Salzburg fans protest with 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.

modern football and the death of history

René Guenther examines the murder of Austria Salzburg by pan-European drinks giants, Red Bull
Ultimately, Red Bull were not interested in integrating traditional supporters. They saw anything that had happened during the entire period of influence 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 can be considered 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 settled comfortably amongst the table-toppers. Attendances have become impressive in Austrian terms, averaging about 15,000 per game. Massive nationwide campaigns have played a role, but no doubt the real attraction on the pitch has attracted large numbers of new and casual supporters more regularly.

The match day experience in Red Bull Salzburg has been described as very different from traditional football. That lack of a core of committed, organised supporters means the atmosphere is generally sterile and muted. There is some spontaneous applause and the occasional roar, but no co-ordinated chanting or cheering on the stands of.

Red Bull’s answer to this has been, the use of club-rep style animators, encouraging the crowd to wave Mexican waves. 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 annual tradition.

How hard can football clubs push their commercial agendas before visible numbers of supporters are alienated? How much of a club’s identity can be sacrificed before it becomes unrecognisable by 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 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 distraction 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 supports identify with it.

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The Initiative Violet & White 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 distraction as the relatively poor.

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