

BLOODY BATTLES CLOUD BELGRADE'S 'ETERNAL DERBY'

BELGRADE: An "Eternal Derby" tainted by ultranationalism: the recurring duel between Belgrade's Partizan and Red Star, which next takes place today, has become more about hooligans and police than sport. Nowadays a pretext for clashes between supporters of the rival teams, the event was for a long time a celebration of Yugoslav football, which had a certain romantic aura despite a lack of trophies. But that golden era of football collapsed with the breakup of Yugoslavia in the bloody conflicts of the 1990s.

In the stadiums filled with Red Star's "Gypsy" supporters and the "Gravediggers" cheering Partizan, paramilitaries were recruited who went on to commit atrocities. Warlord Zeljko Raznatovic, known as Arkan, found men for his "Tigers" paramilitary unit in Red Star's Marakana stadium. "Good football has been replaced by bad play and hooligans," said bitter teacher and Red Star fan Nikola Jankovic, 58, who like many others stopped going to matches in the early 1990s.

On Saturday, like every derby day, Belgrade will resemble a battlefield. Helicopters will fly over the city and thousands of riot police will be deployed. But away from the stadiums and matches, leading supporters from both sides regularly make news. At the end of 2016, top Partizan fan Aleksandar Stankovic was assassinated in his car, in what appeared to be a mafia settlement. "The rivalry does not have much to do with sport, it is linked to criminality," said Mihajlo Todic, football journalist for the Sportski Zurnal newspaper. In the streets of Belgrade are



BELGRADE: A file picture shows supporters of Red Star Belgrade clashing with police on the tribunes during the Serbian first league match between Red Star and Partizan, in Belgrade. — AFP

murals of deceased young men who "are not martyrs of sport, but victims of a quite different type of settling of accounts," he said.

Nostalgia for better times

Former player and Red Star legend Vladimir Petrovic, known as Pizon (Pigeon), nostalgically

remembers the time when he went by foot to the stadium for the derby battle. "After a victory, you walked the streets like a hero," he said. Nothing could be better than winning the derby, not even winning the championship, added former Partizan coach Ljubisa Tumbakovic. The clubs' intense rivalry

emerged from the creation of two clubs in the aftermath of World War II, replacing pre-war clubs that had disappeared in the conflict.

Red Star inherited many players and the stadium of the Yugoslavia club, while Partizan, created and directed by the army, played their first season in the compound of BSK, another former club of the capital. Whether you become a Gypsy or a Gravedigger is not a personal choice. "Children support the club supported by their fathers," said Sandra Radenovic, a sociologist at the physical culture faculty in Belgrade. Certain regions formed bonds with clubs based on legendary players they produced. Thus Zrenjanin in northern Serbia, where Partizan hero Nenad Bjekovic was born, is "black and white", while western Ub is decked in red and white for giving Red Star Dragan Dzajic.

Red Star has more fans across the country — 48.2 percent of Serbians over the 30.5 percent who support Partizan, according to a poll conducted in 2008. Red Star also won the first derby 4-3 in January 1947, and has since won 107 out of 241 contests, over Partizan's 76 victories. Partizan are consoled by the fact they won by the biggest margin, 7-1, in 1953, but have failed to match their eternal rival winning the European Cup Final in 1991. Today, Red Star could widen the gap to nine points in Serbia's football league and advance to a 28th title. But in a very weak championship, nobody will really care. In Serbia, football lovers are now more interested in Chelsea or Real Madrid than the derbies of the capital. —AFP

SNOW VOLLEYBALL HOPES TO STAKE CLAIM IN OLYMPICS

LAUSANNE: Beach volleyball is moving to the mountains and swapping its sand for snow. A spinoff of the sun-splashed sport familiar to Summer Olympic fans and seaside frolickers, snow volleyball is spreading from the Alps to the Andes and making a run at the Winter Games. If all goes well, volleyball officials say, their sport would be the first to appear in both the Summer and Winter Olympics. "Our key message is to be the No 1 family sport in the world," Fabio Azevedo, the general director of the International Volleyball Federation, said in an interview with The Associated Press. "I think it fits perfectly to our plan."

Itself an offshoot of the more traditional indoor game, beach volleyball has grown into one of biggest attractions of the Summer Games, thanks no doubt to the bikini and boardshorts uniforms and the party atmosphere. Now the FIVB wants a piece of the Winter Olympics, and it sees snow volleyball as the way in. With a European tour already established, volleyball officials have set out an agenda that would bring the new snow sport to Asia, Argentina and the United States with an eye toward approval as a demonstration sport at the 2022 Beijing Games.

"They want to push it ultimately to the Winter Olympics," said Martin Kaswurm, whose company manages the Snow Volleyball European Tour. "It's not something we put into the mouths of the FIVB. It's something they had as a goal themselves." The continental circuit, which kicks off this weekend in the Czech ski resort of Spindleruv Mlyn, was officially sanctioned by volleyball's European governing body for the first time last winter. Azevedo said the goal is to have a world tour next year and a fully-fledged world championship in 2019. A spot in the 2020 Youth Olympic Games in Lausanne - where the FIVB has its headquarters - is also on the federation's radar.

Winter Olympics

From there, snow volleyball could apply for status as a demonstration sport at the 2022 Winter Olympics. Azevedo hopes to have at least an informal display at the Winter Games next year in Pyeongchang, South Korea, even if it's just stringing up a net in a plaza somewhere. "We definitely want to be there and show people what snow volleyball is like," he said. "Being really conservative, in order to climb this mountain step

by step, I think the Olympics in 2026."

While Olympic ice hockey and field hockey have different rules, different equipment and different governing bodies, snow volleyball is almost identical to the beach game. The tactics and rules are also similar to the two-a-side beach sport, and many of the competitors come from beach volleyball. "Basically, we've just changed the surface," Kaswurm said. "The only thing different is that they wear soccer shoes." The atmosphere also resembles beach volleyball, with disc jockeys cranking out music and cheerleaders - in lederhosen instead of bikinis - pumping up the crowd. "Music, it's inside our DNA, man," Azevedo said.

Pure happiness

Usually there is a hot tub courtside, and traditionally the winners will jump in after their matches to celebrate (and warm up). "If you're brave enough and have your swimsuit - or not - you can just jump in. And with the drinks and other friends you can enjoy the view on the center court and all the mountains around," said Bobb Kufa, the 2016 Czech beach champion. "Pure happiness." Austrian national champion Flo Schnetzer said the crowd especially loves the post-match hot tub celebration. "The people laugh when they see people in their underwear jumping into the whirlpool," he said. "It's so much fun to play in such an amazing atmosphere and to play in such an amazing place. The crowd is really crazy; they love it. They like to party and they like to celebrate in the mountains."

Smart and flexible

But playing on a mountain has its own challenges. Mostly, because the snow is slicker than sand there is more of a premium on players who can read and react quickly than on tall ones who can block. It's also easier to jump on the compacted snow, so shorter players can be more effective blockers and height is less of an advantage. "Snow volleyball is for smart and flexible players," Kufa said. "All the moves are much slower. That means you have to be smarter - especially in defense. You have to decide the direction you want to go, and that's all. You can't take it back - otherwise you find yourself on your back with the shoes up to the air." — AP

WORLD BASEBALL CLASSIC GROWS SLOWLY, BUT FAR FROM MATURE

NEW YORK: The World Baseball Classic returns Monday for its fourth edition, growing slowly yet still far from rising to the prominence of soccer's World Cup or the Olympics. South Korea hosts Israel at the opener of the 16-nation tournament in Seoul, and the Dominican Republic starts its title defense March 9 against Canada in Miami. "The tournament remains very much in the early innings of its development," Chris Park, Major League Baseball's senior vice president of growth, strategy and international, said Thursday at a Yankee Stadium news conference. "Our ultimate ambition is to watch and supervise this tournament as it matures into a truly global platform for our game and a real competitor with the top international tournaments around the world."

First-round games also are being played at Tokyo and Guadalajara, Mexico; and second-round games at San Diego and Tokyo. The championship round is at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles from March 20-22. The United States, which failed to finish better than fourth under managers Buck Martinez, Davey Johnson and Joe Torre, is led this year by Jim Leyland and starts play March 10 versus Colombia in Miami.

The 2013 championship on the MLB Network averaged 843,000 viewers; it was the most-watched sporting event in the Dominican Republic in at least a decade, averaging an 11.2 rating on CDN. And in Puerto Rico, there was a combined 39.0 rating for telecasts on Telemundo, MLB Network and ESPN Deportes. "Let's see if their success will translate to more people watching," said broadcaster Al Leiter, a pitcher on the 2006 US team. The tournament is run by MLB and the players' association and games will be televised in the US on MLB Network and ESPN Deportes. In total, 171 countries will receive WBC broadcasts, and more than 50 sponsors have reached agreements.

Revenue is forecast to top \$100 million for the first time. Still, that is less than 2 percent of the \$5.5 billion projected by FIFA for next year's World Cup in Russia. While the World Cup is soccer's ultimate event, many players decline to participate in the WBC, which is played while their clubs are at spring training ahead of season openers that start April 2. Japan won the initial tournament in 2006 and repeated as champion in 2009, but Houston Astros outfielder Norichika Aoki will be the only Japanese player in MLB who will be at the WBC this time. —AP