GENERAZIONE WUNDERTEAM

THE RISE AND FALL OF AUSTRIA'S WONDER TEAM

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AT THE ROOTS OF THE WUNDERTEAM: THE BIRTH OF DANUBIAN FOOTBALL

Within the Austro-Hungarian Empire – which stretched over an area of about 70,000km² and included, among others, present-day Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic – frequent invectives were directed from Vienna to its Hungarian neighbours. The dominant thought among the upper classes of Viennese society was that Budapest was a sort of younger sister of Vienna, poorer and backward. This stereotypical and derogatory view was summed up in the words of the politician and traveller Francz Von Löher, 'There is no cultural idea, neither of a legal, military, state, religious, social, artistic or scientific nature, nor of any other field from Hungary that has spread to the civilised world.' The truth is that the Hungarians have remained the same commercially as they were a thousand years ago, when their camps stood out along the Asian steppes. Austrian anti-Semites, moreover, used to refer to Budapest as 'Judapest', claiming it was 'a city of gypsies and Jews'. The then

Czechoslovakia and the Bohemian and Moravian economic migrants who had settled in the suburbs of Vienna were also targeted. Karl Lueger, mayor of Vienna, Hitler's inspirer and creator of the Christian Social Party, in reference to the migration flows from Bohemia and Moravia said, 'Vienna must continue to be Germanic and the Germanic character of the city must not be questioned.' In 1897, the founding of the Challenge Cup was to re-propose these bitter rivalries for the first time in football.

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FOOTBALL IN Austria was developed on the English model in the last years of the 19th century and spread from some elite circles in Vienna. The spread was progressive and involved suburbs, smaller cities and rural areas. The growth of other sports alongside football included disciplines such as horse riding – galloping had appeared in 1839 and trotting in 1878 – gymnastics, running and the notorious Viennese ice skating school. Later, alpine sports, climbing, cycling, athletics and grass tennis would also became popular.

But within a few years football had reached peaks of popularity never seen before, thanks to its ability to spread in Vienna first and, later, within the whole country. If before the Great War sport had been almost exclusively for the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, with the advent of the conflict it began to take root at the front and in the prison camps as a pastime among soldiers. With the end of hostilities and the birth of the First Austrian Republic, it became one of the activities through which men at labour camps used to spend their free time.

Thanks to new laws that allowed workers more flexible hours and a shorter working day, an increasing number of sports clubs emerged in the cities and suburbs. The interest of the population in sport had been strengthened by the war experience: the desire and opportunity to dedicate oneself

to recreational and sporting activities in groups had never been shared as much as in the years following the Great War. And it was thanks to sport that a climate of solidarity and a sense of community, accompanied by participation in various disciplines, was generated both in bourgeois circles and in factory environments. It was precisely in this context that in 1931 Vienna would organise the second edition of the Olympic Games of the Workers.

The birth of Viennese football was the work of the English founding fathers. They were the first to play football in the Austrian capital and were employees of several British companies based in Vienna. The key year was 1894: First Vienna and Vienna Cricket and Football Club were born almost simultaneously. One of the main differences between the two was that while Vienna Cricket and Football Club had only English players, First Vienna was also open to non-British players: in 1897, in the 11 of First Vienna there were five Austrian players, although there was also the English-speaking John Mac and another player had joined the team after experience in England.

Between 1897 and 1900 there were 45 clubs in the capital, 17 of which joined the ÖFU, the Austrian Football Union, the first football association founded in Austria, in 1900. The ÖFU was dissolved only four years later, however, when First Vienna and Vienna Cricket and Football Clubs, following some differences, founded the ÖFV, which only a year later would join FIFA. But from 1926, two years after the turning point towards professional football, the ÖFV was replaced by the ÖFB. However, the differences between the two would be minimal and purely organisational in nature.

The initial function of football was mainly to involve English immigrants in an outside-of-work activity aimed at occupying their leisure time. After a few years, however, the

increased interest in the world of football grew, even in the newspapers that dedicated more and more ink to matches. In 1897, John Gramlick, a leading member of Vienna Cricket and Football Club, founded the first international club competition in which all the formations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire could take part, the Challenge Cup (or Challenge Kupa, as it was called in Budapest). Between 1899 and 1910, other important clubs such as Rapid Vienna, Admira and Wacker were born.

The English imprint was also immediately evident in the terms adopted about roles, such as goalkeeper, centre-back, half-back, forward and other football-related terms such as cup, penalty or derby.

In the years to come, the union between football and England within the Austrian capital was further strengthened thanks to some English players who had emigrated to Vienna over the years to work for British clubs. One example was that of Magnus Douglas Nicholson, a player from West Bromwich Albion who moved to Vienna on business – he worked for the Thomas Cook travel agency, became a First Vienna player and began to promote football by organising tours for English teams in the Austrian capital.

A small audience of fans was created among the Viennese bourgeoisie, and ticket prices were deliberately kept high in order to keep the proletarian classes at bay and to ensure that football retained an elitist matrix. As in other countries, Austrian football owed a great deal to the English founding fathers, including some founding characteristics such as club names, an emphasis on fair play, in some cases playing styles and slang borrowed from the English language. These elements distinguished the beginnings of Viennese football and in some cases have survived to the present day.

Over the years, however, the practice of football began to spread to other segments of the population: it became fashionable to play in the streets, parks and squares of Vienna. Any object with a round shape could take the place of a ball if necessary. Players and spectators from the suburbs and working classes began to increase in number and the style of play that had developed in those years was transformed. Victory began to be considered more important than fair play and mere participation, and towards the end of the First World War Viennese football had definitely become the pastime and sport of the proletariat. Spectator numbers had increased considerably and many clubs had begun to flourish, especially within the capital. One of the main differences in the enjoyment of sport between workers and the bourgeois classes was their ultimate goal: among the workers, the main objective was recreation and distraction from the working routine, while within the bourgeois circles more emphasis was placed on results and the consequent economic gains.

Even the facilities had been redesigned from the early years: now several stadiums were able to accommodate 70,000 or 80,000 spectators, a sign that football had become a mass phenomenon. In the space of a few years, the social impact of football would have reached that of cinema, surpassing art, music and literature, which, compared to the game of football, did not make an impact on an equally large and heterogeneous audience. 'Daddy's beer, Mummy's cinema and brother's football,' it was said in Vienna.

Thus was born in the early 1920s a deep-rooted football culture around the Austrian capital, characterised by the ability to mobilise the masses and to represent almost exclusively a male phenomenon, although some women's clubs had appeared after 1918. It was a culture largely confined to

the capital, and at the highest levels things would remain unchanged until the end of the Second World War. The same phenomenon had occurred in Prague and Budapest, which, like Vienna, monopolised the national football scene. Thus was born what was later called the Central European School, which in the 1920s, '30s and '40s would churn out several of the greatest champions of the time.

Shortly after the end of the Great War, football in Vienna had become a mass spectator sport. In previous years, stadium attendance hardly exceeded 10,000, even when Austria were facing their great rivals, Hungary. And since the end of the war, a new type of fan had appeared: the suburban fan, usually belonging to the proletarian class. The aggressive behaviour of these supporters was initially motivated – according to the chronicles of the time – by the bitterness of the defeat suffered in the Great War and the repercussions that had mainly affected the suburbs. The *Neues Wiener Journal* wrote about this in 1922, 'Since then – since the end of the Great War – the riots caused by the crowds have not only increased, but have also grown in violence. Fans are now used to carrying wooden clubs and stones, and when hordes from Fuchsen or Drachenfeld [at the time the most infamous districts on the outskirts of Vienna] flock to the matches, it is not uncommon to see stabbings.'

But it was in the very suburbs where hunger dominated that football began to sprout. Most of the fans and players came from Fuchsen, Drachenfeld, Ottakring, Favoriten and other areas of the capital, and the main sports facilities were almost all located outside the city centre.

The clubs were almost all characterised by a social and sporting identity: there was the elite and bourgeois club, Austria Vienna, and proletarian clubs such as Rapid as well as, of course, apolitical teams and sports clubs that rejected

any kind of label. In the early years, Austria Vienna and Rapid enjoyed the greatest popularity, as evidenced by the number of spectators attending their home matches.

In 1924 the Austrian professional championship was born and officially began on 21 September of that year. And from the early 1930s, Austrian – or rather Viennese – football entered its heyday thanks to the successes of the Wunderteam and the victories of Austrian clubs in the newly founded Mitropa Cup, the highest European competition for club teams, which was founded in 1927.

The fact that the Austrian championship had become professional, however, had entailed burdens and honours: those unable to stay afloat financially had to reluctantly accept participation in minor tournaments.

On average, 40,000 people were in attendance to see the Wunderteam, Austria Vienna or Rapid play. Football had become a business in its own right, and several companies were beginning to associate their products with the most famous faces of the game.

After the Great War, football also represented the main international showcase of a city whose charm as a European metropolis had faded considerably. The Viennese School remained famous throughout the world and this halo of popularity also benefited the smaller teams, who were often invited to play friendly matches in other European countries. Austrian players and coaches were also regularly contracted by foreign clubs. An article from 1924 entitled 'Europe's football capital, Vienna, is still in the lead' said, 'Vienna is the capital of the European continent. Where else can you see at least 40,000–50,000 spectators gather Sunday after Sunday at any stadium, even when it rains? In what other city is the majority of the population so interested in the results of the matches that in the evening almost everyone discusses the

championship, the prospects of their club and subsequent matches?'

As Austrian football was an almost exclusively Viennese phenomenon, the capital's clubs found that their most bitter rivals were not from the neighbouring city, but the big teams from their own city or the best European teams they clashed with in the Mitropa Cup: Bologna, Ambrosiana, Juventus and the teams from Budapest, Berlin and Prague. In the cosmopolitan Vienna of the time, one of the city's main institutions, the coffee houses, became the places where discussions between fans took place.

And just as coffee houses had contributed to the hunger of artists and writers, the same thing happened with football stars. Later on, as several exponents of the then Austrian modernism admitted, the Wunderteam's exploits during the '30s would become one of the most discussed topics. Rooted in each neighbourhood, coffee houses often reflected the cultural and linguistic identity of their area. They spread throughout the country towards the end of the Habsburg Empire and were the places where men and women from all walks of life met, despite the fact that coffee houses were made famous by the presence of bohemians and personalities from the most famous literary circles. They were not simply places where people sat and chatted over a cup of coffee. It was possible to find newspapers, which otherwise was not simply because there were not many kiosks in town to sell them. And the more regular customers – called Stammgäste – could also receive mail or wash their clothes. Card games and chess challenges were the order of the day, as was the organisation of pre-election meetings.

Since the 1920s, when football began to take root and the first professional league championship saw the light, something new appeared on the Viennese scene: the coffee houses of the football teams.

The supporters of Austria Vienna found themselves at Café Parsifal, right in the centre, while those of Rapid used to go to Café Holub, owned by Johann Holub, president of the club for 11 years, on Hütteldorferstrasse, where they also had their playing field. Café Resch in the Meidling district was the main meeting place for Wacker fans while Simmering fans gathered at a coffee house owned by their most prominent player, Johann Horvath. There were also more inclusive coffee houses, where fans from different teams would talk about football. One of the most famous was undoubtedly the Café Ring, which began as a meeting place for the English-speaking cricket community but soon became a favourite haunt for football fans. It was a place where anyone could say their piece about victories, defeats, transfers, national team matches or foreign tours for their club. Café Ring was defined as 'a kind of revolutionary parliament of friends and football fanatics'. One of Café Ring's most frequent visitors was undoubtedly Wunderteam coach Hugo Meisl.

Under the aegis of Austro-Fascism beforehand and German National Socialism afterwards, football would remain a means of expressing a national consciousness. It wasn't until 1942 that the turmoil around the world meant football suffered an abrupt setback due to the summons to the battlefront of most of the players taking part in the championship.

The *Scheiberlspiel* was born, a style of play that reflected a mentality focused on technique, cunning and the development of an approach where the collective took precedence over the individual. In addition, during the inter-war period in Austria unemployment had exploded, and becoming a footballer was undoubtedly a way of escaping poverty and ensuring a survival anchor for oneself and one's family.

The beginning of the 1938 football season coincided with the entry of German troops into Vienna, and the Austrian

Scheiberlspiel began to have to deal with a style of play that was in many ways antithetical – the German style – based on physical and moral exercise and strongly imbued with military aspects. According to the German school, a football team had first of all to be 'ready to fight'.