium loudspeakers. In addition, at various points in its history, the association promoted an effective rapprochement of the Bernese football world with groups of undocumented migrants and refugees, particularly vulnerable sectors of Swiss society.

The road was long and the pedagogy of awareness from that organized sector of the fans paid off. The result, HalbZeit recapitulates, "was that racist attacks and abuses, as well as the use of swastikas, decreased significantly. Fans and families felt safer again and were gradually able to get back on track in the stadium."



Young Boys against homophobia.

This strong spirit of social openness was also evident during the current season that is about to end. A significant part of the more than 20,000 members – a record figure for a Swiss club – are entire families who attend the matches when YB plays at home. Thousands of children, who have a specific family sector, give the Wankdorf Stadium a relaxed air, incomparable with so many other fields in the world that live climates of great tension. In Bern, a Sunday at the stadium already enrolls in a normal family activity, such as going to a cinema, a park or taking a walk in the mountains.

Effervescence for children and young people that particularly exploits Children's Day, a special day that takes place every semester, in which tickets are guaranteed at popular prices in all sectors of the stadium (stalls and grandstands), both for children and for the adults who accompany them.

Looking at this journey of more than 20 years, Stefan Stauffiger does not hide the pride of the intense pedagogical work that has been carried out: "Young Boys is today an emblematic club for its constant work in favor of diversity and tolerance, and not only anti-racism. It is exemplary to recognize that what at one time emerged as a response from a group of supporters has now become the institutional policy of the club, which has allowed it to win, even, European recognition. "



Convocación a la gran fiesta popular del domingo 7 de mayo para celebrar el título: Manos negras y manos blancas. Foto YB.

Sin embargo, esta tarea de concientización no puede considerarse nunca como totalmente cumplida, reflexiona Stauffiger. De vez en cuando, en algún estadio suizo puede escucharse algún insulto racista u homofóbico aislado. “Pero es muy interesante constatar, en particular en el Estadio Wankdorf, que, si alguna vez se escucha algo así, de inmediato son los mismos fans de la cercanía que reaccionan, critican al promotor por esa actitud y frenan secamente la agresión verbal”.

Goals are loves, the popular saying goes. Much more, if they imply social victories in favor of diversity. In this case they represent true popular goals.

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