



INSIDE THE
HERMIT
KINGDOM

Football Stories from Stalinist Albania



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Chapter One

Footballing Beginnings: 1908 to 1938

WHEN THE second wave of Christian missionaries arrived in the tribal backwaters of Shkodër in the early part of the 20th century, they must have been comforted by the sight that greeted them.

The trip, almost certainly, was an arduous and energy-sapping one, weighed down with the ecclesiastical baggage of their profession on this perilous, weather-battered traipse through the rockiest climbs in what was still, in essence, a medieval country.

Shkodër was a city lurking in the shadows of the Bjeshkët e Nemuna – the Accursed Mountains; great name, terrible portent – flanked by its steep canyons and wide valleys, accessible only via its precipitous, upwardly spiralling pathways. It was a region also beset by the constant threat of banditry.

Often romanticised in the works of English artist, Edward Lear, the Shkodran peninsula remained a fiefdom ruled by the dictums of the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini; an archaic law system harking back to the 15th century which blended Christianity with primitive elements.

The Kanun propagated the cult of the *gjakmarrja* – the blood feud – with families granted permission, by tribal elders, to rain gory revenge on enemies who'd transgressed upon them. Also, it was notoriously demeaning in its treatment of women. After a wedding ceremony, the father of the bride

would present the groom with a bullet wrapped in straw, giving his new son-in-law permission to kill his daughter if she defied him.

Gjakmarrja was outlawed by the regime, but returned unabated when Stalinism fell, a much-publicised incident occurring in Tirana in February 1992, when a man was beheaded with an axe in a hotel lobby for a killing his father had committed in a northern village over 40 years before. Primitivism, to the present day, continues to find the oxygen to survive in the mountain fiefdoms.

Despite the hazards of their journey, the missionaries arrived in a thriving city, replete with opportunity, its marketplace a hub of traders selling textiles, crafts and silverware.

The first wave of missionaries, arriving in 1905 from Malta, established several Catholic schools geared towards the religious and educational modernisation of old Shkodër, complementing the teachings of the large Islamic community already present in the city. But they'd also brought with them something else.

On the sparsely grassed terrains, children played a rough-hewn variant of a game resembling football called *top e kambë* – ball and leg – the balls fashioned from rags bound with string. It was an import that was to strike a lasting chord with the people of Albania.

A Maltese priest named Father Gut Ruter, a patron of Shkodër's Jesuit-run Saverian College, sought to harness the religio-social aspects of football under the banner of the Christian faith, assembling a team called *Indipendenca* – the first stand-alone football *klubi* in Albania – in 1912.

Indipendenca played friendlies against any local outfits willing to take to a pitch with them, but they were lauded for commendable performances against the Austrian army sides serving in Albania; a 2-1 defeat in 1913 constituting the first international fixture played on Albanian soil.

Captained by Palok Nika and featuring Kolë Hila, Kolë Gjoni, Gjon Pashkja and Pashko Fishta, the club – boasting players regarded as mavericks in Albanian football's evolution – saw their history-making exploits documented in the Austrian-Hungarian press, adding further legitimacy and contour to an emergent sport.

Football thrived as a purely recreational pastime, until a merger between two familial societies in the city – the Mustafa Pasha society and the Vaso Pasha society – in February 1919 spurred the foundation of Albania's first official sports club and academy, Shoqëria Sportive Vllaznia (Vllaznia Sports Society), an organisation geared towards the betterment of Shkodër's youth, not only via the vessel of football but through the combined teachings of literature, culture, theatre, music and gymnastics.

Vllaznia Sports Society was at the core of its community, offering opportunities to young people in pursuance of a proper education and development of untapped creative skills. As a result, Shkodër was rapidly earning external recognition as the intellectual and religious centre of a new, progressive Albania.

Taking a lead from their Shkodran forebears, other societies in Albania founded organisations promoting similar virtues, proactive in the advancement of Albanian intellectualism and well-being; Elbasan, Tirana, Korçë and Delvinë all forming sports clubs similar to the Vllaznia model.

In August 1920, Sport Klub Tirana was formed, and briefly changed to Shoqata e Futbollit Agimi (Agimi Football Association) before the founders settled on the name Futboll Klub Tirana.

Albanian football had been represented by a team from Tirana since 1911, a predecessor of KF Tirana competing in, and winning, the Fier Fair Football Tournament – Turneu Futbollistik i Panairit të Fierit. The eight-team competition including sides from Elbasan, Kavajë, Berat, Peqin, Vlorë, Fier, Lushnjë and, of course, Tirana saw Peqini thumped

6-1 in the final. It is Albania's oldest recorded football tournament.

Newly founded KF Tirana pitted their talents against the gifted Juventus of Shkodër at the Shallvare Grounds twice in October 1920, and it was these well-attended friendlies, high on incident and excitement, that showcased football as a viable, profitable phenomena within Albanian popular culture.

New clubs Adriatik of Kavajë, Luzemi of Durrës and Tomori of Berat were hastily inaugurated, supporting the need for a competitive league structure.

During the November of 1920, the first football regulations were penned in Shkodër; a clarion call summoning forces together in order to pursue a mutual goal – the formation of a bespoke national championship.

However, the game was condemned by the ruling Zogist regime for, purportedly, 'causing acts of aggression amongst Albania's youth', and was forbidden from being played in the 1925 rewriting of the constitution.

Zog was forced to retract the decision after a spate of public outrage, possibly on the advice of Mussolini, whom Zog had aligned Albania with during the spring of 1925. *Il Duce* was a fan of the game, harbouring a deep understanding of its propaganda potential.

So, in 1926 and 1927, the games continued, Korçë touring northern Greece and Tirana and the university side of Shkodër both playing matches in Yugoslavia against teams from Cetinje and Podgorica.

In 1928, the Zog–Mussolini axis welcomed Italy's most distinguished specialists into Albania, to assist with the development of Albanian sport and, in particular, football.

In June 1930, after the founding of the Albanian Football Federation – the Federata Shqiptare e Futbollit (FSHF) – English influence was called upon too, former British intelligence agent Colonel Hill taking on triumvirate duties as refereeing regulator, match official and nominated chairman

of Albania's technical commission in time for the inaugural National Championship in 1930.

The first edition of the Albanian National Championship – *Kampionati Kombetar* – was contested by six clubs: Sport Klub Tirana, KS Skënderbeu Korçë, KS Urani Elbasan, SK Vlorë, KS Teuta Durrës and a rebranded version of Vllaznia Sports Society named KS Bashkimi (Union) Shkodër.

With meagre funding from Zog's government, clubs were forced to provide their players with kit, finance training, arrange facilities and foot travel costs out of their own pockets.

In spite of this, and due to mushrooming support at the Shallvare and the nascent popularity of the game in both Korçë and Shkodër, football was proving a success despite its lack of subsidy. However, the final of the first edition of the *Kampionati Kombetar* was never played, with the *Juglindorët* – the South Easterners – of Korçë refusing to participate, citing bias by the FSHF. SK Tirana – who'd finished level on points with the dissenting Skënderbeu *klubi*, albeit with a significantly better goal difference – were crowned inaugural champions by default.

Teething problems were something that football would outgrow, yet the government's want of interest in Albania's new national sport created the anti-establishment vacuum that Zog must have feared when inking the 1925 constitution.

Football-loving Albanians despised the regime and their snobbish non-involvement. With SK Tirana's success and their ability to draw big crowds, bolstered by a growing fan culture in the other competing cities, football became a forum for anti-Zog resentment which, dually, guaranteed the league's future.

The 1931 *Kampionati Kombetar* welcomed a further team, KS Muzaka of Berat. Formed in 1923 under the moniker Tomori (a name that the *Mistrecët* – the Captious – would return to in 1935), the new boys joined the *Kampionati's* increasing fold. Their first spell in the top tier was short and

they were relegated at the season's end; SK Tirana were the champions, again, securing a 4-2 aggregate victory in the final versus KS Teuta.

Being in proprietorship of their own league, the FSHF were inaugurated as a member of FIFA in 1932, and thus invited to participate in both the 1934 World Cup finals in Italy – a mere skip across the Adriatic – and the France World Cup of 1938.

On both occasions, a lack of backing from the Zogist regime rendered entry to the competition a financial impossibility. It was very much an opportunity lost for the newly invested Albanian national side who would, resultantly, have to wait another 16 years for their first competitive international.

The *Kampionati Kombetar* campaign of 1932 rolled on irrespective of Zogist lethargy with Tirana again the winners, this time finishing ahead of KS Bashkimi by two points in a newly adopted league format.

In danger of becoming a one-horse race just three years in – Tirana winning all three titles thus far – 1933 was grateful to welcome a new champion to the fore, KS Skënderbeu of Korçë, the perennial bridesmaids, eventually taking their first title crown.

Buoyed by the goals of Teufik Agaj, the *Juglindorët* romped to success ahead of KS Bashkimi having scored and conceded fewer than all of their opponents – worthy *kampione*. Tirana finished a disappointing fourth, way off the pace.

The remaining years of the 1930s saw a return to dominance by SK Tirana, winning the title in 1934, 1936 and 1937 – there was no championship in 1935 – Mark Gurashi and two boys from Kosovo, Riza Lushta and Naim Kryeziu, proving potent new weapons in the *Tirana* machine.

Football had blossomed during the pre-war years. Budding from its humble beginnings in the stark mountain territories of the north merely 30 years earlier, the game had

bloomed apace. Even in the wildest imaginings of the deepest sceptic, it was a growth that could not have been foreseen or logically charted. Football, in spite of its detractors, had taken its hold upon the Albanian people.

However, a change was coming, and not exclusively for Albania, but for the whole world, although it would be felt most sharply in the pocket of continental Europe that divided the Aryan north from the Asiatic east. And it would be a pinch that would last.

April 1939 presaged a new chapter in the dark, bloody history of the Albanian diaspora, an era that not only altered the nation's footballing direction but everything that its beleaguered people held dear.

In the forthcoming years, the championships – from 1930 to 1937 – would be expunged from the history books as 'the championships of the bourgeois regime and the reactionaries'. The Party's mission to edit the past in order to fit their abridged version of Albanian history had begun in earnest; the mere mention of the formative years of the *Kampionati* – in print or in conversation – liable to get you in serious hot water with the local authorities.

The promise of independence came at a heavy price. It was *Revolucioni* time in Albania, and not in a good way.