



modern football and the death of history

René Guenther examines the murder of Austria Salzburg by pan-European drinks giants, Red Bull

Picture yourself in the following situation. You turn up for your club's first pre-season friendly, kitted out in the usual way – replica shirt, scarf, flag – only to be refused entry by your 'own' stewards with the words: "you lot are not welcome here." It may sound surreal but this is exactly what happened to Austria Salzburg supporters this summer after their club had been taken over by soft drink producers Red Bull.

What followed was a power struggle between a multi-million dollar company pursuing its corporate agenda and a group of local football supporters fighting for their club's identity. Given this uneven contest, there was always going to be only one winner – or was there?

Salzburg fans protest with slogans like 'we would give anything for these colours' and 'give us our violet back'



Whilst Austria Salzburg may not be a household name in this country, the Salzburg outfit is one of the most famous, best supported and, of late, also one of the most successful clubs in Austrian football.

Its illustrious history began in 1933 in a move described as "unheard of" in civil war-torn inter-war Austria, with the merger of two clubs from opposing (socialist and conservative) ends of the political spectrum. The neutral stance of the club was reinforced by its violet and white colours and the choice of 'Austria' as the club's new name, at a time when the extreme right was undermining the country's sovereignty by calling for a close political alignment with Nazi Germany.

Having spent most of its post-World War II years playing in the top flight, Salzburg's major successes came in the 1990s under Otto Baric, known to England fans as Croatia's flamboyant national coach at Euro 2004: three Austrian league titles, one Champions League qualification and, most famously, a UEFA Cup Final defeat against Inter Milan at the San Siro in 1994, having been the first Austrian side to eliminate a German team (Eintracht Frankfurt in the quarter final) from European competition on the way.

This period of success and relative riches was, however, short-lived. By the early 2000s, the level of debt accumulated was serious enough for the club to be in real danger of losing its licence, which, under the financial regulations of Austrian professional football, would have meant automatic relegation to the amateur

leagues. As a result, the club's owners desperately sought new investors. This quest included a highly embarrassing episode involving a mystery sheik, whose name was never revealed and whose "internationally renowned" director of football initially wooed the board with fake references and a doctored CV.

It was not surprising then that most supporters were pleased initially when Dietrich Mateschitz, respected local businessman and owner of Red Bull, took over in April 2005. A new manager was appointed and the squad revamped with the purchase of fifteen new players. Alongside a number of Austrian internationals, including ex-Arsenal keeper Alex Manninger, household names such as ex-Bayern Munich striker Alexander Zickler and Czech international Vratislav Lokvenc were brought in to give credence to the new owner's declared aim of Champions League football within three years.

But the transformation of the club did not stop there. As a first step, the club's name was changed to Red Bull Salzburg. Whilst deplorable, this was not unexpected. It is common practice in Austria for the main sponsor to be included in the club's name. When Red Bull's new kit and crest were revealed shortly afterwards, the club's traditional 'violet and white' colours were replaced with Red Bull's corporate 'red, white and blue'.

In line with Red Bull's 'snazzy' corporate image, 90 minutes of football alone would not provide sufficient entertainment to the paying customer any more.





Home games were turned into “events,” including, at the season’s opening fixture, a disco-style laser show, a parachutist landing in the centre circle and a celebrity kick-off by Red Bull Formula 1’s David Coulthard.

Whilst each of these on their own might have been seen by traditionalists as irritating but bearable, the picture that soon emerged overall was that of a hostile take-over. There was a clear intention to sever any ties with the “old” Austria Salzburg. Club sources went on record to declare that: “as far as Red Bull is concerned, there is no history, no tradition.” Tellingly, Red Bull’s website deals with past achievements in a short section entitled “roots.”

Unsurprisingly, traditional Austria Salzburg supporters became increasingly suspicious of the new owners’ motives. It soon became clear that “their” cash-poor football club had been taken over to become a corporate pawn in the chess game of international business.

Action was soon taken when a number of long-established supporters’ clubs joined up to form the umbrella group “Initiative Violett-Weiß” (<http://www.violett-weiss.at>) the main aim of which was to defend the traditions of Austria Salzburg through peaceful protest. Initial campaigns received encouraging local and national media coverage and attracted support from terraces across the world, most notably in Germany and Italy under the slogan “Gegen den modernen Fussball / Contro il calcio moderno” (<http://www.violett-weiss.at/solidaritaet-bilder.php>), meaning “Against Modern Football.”

Faced with some unpleasant PR, Red Bull’s corporate machinery soon hit back. “Critical” banners, such as ‘Violet & White Since 1933’ were banned from the stadium and half of the Südtribüne terrace, traditional home of the vocal violet and white supporters, was turned into seating.

An unsavoury fire-work throwing incident at the peak of the conflict was then used by Red Bull to deal with the issue in a more heavy-handed way. Whilst the six culprits were soon identified and prosecuted, Red Bull issued stadium bans to more than 50 supposed trouble makers, one of whom later turned out to be a grandmother who had purchased a ticket as a birthday present.

- Negotiations with the new owners were entered into with a simple five point petition:
1. Clear recognition of the history of Austria Salzburg under the new ownership
 2. A home kit in ‘violet and white’ colours
 3. Re-instatement of the ‘Südtribüne’ terrace to its original size
 4. Retraction of all blanket stadium bans
 5. Ongoing dialogue between Red Bull and traditional supporters’ clubs

Talks however soon reached a dead end. “It was quite clear early on that Red Bull were not going to compromise on any of the issues that mattered most to us,” says Harald Mittermaier, one of the leading proponents of the Initiative Violett-Weiß. “A particular provocation was a so-called good will gesture where the goalkeeper was made to wear violet socks at a match.

Ultimately, Red Bull were not interested in integrating traditional supporters. They saw anything that had happened before their involvement as unnecessary baggage and a potential threat.”

In October 2005, many traditional Austria Salzburg supporters finally gave up on Red Bull, most of them returning their season ticket under a refund scheme set up by the club for disgruntled fans. At face value, Red Bull has emerged as the winner from this dispute, which for the new owners was no more than a brief distraction on the way to assuming full control. By Red Bull’s own standards, things have been going well ever since.

After a shaky start to the season, results have improved and the side is now sat comfortably amongst the table-toppers. Attendances have been impressive in Austrian terms, averaging about 15,000 per game. Massive advertising campaigns have played a role but no doubt success on the pitch has attracted large numbers of new and casual supporters more regularly.

The match day experience at Red Bull Salzburg has been described as very different from traditional football. The lack of a core of committed, organised supporters means the atmosphere is strangely sterile and muted. There is some spontaneous applause and the occasional roar, but no coordinated chanting or cheering on to speak of.

Red Bull’s answer to this has been the use of club-rep style animators, encouraging the crowd to get Mexican waves going. Whilst this is not football as most people know it, it is clearly in line with Red Bull’s concept of corporately branded and carefully choreographed, circus-style “fun” events of the aerial triathlon, skate shot or x-biking genre. It remains to be seen whether this stage-managed approach will continue to draw the crowds when things start going wrong on the pitch.

But what about the other side, the apparent losers in all this? Those traditional Austria Salzburg fans who

would not watch quietly when their club was hijacked by a multinational brand. They have now turned their attention and efforts elsewhere. Steps have been taken to set up a new football club (as you can see on the right hand side of this page). SV Austria Salzburg (www.sv-austria.at) would revive the proud traditions of the currently defunct club.

Many, such as ‘violet and white’ campaigner Harald Mittermaier, feel that the take-over by Red Bull could yet turn out to be a blessing in disguise: “We will once again have a football club called Austria Salzburg, playing in violet and white. But this time it will be even better, it will be run and owned by supporters for supporters, deeply rooted in the community and resistant to any commercial agendas. Something we can all be proud of, football the way it was meant to be, for the benefit of real fans and not for profit”.

The Initiative Violett-Weiss is another example of supporters fighting back when they feel the commercialisation of their club has gone too far. AFC Wimbledon and FC United of Manchester have set the examples and now SV Austria Salzburg is about to follow suit. These three very different cases show that football as a commodity is now attractive enough to make the very rich just as vulnerable to this kind of intrusion as the relatively poor.

Any supporter will understand that turning the back on your football club is a very hard choice to make. The realisation that “this is not my club anymore” is linked with important questions about what constitutes a football club’s identity and why and how supporters identify with it.

How hard can football clubs push their commercial agendas before sizeable numbers of supporters are alienated? How much of a club’s identity can be sacrificed before it becomes unrecognisable? Its history, its name, its colours, its location? Most of us will probably never be faced with such questions or decisions. But for those who are, the case of SV Austria Salzburg and others provides encouragement that life as a football fan will go on, even if those in power declare that history has ended.



Reviving Austria Salzburg – the plans

Concrete steps have been taken to set up a new, fan-owned football club to continue the traditions of Austria Salzburg:

The new ‘SV Austria Salzburg’ has been successfully registered as a football club with the relevant authorities. This is a very important step in Austria. For any club to be recognised as a legal entity and conduct its business in a lawful manner, its constitution has to be approved by the police.

Negotiations have started with one local football club about a potential merger. The club in question is currently in the fourth (amateur) tier of Austrian football. Since it has no tradition or support to speak of, there is no danger of alienating that club’s existing fan base.

It is understood that talks have been held with representatives of the regional FA, who are said to be sympathetic towards the concerns of the initiative. FA representatives are understood to have had no objections to a merger in principle.

Should the merger be unsuccessful, a new start of SV Austria Salzburg at the bottom of the pyramid (7th tier) is considered as a realistic alternative.

A business plan for SV Austria Salzburg has been drawn up and potential sponsors are understood to be keen to support the project on that basis.

Fundraising has already started and includes SV Austria Salzburg supporters setting up monthly direct debits, paying the savings made by not attending football matches into the new club’s account.