

# THE HEART OF POLAND

AN ODYSSEY THROUGH  
A COUNTRY'S  
FOOTBALL CULTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

When I first arrived in Poland in 2000, not in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that nearly a quarter of a century later I would be penning a book about the nation's football. In all truth, I would have found it inconceivable that I was still in the country to begin with.

The plan had been one year – maximum. Warsaw had other ideas. It did not surrender fresh blood lightly back then. Far removed from the dynamic, modern swagger it nowadays has, it was a greasy city of sleaze and darkness. Morally bankrupt, the Polish capital was a latter-day Gomorrah; an engorged version of Travis Bickle's Times Square. Obviously, as a cavalier young man, I was absolutely gripped by the adventure it promised. One year turned to two, two turned to three, three turned to four, and so forth. I loved it. Loving Polish football, however, would take a lot longer.

Early dalliances had been catastrophic. A visit to Legia circa 2001 had left me unimpressed. Not more than a few hundred crooked old grandfathers had gathered in the stands, and their murmuring and wheezing was drowned out by snores. Mine. If this was the best that Polish football had to offer, then I was better off without. No one, of course, had told me that the Ultras were either boycotting or banned.

Around a decade or so later, I tried once again. Would you believe it, again there was a no-show of supporters that went unexplained. Not that I cared. This was peak expat Warsaw. In murky Irish pubs we gathered to swap tall tales while Sky Sports played in the background. These were my Saturdays, and I couldn't have been happier. I did not realise that while I was down the pub, I would miss what is commonly regarded as Polish football's nuttiest era.

A Rubicon was crossed in 2016. I had a work trip to Lublin that got binned at the last moment, but with the hotel paid for I went along anyway. I enjoyed trooping around the city but within a few days I'd done all there was to do. Looking to alleviate the boredom, I rang the local club and asked if I could poke around their stadium. Clearly as bored as I, they welcomed me down, sending their press representative to act as a guide. His enthusiasm bowled me over. When he made me promise to return for a match once the winter break had ended, I had no hesitation in saying that I would.

Based on my previous experiences of Polish football, my expectations were set some way below the waterline, but to my surprise I found myself completely enthralled. Poor as the attendance was, not once did the fans stop for air. Encouraged by this backing, the side responded by launching wave after wave of buccaneering attacks. When the deadlock was finally broken, I found myself jumping on a steward's back with all the joy of an escaped orangutan. Inside me, a fire had been lit.

More trips followed in quick succession, but with match dates and kick-off times often conveniently staggered in Poland, I soon found myself cheating on Lublin and sharing my affection with others.

At the beginning, I concerned myself with the big clubs in the main cities and saw my jaunts as something of a jolly. They were a chance to check into flouncy boutique hotels before heading yonder to judge the local curry scene, browse used bookstores, test the region's beers or break into abandoned haunted mansions. Football was the focal point, but there was more to it than that.

Somewhere along the line, that ceased to be the case. What had started off as a fun pastime evolved into a full-on obsession. No longer was I satisfied flitting from one major city to the next, my tastes became more demanding. I needed the obscure. Just as much, I wanted to seek out the bangers, those crazy provincial derbies in the back of beyond. I wanted to see everything Poland had, whether it be her best or her worst.

As it turned out, I had timed all this well. Yes, I had missed the truly lawless days of football, but what I had happened upon instead was an extraordinary time of change. Comparable to the 1990s in England, Polish football had reached a fork in the road. On the one hand, it was bogged down in the past. On the other, a new future beckoned.

The ensuing metamorphosis has been delivered at the same meteoric pace as that witnessed during English football's own social revolution. It has been a pleasure to be on hand to capture that in real time. Not all the changes have been positive, of course. Whereas Poland's notorious hooligan problem has been significantly curbed, the times have also seen scores of characterful stadiums flattened and replaced by bland plastic boxes. The same problems that impacted England's time of change now find themselves repeated. How Poland deals with them remains to be seen.

Never did I think that my escapades would be turned into a book, and that alone is almost a fluke of fate. My football rebirth just happened to coincide with my adoption of Bonnie. Known as Bonzo to the butcher, I purchased an entry-level Nikon to record my dog growing up. As it turned out, that camera would see more action as my travelling companion. I could not have wished for a more faithful sidekick.

It is through this web of unforeseen coincidences that this book came about. Quite what it achieves, I'm not really sure. What I do hope is that it is one day treated as a testament to this thrilling time of transformation. Crucially, though, it is not just the changing face of football that I hope to have captured. Looking deeper, I hope the pages within offer a glimpse of the passion and soul. Somewhere within here, I hope that readers will find the heart of Polish football.

Alex Webber, July 2024



ONE YEAR TURNED TO TWO, TWO TURNED TO THREE, THREE TURNED TO FOUR, AND SO FORTH. I LOVED IT. LOVING POLISH FOOTBALL, HOWEVER, WOULD TAKE A LOT LONGER.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

This book should not be treated as a guide to Polish football – it is far from it. Loose in format, it is little more than a picture-led chronicle of my journeys around the country. For reasons that are diverse, some key clubs and stadiums have not been included. Wisła Kraków, for example, are arguably the biggest oversight. Having never been granted press accreditation, the photographs I have furtively shot at this noble club simply do not pass muster.

There are several other notable omissions. Regions such as the north-west are almost completely unrepresented, along with them grand institutions such as Pogoń Szczecin. I have not visited this part of the world, so the exclusion of such clubs is no more sinister than that. Of course, some of my excuses are downright witless. At the wonderful home of Tarnovia Tarnów, I was treated with such hospitality by the fans that the images I shot look like they were taken standing on my head. It's possible that some actually were.

Along the football trail, I have enjoyed visits to numerous sizeable clubs such as Jagiellonia Białystok, Korona Kielce, Zagłębie Sosnowiec, and others. Again, these are absent due to a variety of circumstances. Having visited over 160 clubs, a line needed to be drawn. Not all could make the cut. A line also needed to be drawn due to pressures of time. Dozens of clubs remain on my bucket list yet ticking them off would have required years of added travel. This is why such groundhopping staples as Polonia Stubice are AWOL from this book.

As for the accompanying texts, I must stress these were written with the English speaker in mind. The Polish language is a complex animal. Where it makes most sense, Anglicised naming conventions have been used: Warsaw is Warsaw as opposed to Warszawa, for example.

With regard to the words and waffle, I have tried to offer a brief background to each club

that is mentioned. At times this was all but impossible. On the other end of the scale, such is the history of Poland's larger clubs that I have merely provided a few condensed facts to act as a primer; providing anything more in-depth would have necessitated entire forests to be felled. Unfortunately, it is a given that there will be historical inaccuracies, and for these I apologise in advance.

Crucially, most mind-boggling of all is the structure of Poland's league system. For the sake of clarity, the Ekstraklasa is frequently referred to as the top flight or the top tier. Where Poland's football pyramid splits off into dozens of regional leagues, I have tried to simplify matters by giving them an easier-to-grasp equivalent. Because of this, it is with some prevalence readers will find terms such as fifth, sixth or seventh tier.

Finally, it should be recognised that this work is nothing but a series of personal observations. This is the Poland I have seen and it is the Poland I have loved. In many instances I have offered my thoughts on certain fan scenes, on different cities and on stadium architecture. My personal opinions are just that and are in no way intended to devalue or demean. If offence is caused, that is far from the intention. It has been a privilege to travel this country and document the changes occurring in football. Above all else, I hope that this enthusiasm shines through any perceived negativity.





Some will look at Motor's ground and just see another new-build. That is not the case for me. It is here where my passion for football was born anew; it was here that Polish football first began to make sense.

**B**uilt to hold just over 15,000 spectators, the Arena Lublin was completed in 2014 and has, since its inception, acted as the home of the region's premier football side, Motor. It continues to sparkle brightly, and whereas many new-wave stadiums have missed the mark for one reason or other, this one feels distinctly 'right' for the club it hosts. Right in size, design, look and vibe.

User-friendly, it is an object built within walking distance from both the train station and the state-of-the-art bus station – a newly opened facility balanced on columns that recall Singapore's Gardens by the Bay. Passing some highly photogenic graffiti left behind by the Ultras (e.g. a glam nude bursting from the walls, completely starkers aside from a scarf held aloft), the

stadium closes into view as a rounded block clad in sleek, horizontal blinds. When lit at night in the yellow and blue of Motor Lublin, it strikes a balance between the futuristic and the inviting. Although identical on every side, the limited number of access points make it far easier to navigate than other grounds of its generation.

Inside, single-level stands wrap all the way around. Strangely omitting the colour yellow, seating comes in different shades of blue, yet while this would look cold and harsh in some stadiums, in this case it works well. That's entirely due to the fans. Religiously dressing in the sunshine yellow of the club, they supply a wall of warm, bright colour that contrasts against the cooling tones of turquoise, navy and denim blue.

Coming into being in 1950, the Motor part to the club's name was added in 1957, no doubt a tribute to the local truck factory that played a role in the initial formation. It was not until 1980 that the fans first savoured the sweet taste of the highest league in football, and over the next 15 or so years the club flitted between the first two leagues. Veterans still reminisce about Motor's three games in the 1982 Intertoto Cup against Lyngby Boldklub, MSV Duisburg and FC Lucerne. Helping clinch promotion back to the big time, yet more recollect a legendary 4-0 shellacking of rivals Resovia. The crowd of 30,000 remains a club best.

Relegation to the third division in 1996 marked the start of a dramatic decline. Spinning towards bankruptcy, the club had

little option but to temporarily change its name in order to escape its debts. By the time the new ground was built, Motor were flailing in the fourth tier. The opening league game held inside the ground drew 6,500, but thereafter crowds settled and largely hovered between two to three thousand. For me, this mattered not.

It was in this era that I first started visiting Motor, and I instantly fell into a recurring habit. After a morning spent exploring the hushed, shaded courtyards and winding, little streets of the Old Town, I would repair to the flagship bar of the local Perla brewery where I would eat sausages and studiously read through my guidebooks while sampling Perla's portfolio of drinks. That done, I would finally make the downhill walk to the ground.

Without fail, I would assign enough time (approximately eight minutes) for a look around the Centre for the History of Sport in Lublin, a museum housed in the stand closest to the car park. In here, I would stare blankly at medals won by Poland's greatest volleyball player, Tomasz Wójtowicz, admire a motorcycle belonging to the 1980s speedway legend Marek Kepa, and gaze rapidly at the outfits worn by the bobsleigh team at the 2018 Winter Olympics.

After this cultural diversion, a trip to the club bar was mandatory. Also run by Perla, it's a thin, narrow affair lined with green empty bottles, leather banquettes and TVs beaming live sport. Though one of the best to be found inside Poland's stadiums, it was opened at a time when the club were stuttering. Now, with attendances spiking, it's starting to feel too small for comfort.

### **A TRIP TO THE CLUB BAR WAS MANDATORY. ALSO RUN BY PERLA, IT'S A THIN, NARROW AFFAIR LINED WITH GREEN EMPTY BOTTLES, LEATHER BANQUETTES AND TVS BEAMING LIVE SPORT.**

During those early forays to Lublin, I was yet to become a member of the photography fraternity, so instead I took advantage of a hospitality offer that was too good to pass up. For a modest outlay it allowed me access to an open but intimate VIP room of clean white colours, hexagonal ceiling patterns, black flashes, and floor-to-ceiling windows looking on to the pitch. Alongside players' wives taking selfies, veteran players posing for photos, local business honchos and a few other corporate



randoms, I would happily mingle before taking to the best seats in the house. Crowds were sparse back then, but the volume of the support was always full-throated. On the occasions Motor scored, I would celebrate with all the vigour of the Ultras.

Fortune has favoured Motor in recent years with two promotions in three years adding several thousand to the gate. In that time, there have been classics aplenty. A cup game played on a Wednesday afternoon against Wisła Kraków, a match disrupted following a coordinated stream of flares launched from the away end; a third-tier game against Ruch Chorzów that seemed to galvanise the fans

during the time of Covid; and a triumphant return to the second tier that saw the ground swallowed in blue, white and yellow smoke.

These have not been the only memories that the stadium has created. In 2019 it was a host venue for the U-20 World Cup, and twice it was used to stage the Polish Cup Final during the pandemic. It has become what a stadium should be: a cornerstone of the city and a sign of its ambitions. As sporting investments go, it has succeeded.



LEGIA WARSAW

Were it not for the hand of fate, my relationship with Polish football could have started years before it did – and there but for (mis)fortune, it would have begun with Legia Warsaw.

The exact year escapes me. Maybe 2001, but possibly 2002. A work colleague had blagged me a press pass for a Legia game and packed me off with a warning in my ear. I would, according to him, be taken to the brink of insanity. This I was, but not in the manner he had probably expected. On the pitch, the game was diabolical. The referee barely left the centre circle, his own inaction summarising the lacklustre nature of this lifeless match.

In the stands, it was equally tepid. Played in front of a crowd that must have numbered less than 1,000, it would only be years later that I would find out that the previous match had seen the Ultras run amok. Either they were boycotting as a result of the punishment they had received, or they were banned. No one, however, had thought to tell me. Thinking I had seen all that Polish football had to offer, I left defeated and unimpressed. It was enough to keep me away from league football for the next ten years. More fool me.

Founded in 1916 by soldiers serving on the Eastern Front, Legia are considered the Grande Dame of domestic football with a record 15 league titles to their name and 20 Polish Cups. Outside the stadium, their history is remembered via a statue of Kazimierz Deyna, the country's original playboy footballer and a vital cog in the Super Eagles national side that finished third in the 1974 World Cup. There is also a club museum, and here sightseers will find jerseys, pennants, medals and a shrine devoted to the Żyła – the part of the ground where the most hardcore fans gather.

**REBUILT IN 2011, THE RECONSTRUCTION OF LEGIA'S ICONIC STADIUM CAN BE VIEWED AS ONE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENTS THAT HAULED POLISH FOOTBALL INTO THE 21ST CENTURY.**

Rebuilt in 2011, the reconstruction of Legia's iconic stadium can be viewed as one of the revolutionary moments that hauled Polish football into the 21st century. Befitting of the club's stature, the renovation saw the decrepit ground of yore reinvented as a smart, wraparound facility topped with a sail-like roof. Now firmly enshrined as part of Warsaw's landscape, the stadium's revival was a watershed moment – not just for Legia, but Polish football as well. At a time when the domestic game was battling hooliganism, the redevelopment of Legia's ground helped reinvent football as a sport where all spectators were welcome.

It has lost none of its sparkle and has, in its own right, become a tourist attraction. That much has been underlined by the stadium tours conducted by lifelong fans eager to relate their own personal anecdotes.



The first game played in the new-look ground saw Legia come out on the wrong end of a see-saw 6-5 friendly contested against Arsenal, but despite the result the match ushered in a new modern era for the club. Exploring the stadium from top to bottom, it is on the tour that tourists will enter the Presidential Box and the changing rooms. 'See that handle there,' says my guide, 'that was damaged by Cristiano Ronaldo.' Locking himself away for 30 minutes in the bathroom in the aftermath of a 3-3 draw in the Champions League, Ronaldo's 2016 visit to Legia saw the legend break down in tears of frustration. 'We joke that the oil stains in the car park are Ronaldo's tears,' says the guide.



Spanking new it might be, but the modernisation of Legia's ground has not cost it its atmosphere. Even the more mundane games see the stadium rocking. It is the biggies, though, that are to be sought. European nights are exceptional, with even Steven Gerrard naming this venue as one of the most intimidating he's visited. 'It's not what's in front of you, it's who is behind you,' read Legia's flag drop against Gerrard's Rangers in

2019. Unveiled to a wall of noise, it was enough to make the hair stand on end.

Such shows are to be expected for the big matches and have become a specialty of the Żyła. Born in 1973, the Żyła was created as a response to the Feyenoord fans who had visited Warsaw three years previously for their European Cup semi-final. Polish supporters had never seen anything like it. 'They walked around the city in large groups, decorated with scarves, top hats and clothes specially prepared for this occasion. In short, they looked like they were from another world,' regales Legia's website.

Inspired by the sight, Legia's fan movement was born soon after. 'Mothers and grandmothers knitted scarves,' says the website, 'whilst flags were sewn at home.' Finally, in 1973, this all bore fruit when fans gathered en masse on the Żyła, an open-air stand running down the side of the stadium. When the stadium was reconstructed, the Żyła was relocated to the North Stand. Physically it has moved, but spiritually it remains the same. Here lies the heart and soul of Legia, and to see it in full voice will leave a mark on all.

## POLONIA WARSAW

Characterised by struggle, despair and their occasional tip at glory, there are few clubs that compete with Polonia Warsaw in terms of thrills, spills and general turbulence. While cross-city rivals Legia have used the new millennium to build new trophy cabinets, for Polonia mere stability is fine.

Formed in 1911, Polonia were Warsaw's best-supported team for decades. However, the advent of Communism saw Legia fall under the patronage of the army, a move that enabled them to cherry-pick the best players – sometimes directly from Polonia's ranks. Polonia, on the other hand, were treated with suspicion by the authorities due to their perceived ties with the interwar government. While Legia enjoyed the ample resources provided by the army, Polonia were propped up by Poland's beleaguered railway company. The balance had shifted.

Polonia's status as the capital's underdog has made their triumphs all the greater. In the kind of dramatic twist only the football gods could engineer, the bulk of these have come at Legia's own stadium: Polonia's only league titles (1946 and 1999/2000) and a 2001 League Cup victory were all sealed on Legia's home soil. But times have been tough. Financially molested by a string of dubious owners, the last decade saw them plunge down the leagues, punished for an economic implosion that nearly saw the club vanish. During the darkest days, Polonia's crowds shrunk to the 500 level. That's 500 with no zeroes missing. A low had been reached.

Taken over during the lockdown era by a Frenchman who first arrived in Warsaw as a student two decades ago before successfully building an IT empire, Polonia's fortunes have lifted ever since. After years of stagnation in the fourth tier, two promotions were achieved on the spin. Optimism returned. Still, for many, just how much further the club can go rests on the redevelopment of the stadium. Accommodating 16,000 fans and VIP skyboxes, an architectural concept for a stadium rebuild has already been filed and approved, but so far a timeframe has yet to be confirmed as of the time of publication.

Frustrating as this is for Polonia's fans, the longer their antique stadium can cling on to life, the better it is for the football sentimentalist. Built in 1928, it's a place steeped in history: by old-school colonnades, plaques commemorate the lives lost here during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. In eye-line with a tinkling fountain, fans gather pre-match to discuss the upcoming game over sausages and beer. A foreign accent draws curious glances, and eventually, conversation: this could be with anyone from the club vicar to Polonia's English-inspired casuals to the Scandinavian expats who have attached themselves to

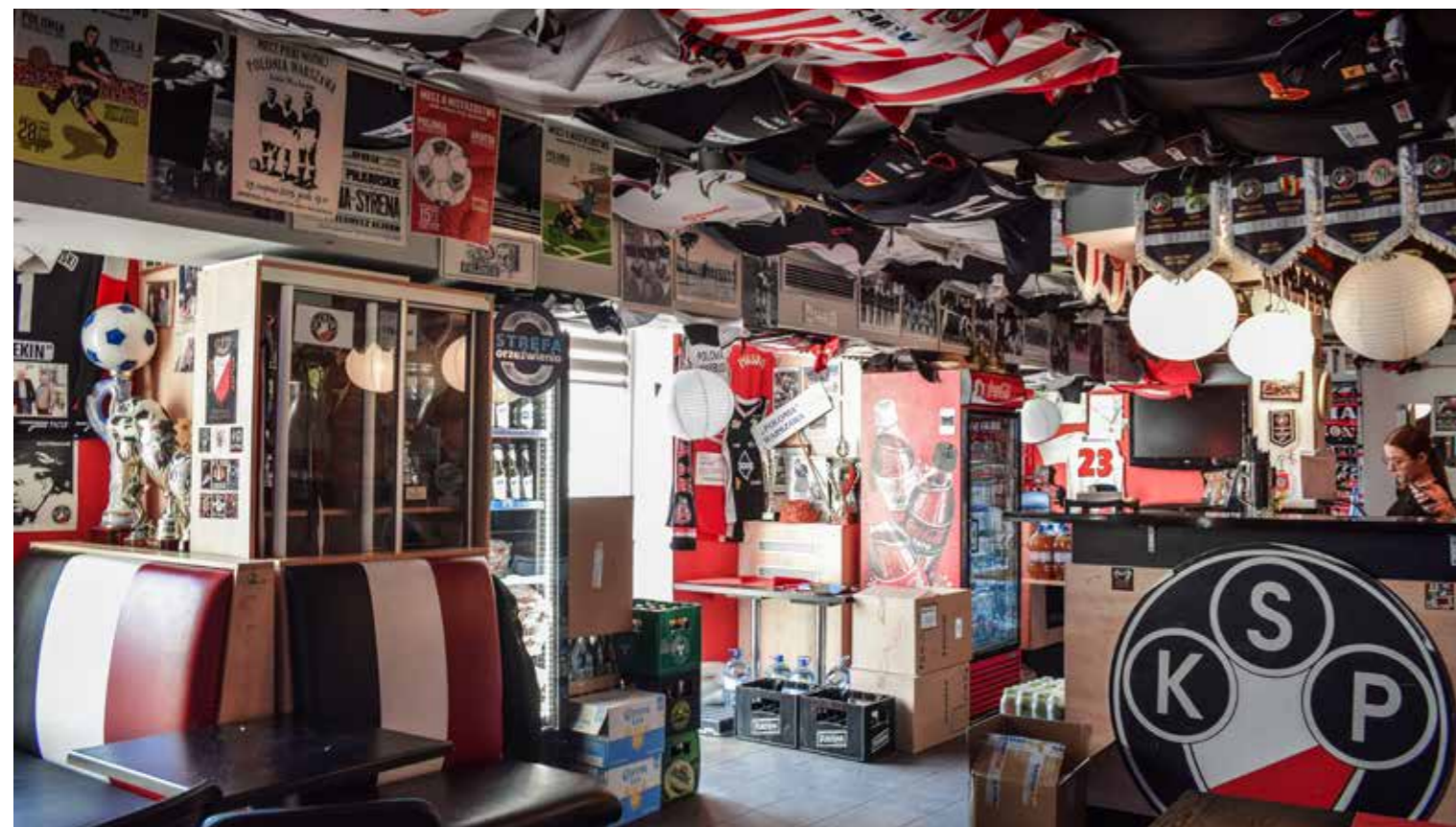
the club. And do not be surprised to find the owner, Grégoire Nitot, walking around bravely canvassing opinion.

This stadium is showing its age and you feel that when you squelch into the suffocating sweatbox that doubles as the lavatory. But for all that, how can you not love the place? Smearred, stained and draughty, the main stand feels of the kind you'd have once found in northern England. As for the view, it looks directly on to the Kamienna. Seen by the vocal fans as their spiritual home, this stand's capacity was designed to correspond with the year Polonia were founded: 1911. Where the ends are concerned, there's only one to speak of – an away enclosure with a few hundred weathered seats bolted on to a shallow, curved terrace.

Above all else, the club has the Czarne Koszule, a cramped bar in which every inch is consumed by Polonia memorabilia. Yes, you can find big-brand yellow fizz, but there's also a fridge packed with club-branded beer and craft brews from boundary-pushing mavericks. The redevelopment plans have provided for a bar,



sure they have, but they really don't need a new one. Shabby but atmospheric, this is the most authentic football pub in the country. Even when Polonia are not playing, it is well worth the visit.



There are shades of The Hive at Hutnik Warsaw. Much like Barnet, Hutnik play in front of orange and black stands that are clean, plastic and aesthetically easy on the eye. There are only two tribunes to speak of, but as a facility it feels well geared to advance football in the district. Above all else, it is functional and efficient. Opened in 2021, it is markedly different to what came before.

Though established in 1957, it was only in 1985 that Hutnik moved to this site. A simple concrete bowl was built to serve as home, and over the years it gradually fell into ruin. Constructed inside an oval earth embankment, over half seems to have never been developed and simply left as a scrubby basin. The other half offered no frills beyond grassy steps and a token spread of red, weathered seats. If it rained, the only shelter would be underneath the trees that stood behind one end. As an away fan, it was even worse. A basic cage and one portable toilet would have been your lot.

This was the Hutnik I used to visit. From around 2016 I made several trips here, taking the tram north to the suburb of Bielany. Sat by a small but carefully tended Italian war cemetery, my routine rarely changed. Handed a photocopied programme, this would be used as a bum protector when sitting. I'd smoke heavily, send text messages, and occasionally lift my eyes to watch some tough tackles. The rest of the crowd did much the same.





**A MAN DRESSED AS A PANDA PROWLED THE STANDS. NOT BEING A SPECIES INDIGENOUS TO WARSAW, THIS STRUCK ME AS A CURIOUS CHOICE OF MASCOT.**

Of them all, district derbies against Olimpia stood out, but it was a 2018 game that I remember the most. Bug Wyszków's reserves were the visitors, and they'd taken a travelling army of about seven pensioners. Taking one look at the state of the seats in their end, they chose to sit on the steps instead. From Hutnik's side, the fans were out in force, probably around four or five hundred braving the heatwave to see their side clinch promotion to advance from the sixth or seventh tier.

Among them, a man dressed as a panda prowled the stands. Not being a species indigenous to Warsaw, this struck me as a curious choice of mascot. This was not the only animal of note, either. On the pitch, play was disrupted after a terrier ran on to the pitch to sink his teeth into the ball. Meanwhile, around 70 or so Ultras got promotion celebrations under way by firing rockets and setting off orange smoke bombs. Aware that the club faced a fine for such indiscretions, the PA announcer pleaded with the fans. 'Boys, please, stop being idiots.' No one paid heed. This was a party and he wasn't going to stop it. Hutnik's ground might be fit for the higher levels now, but it's the old one I crave.



If you pressed a Warsaw local about Olimpia, there's no doubt that all would assume you were referencing the market, a grotty tent city filled with hundreds of traders selling everything from German bayonets and bootleg cigs to dented cutlery and dusty attic finds. Known as the city's most low-rent bazaar, walking among the grubby stalls can feel like an anthropological adventure.

## OLIMPIA WARSAW

Infamous for its raw depiction of 1990s-style capitalism, the market's title is actually a nod to the sporting complex it's held on. Pull yourself away from the dodgy hairdryers and VHS cassette players and you'll notice a small stadium through the throngs of bargain hunters. Here lies the real Olimpia – not the market, but the football club.

Founded in the east end of Warsaw in 1952, the club moved across the river in 1975 and have remained there ever since. As a throwback to this time, the shabby pavilion that houses the changing rooms and offices is not to be missed, decorated as it is with leafy succulents, postcards of puppies and pin-ups of '80s-era glamour girls. 'Nothing to do with me,' shrugs the elderly steward who sits among this curious array of interior adornments.

A little further sits a wooden shack, and within its draughty confines Olimpia's Ultras gather for their pre-match catch-up. As with most supporters of Warsaw's lower-league clubs, their allegiances lie primarily with Legia. In the run-up to kick-off, few will be talking about Olimpia itself. This, however, is not intended as a criticism. That a bunch of lads from the local estate turn up to lend their support to teams playing in the sixth, seventh or eighth tiers is something to be admired.

Inside the ground itself, your mileage may vary with the crowd numbering anything from several dozen to several hundred. Sometimes docile, but occasionally raucous, if your luck is in the game will pass in a fog of song and smoke. Even if not, a visit is not wasted: the stadium is a true one-off. It's not uncommon to find a ground