

A SPORTING CHANCE

The Anti-Racist Fanzine

Johann Wilhelm

"Rukeli"

Trollmann

The Anti-Racist
Fanzine for Roma,
Sinti,
& Travellers'

Funded by
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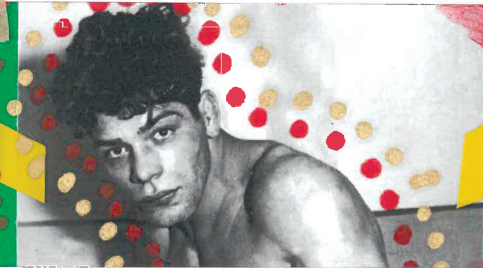


Rukeli: One of the Greatest of All Time

By Jonathan Lee

The boxer whose image is on the front cover of this fanzine

The boxer whose image is on the front cover of this fanzine is a Sinto man named Johann 'Rukeli' Trollmann.



Rukeli the Symbol of Defiance

Born in 1907 near Hannover, he was nicknamed 'Rukeli' because his athletic stature reminded family and friends of a strong tree (ruk in the Romani language). In 1933, he became the German light-heavyweight champion by defeating the all-Aryan-favoured contender Adolf Witt. He was stripped of his title eight days later for his ethnicity and his defiance in the face of the Nazis.

Despite being robbed of the title, Rukeli was still the darling of the boxing public. Good-looking, and with fast 'dancing' footwork, the papers called him 'the Gypsy in the ring.' Everything he was represented a threat to the notion of Aryan physical superiority. So, the day before his next fight against the big-hitter, Gustav Eder, the Boxing Union threatened to remove his boxing license if he did not drop his decidedly un-German fighting style. Despite knowing that he could never win a fight trading punches toe-to-toe with Eder, Rukeli turned up to fight anyway. To the scandal of the Nazi world, he arrived in the ring with his hair dyed blond, and his face and body whitened with flour in a grimly comic parody of Aryan purity. Rukeli stood bolt-upright in the middle of the ring, feet planted stationary in the 'German style' and took the blows for four rounds before being finally knocked out in the fifth.

Rukeli was told that a 'gypsy' would never be allowed to be champion in Germany. He continued boxing but was now the national villain of the boxing press and the boxing union and couldn't train in boxing gyms. After being forced to change his modern fighting style in favour of the plodding and predictable style derived from bareknuckle prize fighting, Rukeli only won one of the remaining 11 bouts of his career. In a final 'fuck you' to the Nazis who took his title, he allegedly turned up for his final fight dressed in the 'Brownshirt' paramilitary uniform of the SA (Sturmabteilung) in 1934.

After a period of incarceration in several labour camps, hiding out in forests, and being forced to choose sterilisation over deportation to a concentration camp, Rukeli was eventually drafted into the Wehrmacht in 1939 with the outbreak of war and sent to the Eastern Front. In February 1941, Roma and Sinti were discharged from the Wehrmacht on racial grounds and in July 1942, Rukeli was arrested by the Gestapo at his family home in Tiefental. He was held and severely tortured in the local police station until October 1942, when he was transported to the Neuengamme Concentration Camp near Hamburg.

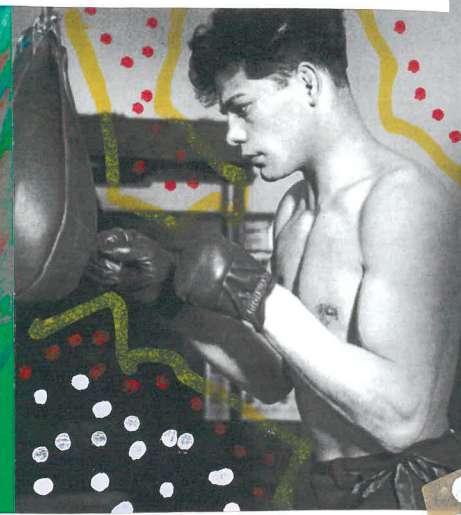
While doing hard labour in gruelling 12-hour shifts, he was spotted by SS officer and former boxing referee, Albert Lütkemeyer, who forced the malnourished and exhausted Rukeli to fight his soldiers every night. In 1944, he was transferred to the Wittenberge Satellite Camp where he was again recognised and challenged to a fight by a much-hated Kapo, Emil Cornelius. Despite his condition Rukeli won the fight, but, in an act of revenge while on a work detail, the Kapo attacked him from behind and beat him to death with a shovel. His body was buried in a mass grave and never recovered.

Rukeli the Boxing Great

I'd known about the boxer nicknamed 'Rukeli' for many years as a symbol of antifascist resistance, but only recently did I rediscover him not just in terms of this legacy but as an athlete and professional boxer. After first stepping into a boxing ring at the age of 8, Rukeli had boxed his way up through Hannover's working-class boxing gyms BC Heros-Eintracht and BC Sparta Linden. Despite winning the Regional Championship four times, and the title of the North German Championship, Rukeli was passed up for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics by the German Boxing Union in favour of one of his opponents who he had defeated several times.

Undeterred, he hired Berlin manager Ernst Zirzow and in 1929, at the age of 22, Rukeli went pro. In his early career, Rukeli's combination of heavy punches, technical proficiency, and his trademark fleet-footed 'dancing style' won him a string of big fights. He defeated fighters like the German Willy Bolze (KO, 4th round), Dutchman Rienus de Boer (victory by points), and Argentine Onofrio Russo (KO, 2nd round). Before the Nazis took power in January 1933, Rukeli had the making of a boxing superstar in Germany – precisely because of his exciting new fighting style. From the sound of it, Rukeli would nowadays be considered a typical out-fighter (also known as a stick-and-move fighter). This style was being developed simultaneously in the United States and elsewhere but was mostly alien to Europe in the early 20th Century. Out-fighters like Rukeli rely on fast hands, a long reach, and their 'ringcraft' of nimble footwork and feints to wear an opponent down while throwing jabs from outside of their reach and hard-hitting counterpunches as the opponent comes in to attack.

It's difficult to see how Rukeli could have effectively emulated boxers developing this style in the United States considering his modest background and the technological limitations of the time. While fights were sometimes filmed, and even broadcast, their range did not cross the Atlantic. Not only for technological reasons, but fights between local boxers were mostly transmitted to very local audiences in the early 20th century. The 1937 World Heavyweight Title fight in New York between Welsh Boxer Tommy 'the Tonypandy Terror' Farr and the 'Brown Bomber' Joe Louis was probably the first boxing match televised live to a European audience.



It seems likely that Rukeli forged his dancing footwork style organically to make the most of his natural physical advantages. Had he not been born when and where he was, his name might be remembered alongside other early pioneering greats of modern pugilism. Many of these names are as much remembered for their anti-racist activism as their prowess in the ring, boxers like Archie Moore, Joe Louis, or Jack Johnson. Fittingly, the out-boxer style Rukeli was unwittingly emulating is probably most famously exemplified by another towering boxing giant and a modern symbol of anti-racist defiance: Muhammad Ali.

THE LIFE OF REILLY

Meet Pa Reilly, the Traveller Footballer, Club Secretary, and Football League Referee

TM: Right, hello, my name is Thomas McDonald from the Exchange House Ireland. Thank you for coming today, we have Pa Reilly with us and he's a member of Travelling community. So, we're just going to kick off the interview here Pa, and the first question is what age did you first get involved in sports at?

PR: I think I was always involved in sport from say 8-9 years of age, but I never really got into sports fully until I was 18 or 19. We started up what we called a Traveller team and entered the league. And it was really from that age that I really got involved in sports. First and foremost, it's soccer, soccer has always been the sport for me. I loved watching it, playing it, loved talking about it. And what brought me into it was, there was a few of the lads that I grew up with, played in the soccer team, and they approached me because I was able to read and write and stuff like that. They asked me: "Would you become club secretary, filling out the forms, registering players?"

So, I agreed and that was my role. Even though I was club secretary, I still played with the team and throughout the course of the couple of seasons you go to a variety of management meetings and such, mostly disciplinary! But yeah, it was there that the opportunity came for the need for soccer referees, there wasn't enough referees. That brought me into the soccer refereeing. And I was at that for, four, five or six year, refereeing in the Meath and District league, which would have been local, and then the Leinster Senior League.

TM: It's good that you've had a lot of different experiences within football because I want to ask you if during your refereeing and all your playing, all the years from when you started and all the way up, did you ever experience any racism or discrimination?

PR: Yeah, I think that there's a very important point in your question, Thomas. Did you ever experience racism? Because sometimes the racism part can get lost. The link between Travellers and experiencing racism can get lost. Some people can fall into thinking it's about colour but Travellers experience racism, because they're Travellers.

TM: That's a very good point.

PR: And yes, I have seen elements of it, but what was more concerning, Thomas, is because you're a Traveller when you're going out to play soccer, or any sports, or you're going into refereeing or anything like that, you're always conscious of it. You're always thinking of it, that it'll happen. You're worrying about it before it even happens. It's always there, and that is the worry, that you'll experience it.

And I've had that. I've played football and you'll hear the words "tramp", "knacker", all the derogatory words that's associated with your ethnicity. And I've heard it directed at me and other players, Traveller players. In refereeing, yes, I've seen elements of it as well.

It stays with you, it stays with you. Like, I remember with the football team in particular, we just wanted to play football you know? Win and get up to the table and win as much as you can. You didn't go out there for that. You know?

TM: What do you think are the issues for young people involved in sport in general now, and for members of the Travelling community?

PR: I think today's world is a lot different than say even when I was refereeing in the early 2000s and playing. I think if you look at the whole social media now, like I've seen Travellers involved, Thomas, and I'm sure you have, they've been involved in different sports. And when you ask them can we promote them through social media, they'll say no, because the fear is of that comment section and it's that one thing all the time.

TM: I think one of the things that could be different now than it was for when I was playing football, or you, or any older people – not that we're old! – but I think the younger generation now, we would have experienced stuff on the football pitch or whatever sports we are involved in and we could go home and it wouldn't necessarily follow us home, even though we'd be thinking about it. But young people now with their devices, their smartphones, and their tablets and stuff, it can follow them back to their own house. People can remain anonymous online and call you all sorts of names and everything. And it can really affect the young people. They can feel trapped and there's no escape from it.

PR: It's a big negative impact on Travellers' mental health. I mean, look, we've seen that, Thomas, around accountability. There's no accountability when it comes to online. You report someone and they can delete their page, or they can be blocked or so on, they go back on and make another page, and they can do the same thing over and over. I hear this an awful lot: "Well, it's not just Travellers that experience that", and like, no one should be experiencing it, but the outcomes are very much different for Travellers, and they don't want to be identified at all because of those things. I think one of the barriers for me, really, is there's not enough visibility of Travellers in sports. You put on the RTE [national broadcaster], the stations we have here, on all these platforms and you don't really see Travellers. Yes, maybe at another Olympics every four year you might see a Traveller boxer. I've gone into town where I work, you have all these sports people up on billboards – rarely see Travellers. You know?

We have Joel Ward there who's gone professional now, a well-known boxer. There's not enough. And I know, you know, us Travellers, they are there in sports, but it's just the barrier is being [self] identified. And you know what, it's sad in one way, but I can understand it. Would you want to put yourself out there when you know what there's a high possibility, you're going to be called names because you're a Traveller? You're going to be all these negative stereotypes about your community. You wouldn't want that.

TM: No, I can completely understand where you're coming from. As you said there, when they do participate in sport, they don't identify themselves as a Traveller. That can have serious mental health effects as well of course. It's like you're trying to be somebody else.

PR: I would love tomorrow morning – no matter what sports you'd be involved in – I'd love to be able to say I'm Patrick Reilly, I'm a professional or I'm whatever in such a sport, and I'm a Traveller. You know, like, imagine the proudness of that, to be able to say that without having to choose, "if I say this what will the club think of me? What will the officials, what will everyone think?" I think what it is, Thomas, is that Travellers for years, historically we have tried to be what people say they want, that is "put them into houses and they'll be settled people, and we'll get rid of the Traveller problem." I think it goes back a long way historically, like my father and mother, for example, their experience in school, like with the white line across the schoolyard.

TM: Segregation.

PR: Yeah. One would be forgiven for thinking, you know what? I'm not going to even open my mouth here, because of the historical treatment.

TM: It goes back to the thing we were saying earlier on that the fear is always there before it even happens to you. Maybe it might not happen today, but you're still afraid of it. And so, it's always in the back of the mind.

PR: I've seen it with young Travellers that we engage with and talk to, and it's that you go into the shop and you're afraid of being followed around. You go for a job interview and if they see your address and it's a well-known Traveller halting site, your fear is they won't give you the job. And that's before it even happens.

TM: So, it's happening in everyday life. It's happening when they're going into shops, it's happening in their daily life. So, when they're going into sports, trying to get a bit of, maybe an escape from all that, the reason they might hide their identity is because they don't want to experience it there as well.

PR: Absolutely, the fear is that they'll be mistreated, probably not picked for the team, all these things coming on in to their mind you know, the club mightn't accept me, the players mightn't accept me.

TM: So, before we go, Pa, there's been a lot of very good points made there. The last question I'll ask you is what would be your recommendations for the governing bodies of sports and the people that can make a difference in sports today for young members of the Travelling community?

PR: I would certainly say, Thomas, there's a very good saying – "nothing for us without us". And I think anything that's being developed around sports, where we're trying to target particular groups, they need to have those groups involved. They need representation there. Travellers on say, committees, government boards, feeding into that process. I am very much for inclusion over integration. Inclusion is warm, it's welcoming, and that's what needs to happen. Wherever these bodies are identifying, or are going to develop strategies, or anything that's to do with particular groups – have the voices of those groups at the front of the table!

TM: I couldn't agree with you more. What was that saying again? You said nothing for us without us?

PR: Yeah, I think the right saying is actually "nothing about us without us", but I just put the 'Pa Reilly twist' on it.

TM: Well, it's a very powerful quote and it's very true, and I couldn't agree with you more.

Xerez Deportivo pay homage to Lola Flores

and Spain's Romani Community

In 2022, the lower league Spanish club released a special tribute shirt celebrating the iconic flamenco singer and her gitana heritage

By Paul 'the Derry Maradona' Reidy

It all started back in 1973 with German side Eintracht Braunschweig. With the team struggling at the wrong end of the Bundesliga table and the club contending with financial issues, the side from Lower Saxony accepted over 100,000 Deutschmarks from local liquor company Jägermeister to feature the brand name on the front of the club's distinctive yellow jersey.

Back in the early 70's, football shirts were uncomplicated, colourful affairs with the cotton jerseys at most, bearing the club badge and very occasionally the manufacturer's logo. Braunschweig, however, were forced to circumnavigate initial objections from the DFB (German Football Association) who overruled the initiative stating that only the club crest could feature on the shirt which prompted the team to change their emblem, replacing it with the distinctive Jägermeister stag logo.

The move was something of a milestone for the football industry and paved the way for countless other clubs to use their front of shirt space as a billboard for brands looking to generate wider exposure with an increase in live televised matches.

Brazilian outfit Corinthians were one of the first high-profile clubs who decided to use their shirt to promote a message of a different type when they took to the field. Ahead of the national elections in November 1982, the São Paulo based side, inspired by politically active captain Socrates, took to the field with 'Dia 15 Vote' (Vote on the 15th) message on the back of their jerseys as a drive to encourage fans to cast their vote with the country under military dictatorship at the time. This initiative paved the way for the 'Democracia Corinthiana' movement where the players would vote on key internal matters affecting the club with their action becoming a source of inspiration for many dissenters in a country which was then governed by a military junta.

Over time, many other football clubs have realised that important political or socially aware messages can be conveyed to a mass audience with the likes of Sampdoria's 'Samp for Peace (1994), Bohemian FC's 'Refugees Welcome' (2020) or St. Pauli's 'Kein Fussball den Faschisten' (No football for fascists) (2021) shirts all generating widespread interest for their unconventional use of space nowadays traditionally reserved for betting companies or airlines based in the Middle East.

Spanish football too has seen its fair share of clubs adopting the front of shirt space to convey pertinent social causes. From the iconic FC Barcelona 'azulgrana' stripes bearing the Unicef logo, marking the first time the Catalan club ever supported a shirt sponsor, through to both main Canary Island outfits (UD Las Palmas and CD Tenerife making frequent use of special edition pink jerseys to highlight breast cancer awareness.

However, one of the recent high-profile collaborations to generate considerable hype involved the Andalusia based 2A RFEF side Xerez Deportivo FC, who play in the fourth tier of the Spanish football pyramid, as they paid homage to both iconic Flamenco singer Lola Flores and to Spain's Romani Community.

The fan-run football club was eager to commemorate the city's most famous daughter who would have celebrated her 100th birthday in 2023 with Flores passing away in 1995. 'La Faraona' as she was affectionally known, was born in Jerez de la Frontera and became an iconic figure in Spanish culture famous for her creative talent as an actress and singer. Flores married into a 'Gitano' (Spanish Roma) family and always identified strongly with the Romani community and culture with her own grandfather also being Romani.

Xerez Deportivo produced, not one but three, special edition Lola Flores commemorative jerseys with the club's creative force Juan Pedro Vázquez explaining the process: "We were keen to pay tribute to Lola, as she is such an iconic figure and undeniably linked with the city of Jerez so we approached her family with the proposal and the initial idea was to just release one jersey in a deep red tone with that colour always associated with Lola and flamenco".

The club's head of communication Álvaro Richarte adds that the family were delighted with the proposal and as the creative process evolved, the idea came about to release two additional jerseys: a blue shirt featuring the Rainbow Flag representing the LGBTQ+ community, with Flores always a passionate defender of gay rights, and a green and blue jersey using the colours of the Romani flag accompanied by the 16-spoked chakra as an homage to Lola's ancestry.



The jersey made its one-off debut on April 9th (2023), the day after International Romani Day, and brought good luck for the Andalusian side as part of a 2-1 home win over Mar Menor FC at the Estadio Municipal de Chapín.

Apart from the extensive national media generated by the shirts, the jerseys proved a massive hit commercially, and not just among the Xerez Deportivo faithful. The initiative was also picked up by the international shirt collector community, along with Lola Flores' fans across the world with the project also receiving the backing of Spain's largest Romani organisation, the Fundación Secretariado Gitano.

Richarte was delighted with the reaction to the jerseys, stating: "Even though this was not the first time the club has paid tribute to the Romani Community with our club captain previously wearing an armband featuring the 'chakra', the success of the shirts exceeded our expectations and I'm not sure that any future venture of this kind will generate so much media impact, and the jerseys are easily the biggest sellers in the short history of Xerez Deportivo".



"Soy xerezista, seré fiel a mi estado,
blanquiaz es mi sangre y mi geto
de guerra sera: ¡XEREZ!"

What is your favourite sport and why?

My favourite sports are ice hockey and football.

So, hockey, because I've been watching it with my grandmother since I was about three years old and I like the sport, it's a rough sport, and I like rough stuff. And football, it's just something that belongs to a kid, I guess, football.

I think what I like most about football is that you're with the whole team, you're connected. You communicate with each other. You've got to be thinking, you've got to have your head up and see where the other players are and that teamwork, well, that's why I play football.

Do you consider yourself a good football player?

Well, I'm definitely not a good football player, but I keep on doing it with love, everything I can, and I think that's appreciated as well.

If you had to describe one moment in your active sporting life that you have as a favourite – any memory – what would it be?

I've said it before, this is probably my fondest football memory.

We were playing in Ceska Kamenica just fair play football, and it was a few seconds to go, and it was 1-0 to the other team. So, we were losing, and I had already gone to the bench, but I could see my teammate was running towards the goal, so I yelled "Matya, boom!" and he shot, he scored, and we drew the game, which was the best we could do, but we did it and I remember that memory very fondly.

Do you have any sporting idol and why?

My best one as an athlete that I like and admire is Mike Tyson, he's a boxer. Then I like Jaromir Jagr and then from the football world it's probably Neymar Júnior. Neymar Júnior is just a gentleman footballer, he's got a mindset, and that's just great with football, he's also a technical player, which I love.

What helps you tune into sport, for example do you have a routine? A lot of times people listen to some music, what helps you get in the right mood and get in the right frame of mind to play?

So, I definitely have one. I have to eat well first to be able to do anything at all, then I actually watch the indoor games, the football games, and that makes me want to just go out on the field right away, dig in, because there's a great crew there waiting for me. The guys are driving me to do it, like "come on, Eric dig in, let's go play football!", and that's the most a kid can ask for, to be called to play football, and it fills you up to go out and play.

Do you have any other ambitions in sports, what do you want to accomplish in sports?

I certainly don't. I don't really have any ambition in sport I guess because I'm not really like an athlete, I'm more into music, but if I could, then I would like to be like a real footballer or a boxer if it worked out well.

Is there any sport maybe that you want to try that maybe you haven't tried yet but would like to?

Well, the sport I'd like to try is probably MMA. I'd like to get in a cage and fight someone, that's been my dream since I was a kid. But what I'd really like to try is probably American Football, because I can see myself being into that too.

What is your favourite sport and why?

My favourite sport is football. I love it and I started playing it when I was young.

What is it about football?

Football is life, if I have to put it like that. It's part of my life, to play football, I wouldn't change it for anything.

How do you feel when you play?

There are emotions, there's respect, there's everything that should be there. My favourite player is Neymar. I like his style, I like his goals, I like his tackles, I like the way he just handles everything, he does it beautifully. So, yeah, well, I definitely want to take it as far as I can, like keep pushing on and on and on. But we just have to work, and work on ourselves, and it's either going to work out or it's not.

Any other sports that maybe you haven't tried but you're attracted to in some way?

I'd like to try playing hockey. It's a tough sport but I think I'd enjoy it. It's pretty much the same as football, except there's a puck, some hockey sticks, and skates. I think I'd enjoy it.

Do you have a routine that helps you get into the mood when you play? I don't know, do you listen to music before you play, how do you tune into the sport?

I definitely get up in the morning, put on some music, get in the mood, have some breakfast, and I just have to, I don't know how to say it, lie down for a little while after breakfast, listen to some music, have a little bit of a recovery, and just be completely in the mood for another hour or so.

When you think of a moment in your sporting history, is there a memory that you like to remember?

We were playing against Prerov, I remember, and the goalkeeper kicked the ball and as he kicked it, it kind of went to me and I just shot from the halfway line, and I took it differently that time, like as if it was a shot, and I scored. So, I like to remember it like that as a football memory for me.

What is your favourite sport and why?

Well, my favourite sport is football because I've just been doing it since I was a kid, I enjoy it. My grandpa also played football; I got it from him.

What is it about football that you love?

It's just, the energy, everything. It's a world sport, it's just a world sport.

Do you consider yourself a good footballer?

Well, I certainly don't consider myself to be the best footballer. I'm kind of an average player, but like I'm not saying I'm bad, but I'm not saying I'm good either. I can keep improving though and I will keep improving.

Who's your sporting idol?

My sporting idol is probably Lionel Messi, the best footballer in the world.

Why him? Is it his playing qualities or is there something else you like about him?

I like the fact that he plays well and just that he treats people well. And he's just good, he's the best. With Lionel Messi, what I like about him is how he just plays football differently than other people, like when he was at Barcelona, like he was killing it there, he had just found a different way to play the game than other people. That's probably why he's my idol.

From your own life experience, do you have a favourite sports moment, something related to sports that maybe you think of often?

So, often I remember that moment when I was playing football, when maybe I decided the outcome of a game, I don't know, the best feeling is maybe when you score a decisive goal and it's just...good, like I did yesterday. One moment is probably when, as a defender, you save the team from losing and it's at least a draw or a win for you. That's probably the best way I remember it.

Do you remember any moments in particular?

Like yesterday one of our teammates, he's 12 years old, he kind of saved two games for us and we won both of them because of him.

What does it take to get you in the mood for football? Do you have a routine? Like before you play? Like, do you listen to your music or, I don't know, do something that helps you tune into the sport, to kind of warm up?

I tune in by just kind of working out or something, put on some music, I don't know, I guess sometimes I'll take a cold shower or something to kind of get my head in the game and then it just kind of goes from there. I tune in just like, when I see the ball, I just want to play football right away. That's just it.

Do you have any sporting ambition, what do you want to achieve in sport?

I guess in football I would like to prove that I could play for a professional club, play for the Czech national team or play in the Champions League. That would be my dream.

Where are all the Romani and Traveller sports stars?

By Didicoy Jac

Inspiring, if obscure, Romani sports personas from the turn of the century are all well and good. But considering the size of the Romani population in Europe (more than 12 million), particularly over the last few decades, oughtn't we have had a few more Romani sports stars?

The reason of course, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, is antigypsyism: the specific form of racism directed at Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others ostracised by society as 'gypsies'. The relatively low number of Romani or Traveller sports stars is an indictment of the historical and ongoing racism towards these ethnic groups in Europe today.

A Hungarian football manager once said that signing a Romani player was career suicide in Hungary. At the same time, outing yourself as a Romani or Traveller athlete in most sports (particularly football) is similarly unwise. European Championship Winning Portugal International, Ricardo Quaresma, endured plenty of anti-Roma sentiment as an openly Romani footballer playing in the Portuguese league as well as abroad. *"I've never smoked, never drunk, never experimented [with drugs] nor have I ever wanted to. But there it is, because I'm Roma, I've got a reputation for being a lot of things in football"* said Quaresma in 2016.

Survival leaves little time for anything else

The greatest barrier to sports for Romani and Traveller people is racialised poverty. Large numbers of Roma in Europe live in segregation; excluded by society and condemned to life in impoverished ghettos and villages without access to basic infrastructure, public transport, job opportunities, or sometimes even water and electricity. In such conditions, sport becomes less important. Playing games can seem frivolous and unnecessary when you're struggling to survive.



In my own family, the curt survival wisdom that was passed on from my great-grandfather regarding time-consuming activities such as playing sports was: *"there's no money in it."* Thankfully this survival aphorism had faded from practice by the time I came around, and I was born into a family for whom running for the local athletics club, playing rugby, football, martial arts, and other sports was completely normalised for girls and boys.

There is obviously a direct link between social mobility and sport participation. Romani and Traveller people from working class families who have some economic stability can pursue sporting interests. For the larger number of Roma trapped in segregated neighbourhoods, without basic facilities, poor education, and limited prospects to get out, sport is for them (as it was for my great-grandfather) a luxurious waste of time and money. And yet, despite the history of antigypsyism on our continent there has been, and continues to be, a proud tradition of Romani and Traveller athletes in elite level sport. These athletes have managed to overcome the odds and make it to the highest level despite the barriers in front of them.

O Shukar Khelipe – the Beautiful Game

Football is the world's sport. Over a quarter of a billion people in more than 200 countries and territories regularly play football. According to FIFA, an estimated five billion spectators watch the beautiful game globally. It is perhaps surprising then that the sport most associated with Roma, Sinti, and Travellers is probably boxing and not football. However, on reflection this makes a lot of sense. The scale and cultural enormity of football is unlike any other sport on the planet. Football is such a part of our societies, particularly in Europe, that it absorbs and reflects our values in ways no other sport can. So, it is not surprising that the prejudice and institutional racism played out daily in our society is also played out in our football clubs, fanbases, and terrace cultures.

Regardless, there are still a great number of known footballers from Romani and Traveller backgrounds. Portugal's Ricardo Quaresma has been the most vocal Romani player of recent times, but he is joined by the likes of: French international, Toulouse and Marseille striker, Andre Pierre Gignac; Czech international and former Liverpool striker, Milan Baroš; the late Spanish international and Arsenal, Atlético Madrid, and Sevilla winger, José Antonio Reyes; and Croatian Captain and Dinamo Zagreb and AC Milan midfielder, Zvonimir Boban. The latter was even UEFA's Chief of Football for a time, before resigning over his stated 'moral beliefs' and dismay at the technocracy and corruption in the governing body.

There are fewer Travellers in football. England international, Jonjo Shelvey, is one with both Scottish and Irish Traveller heritage who spent most of his footballing career at Charlton Athletic, Liverpool, Swansea City (pride of Wales), and Newcastle United. In the women's game, the Irish international and Shamrock Rovers defender Savannah McCarthy is the only *out* Traveller currently playing.

As concerns Romani and Traveller footballers, these people are some of the *known knowns* (to shoehorn in Donald Rumsfeld's tortured epistemological soundbite on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq). But there are rumours aplenty about the far greater number of *known unknowns*; that is, the likelihood of many Romani and Traveller players who choose to keep quiet about their identity in public. Some of the *definitely maybe's* (not in

the 1994 studio album sense) include greats of the game like Hristo Stoichkov, Gheorghe Hagi, and Eric Cantona. Some of the more *un-likely lads* (not sure where I'm going with the offbeat references) that are rumoured to have Romani or Traveller roots include players like Wayne Rooney and Zlatan Ibrahimovic (both of whom have faced racist 'gypsy' chants), and even Saudi Arabia's greatest ever league player: the Al Nassr Super-Star, Cristiano Ronaldo.



Combat sports: the great equaliser

Boxing and other martial arts are sports where Roma, Sinti, and Travellers have long excelled alongside ethnic minority groups the world over. These are physically demanding, tough, individual sports with gyms that leave little room for the indecencies of racial prejudice. Dojos, academies, and gyms devoted to combat sports tend to be multi-racial bastions of sporting meritocracy. Where you come from doesn't matter, as long as you train hard and fight hard.

Modern boxing greats include the 2014 middleweight champion, Andy Lee, who was the first Traveller to win a major boxing title; English Romanichal fighter Billy Joe Saunders, who became the first Romani or Traveller boxer to win world championships in two weight classes in 2015 and 2019; the Bulgarian Romani Olympic light flyweight champion, Ivailo Marinov; the Irish Traveller and Olympic bantamweight silver medalist from Mullingar, John Joe Nevin; and of course the greatest – Tyson Fury, 'the Gypsy King' and 'the People's Champion', who has held multiple titles as the heavyweight-champion-of-the-world and is widely considered to be one of the greatest boxers alive.

Missing generations of Romani & Traveller athletes

Considering the level of antigypsyism and the size of the Romani population in Europe, how many young would-be sports stars slip through the cracks every generation because of racism and social exclusion? Without the infrastructure to allow kids to access sports, only a small few blessed with the combination of good fortune and exceptional talent will be able to overcome the barriers placed in front of them on account of their ethnicity. Even then, they may understandably choose to hide their background if they are able, further denying communities representation and role models that others take for granted. While we await the revolution, we'll continue to champion the Tyson's and the Cantona's, the Quaresma's and the Marinov's, and all the Romani and Traveller greats who have made it against the odds.

A League of Kings: For Roma, By Roma.

We caught up with Samuel García López, one of the founders of the 'Gypsy King's League' which was created by Romani communities in Barcelona seeking to emulate Gerard Piqué's celebrated viral football league.

Piqué's original 'King's League' started in Barcelona in 2022 and blends online streaming and gaming elements with a futsal style, seven-a-side game. The league features unconventional football rules such as unlimited substitutions, penalty tiebreakers, and 'secret weapons' & 'wild cards' which allow teams special plays such as: an automatic penalty, the ability to suspend an opposing player for four minutes, or to nominate 'star player' whose goals count as double for a period. The Gypsy Kings League now has teams from across Spain competing in an entirely Roma-made sports league that Samuel can be proud of.

So firstly, what is the situation like for Romani people in your city?

It depends on each neighbourhood, and it depends on the family context, right? Some people are better off, while others... There is the part of the city of Barcelona where we are more rooted, and then there are other areas on the outskirts, which might be worse off. But, well, there are also Roma in central Barcelona who are struggling. It's not all the same, you know?

I am from El Raval. I've lived here all my life, and I consider myself from here, but I come from El Poble Sec which is nearby. There's no border between El Poble Sec, Sant Antoni, and El Raval. There is a large Romani population in El Poble Sec and Sant Antoni. Most of them used to live here in El Raval but since the 1990s, due to gentrification, they moved and now most live in El Poble Sec and Sant Antoni.

I'd like to understand more about what work do you do within the Romani community?

Well... I work a lot with music, specifically Catalan rumba, with theatre, with very artistic projects, and also with the recovery of Romani memory. Those are my strengths. That's why I created the Barcelona Urban Roma Eco-Museum, which is the first of its kind. An eco-museum is a different concept from a traditional museum. A museum typically has exhibitions of artists, right? Visitors, an institution that manages it, right? An eco-museum involves three things: a territory, a heritage, and a community. In the eco-museum, it is the community that sustains it. And how do they sustain it? With their heritage: their stories, photos, objects, and donations made by the community.

Great. So, do you create projects with them, or do you showcase Romani culture and traditions for others within the Romani community itself?

Well, I do create projects, but there are also projects that come from the community. Then I try to carry them out. For example, the "Gypsy King's League" right? The young people came to me wanting to create it.

How did it start? Tell us a little about it.

I've always wanted to do something related to football... something, you know? So, we had some barbecues and organised some games, and that's how the idea of the King's League came about. Some young guys, José and Joni, came to me and said, "We could do something like the King's League." I said, "Great, let's do it." I called a few Roma associations in Barcelona, and we started with friendly matches. Initially, I just wanted friendly games. But then I made an agreement with the Satalia football field. They gave us a reduced price to organize a pre-league. We did a pre-league with people from the neighbourhood, mainly to unite the neighbourhood and foster connection after the pandemic, because people had become more distant. We started with four teams: Soniquetes, Gipsy Julians, and... I can't remember the others. Two more teams. Then we brought in boys from Zona Franca, Hostafrancs, and Gràcia, and they all came together for the pre-league. The second game was recorded and uploaded to TikTok, and it went viral.

From there, things grew because players would ask well-known artists or strong players they knew to make videos, and the project just kept getting bigger. YouTubers who were with us commented on and reacted to our games, saying ours were better than theirs! So it went even more viral. Eventually, I contacted El Periódico, and that really blew things up. The headline was, "We want to play a match with Piqué." From there, things escalated even more. Piqué invited us to his league; we had good chemistry with him. And this is all from a youth initiative led by young Roma.

How did it go from being a casual weekend game to a fully-fledged project, including financing?

We didn't have any funding. Zero. Everything we did, we paid for ourselves: the equipment, the fields, the referees, the TikTok people, the cameras, everything was paid by us and the players.

Have you tried to secure funding for the project?

I applied for a grant from the city council to cover the cost of the fields and the equipment. I don't remember exactly if I asked for 3,000 or 4,000 euros. In the end, they approved 1,000 euros, but I would have had to justify expenses of 4,000 or 5,000 euros, which meant putting in 3,000 from my own pocket. So, I had to give up the 1,000 euros. I said, "If I need to spend 3,000 to get 1,000, I'm not going to bother." So, I declined it and said we'd continue as we've been doing, paying for everything ourselves. That's how it's been.

How do you organise something this big with no institutional support?

There were three presidents: one was in charge of organising the matches, another was responsible for the institutional relations with associations and managing the fields, and the other handled relations with the teams. I created a form for all the players to register, with questions and regulations. We went neighbourhood by neighbourhood explaining the rules and registering players. We held a pre-league, which exploded in popularity. Then, everyone wanted to play. At one point, we were getting calls from Melilla, Madrid, Bilbao, and Valencia from people wanting to play. How do we cover the costs? Even Mallorca had a team that flew in for every game. They paid their own way, and that's how it's been.

Why did you take on such a big challenge? What made you say, "This needs to happen"?

Because I saw it very clearly... I wanted to do something in sports, and there's always been this stereotype that Roma don't do sports, that we're all overweight. It was a personal challenge to prove otherwise. I knew it would go viral. I was certain. I woke up a whole part of Spain that no one else has. Other leagues have sprung up from ours, like the King's League in Madrid and Bilbao. For me, that's a win. Promoting sports and seeing people do it because of my project—money doesn't matter. I wanted to do this for free, and it has now even inspired other Roma to create women's teams.

Has a 'Queen's League' been created?

Not yet, but women's teams have started playing friendlies in Zona Franca, La Mina, and other areas. This could become a future project.

What are the most important values or lessons that you think have been promoted through this project?

The biggest takeaway for me is that Roma can manage things themselves, without an institution telling us what to do. The competitiveness was fun, but for me, winning wasn't the goal. The goal was to have it happen and for everyone to enjoy it. The project also became a way to fight against anti-Roma sentiment through positive projects. Instead of focusing on our historical struggles, which are important not to forget, but it's time to change the narrative through positive actions.



Sport, the secret weapon against racism?

By Jonathan Lee

Let's start with the obvious – we should all be doing more sport and exercise. For Roma, Sinti, and Travellers, who overall live significantly shorter and more unhealthy lives than the rest of society, – this is especially true.

The health benefits of sport have been discussed and included in the realm of public policy for decades. The initial outlay to provide sports infrastructure to make a healthier, sportier population is peanuts compared to the costs of treating unhealthy, un-sporty people through our underfunded health systems. There is also a familiar argument that has been made in favour of the mental health benefits derived from sporting activity, with numerous studies linking regular physical activity to decreases in the suicide rate (which is up to seven times higher for Romani and Traveller communities).

But beyond health and wellbeing, I argue that sport can genuinely be used as a tool of anti-racism. Not in the kumbaya, Olympic vision of fraternal international relations kind of way – I mean actual anti-racism, at a local level where it can bring communities together.

“But how can sport be used as a tool of anti-racism”, you ask?

Sport has the power to change minds. In part through the sickly liberal dream of ethnic minority role-models; where successful racialised sportspeople are put on an impossibly high pedestal to break down barriers with the majority population and encourage participation in sports from their community. But this relies on too many variables to succeed all the time. Not to mention it also exposes those role models to all sorts of horrible abuse in their personal life.

No, sport has the power to change minds mostly through the banal encounters that sport brings week-in, week-out for those who do it. It's the changing rooms, the shared bus-journeys, paying club fees (and not being able to afford club fees), the cleaning of equipment, the team WhatsApp groups, arranging practices, injuries, wins, and losses.

At a professional level, players from racialised minority groups don't necessarily have to be wildly successful role models. They just have to be visible and get on with their job. The longer they do that, the more they normalise their community's participation in that sport.

Of course, these experiences, whether at amateur or professional level, do not materialise over-night. Local authorities, sports associations, and schools have a great deal of say in the conditions that sport happens in. In many countries, the racial segregation between the haves and the have-nots is so wide that real work needs to be put in before you can get to the boring stuff that builds racism-resistant relationships between people.

So, how do we build anti-racist sports programmes?

Research (and common sense) seems to say that the way to do this well is by getting Roma, Sinti, & Travellers involved right from the very beginning. “Inclusion programmes” is often such a loathsome phrase for racialised communities because it sounds like society is stooping down to their level and doing them a big favour by deigning to include them. It ignores the years of ex-clusion that led to this point in the first place.

When Romani and Traveller people own their own access to sport projects, when they design them themselves, when they are the primary contact with communities, then you get genuine dialogue which acknowledges the barriers and attempts to create the conditions for equal access to sport and sport facilities in a dignified way. No one wants to feel like a charity case. Especially when the charity being offered is what everyone else gets for free but without the feeling of humiliation and the burden of putting up with smug, condescending inclusion successes and best practices.

There's also the seldom-spoken-of notion that, generally speaking, inclusion projects by white people in positions of power are very rarely...cool. It's difficult to put your finger on, but some combination of the veneer of boring, besuited respectability and projects dreamt up by middle-class bureaucrats that attempt to resonate with urban (read, ethnic) youth never come off well. Racialised minorities tend to form their own cliques, codes, and subcultures as part of a defence mechanism against racism. In sport, in music, or in fashion these groups often have tastes and preferences entirely apart from that of the majority population (in some cases, often ending up being trend setters for the majority). Projects or policies which seek to improve access to sport and sporting infrastructure for these groups do better when they are not just couched in the language and culture of the ethnic group but are actually designed and informed by the people from that group. These actions are not only more successful at improving the number of people participating in sport, but they also project a change in narrative away from victimhood, and instead depict something of cultural value to the rest of society.

Sport doesn't create racism, racists do!

Sport does not create racism (contrary to some popular beliefs about football). It may reflect racist attitudes, but, as a practice in and of itself, sport does not promote racism. In fact, it tends towards the opposite. The idealist's vision of sport (not necessarily the reality) is one of pure meritocracy in success and failure, and egalitarianism in participation. While the real world often encroaches on the sporting one and ruins this utopian vision, we can still try to put in practice these sporting ideals that uphold values of anti-discrimination and equality. Like any field of human endeavour, the origin of discrimination and racial inequality in sport lies in structural racism in our society. Problems arising in sport cannot be tackled in isolation. The best anti-racist sport policies in the world cannot solve the political issues of segregation and exclusion. Addressing structural racism requires structural solutions, not just dealing with superficial expressions of discrimination. This means things like building social housing and ensuring an equitable allocation to everyone who needs it, it means police reform, legal aid, childcare services, funding a social welfare net with provision to mitigate creeping institutional racism, and a root and branch overhaul of education systems to fully commit to desegregation. In short, basic things which allow society to function in an equitable way. If we did this, it wouldn't end racism. But it might give Roma, Sinti, & Travellers a sporting chance to go to work, go to school, to go to the gym, to play a bit of sport, and to get on with living a normal life.

Interview with the coach of Quadrato Meticcio Women's Football Team

We caught up with Head Coach Stefano Allegro to talk about access to sport in vulnerable communities and how he encourages a multicultural community to play football together.

Tell us a bit about yourself, the association you represent, and how you are involved there?

My name's Stefano, coach of the women's team of the Quadrato Meticcio sports association in Padua that uses football as a tool of social inclusion for different people. We are in a neighbourhood that is characterised by its multiculturalism, and for being a socio-economically struggling population. We have very low membership fees in order to facilitate access, or sometimes membership is even free actually. In addition to sports, the association promotes after-school activities for neighbourhood children, we do food distribution on Tuesday mornings, and we organise festivals and sports and cultural events for the community.

What kind of obstacles do players in your community face in accessing services, including sports?

There are integration problems, racism and segregation certainly towards some communities. Then there are the structural problems of the state not working on its social integration policies. These communities are also economically disadvantaged and therefore have difficulty accessing services. Think about sports, it becomes unimportant if first there are more serious problems such as finding housing, work etc.

...If a community lives on the margins and is poor, then you struggle to access sports and cultural services. For me the main obstacle is economic which leads to housing instability, job instability, and also you struggle even in forming relationships. You are labelled as 'the poor'. For many, the poor are scary and this triggers forms of racism.

Do you think there are specific obstacles for Roma and Sinti compared to other racialised and marginalised communities, such as refugees or LGBTQ+ people?

There are higher difficulties with this community. It is a more marginalised and discriminated against community. I think of the camps that are close to the bypass roads and far from the city centre, from public services.

The perception I find is that they also think in terms of 'us and them', but that is triggered by a vicious circle. Firstly, they are excluded, they are victims, and so they label themselves with an 'us' to defend themselves and because of this there is also a struggle to include them. So, there are two aspects, exclusion and self-exclusion, these things can feed off each other.



What has your experience been like trying to encourage Roma and Sinti kids to play football?

I had experiences with specifically with kids from the Sinti culture, four boys were a part of the club for a while, all different ages. When they were on the pitch playing, for them playing well was the only priority and they were included within the group. The boys in this club are also used to playing with each other and all come from different cultures.

However, it is important to decide the purpose of sport. Sport is not neutral, and it is not all good. You also must create a healthy and inclusive environment. Having mixed groups, creating social moments, listening, this promotes wellbeing in a group. It is not easy however for them because even saying that they are Sinti is not easy, especially when they are the only one playing within a neighbourhood, it's not easy. The other kids come from Morocco, Nigeria, Tunisia and so on...they have so many from each culture, in the case of this Sinti family the difficulty is greater and so even for the kids to feel accepted it is more difficult.

What about access for Romani or Sinti women and girls?

In my personal experience, I have never found girls from this community in my club playing football. In my small personal experience, I generally see that women and girls are relegated to the family sphere, the sisters of the boys who play soccer do not play sports. They often take care of the house and their brothers. So, their oppression is twofold, but then maybe it is also football which is a sport already considered 'for men' in Italian society so maybe it is also this. Perhaps if the Quadrato Meticcio offered another sport then the Sinti women in the community would be interested to come closer.

Finally, do you have any suggestions for improving social inclusion and the participation in sports for Roma and Sinti in Italy?

Certainly, sporting activity is important to create opportunities to meet, provide a fun time for kids, but there needs to be a structural change. Several areas need to be changed to improve the inclusion of this community. However, action needs to be taken mainly at the economic level because then we can improve the situation at the cultural level as well.



Under a Padua Sun

By Vojin "PAZZO" Ivkov

A match report on the international Roma, Sinti, and Travellers' multi-sport event held in Padua Italy on 9th July 2024

The sun was positioned high above the park in Padua. The smell of sweat and watermelon mixed with the heat of northern Italy gave us a fragrant stage for what promised to be a memorable afternoon.

On a Tuesday afternoon in July, the combined forces of Roma, Sinti, and Travellers from several European countries faced off. The representatives from Ireland, tough competitors all, came with a number of Travellers hoping to prove themselves. The Spanish delegation was made up of a Romani family, headed by a father who also works as a preacher in his free time. The Czech cohort came with more than five representatives. When they appeared at the park; heads turned. This was a team of Roma who came with a clear idea, to leave a mark on Padua. The Italians brought the most representatives, not so much to compete but to play their part as good hosts.

And then there was me: a guy from Serbia, never accomplished enough as a journalist, but a photographer in my free time, and a documentarian who found myself with this group in Italy. As a representative of the ERRC, I was there to make a fanzine and exhibition about Roma and Travellers in sports. The reason for the gathering of such a large number in a park, under the 33°C heat of the Italian afternoon sun, was not gelato, but an initiative of several organisations aiming to improve access to sport for Roma, Sinti, and Travellers. And – you guessed it – they're here to compete in sports. So, I'll try to describe the atmosphere as best I can, moving from sport to sport. Let's go...



Frisbee

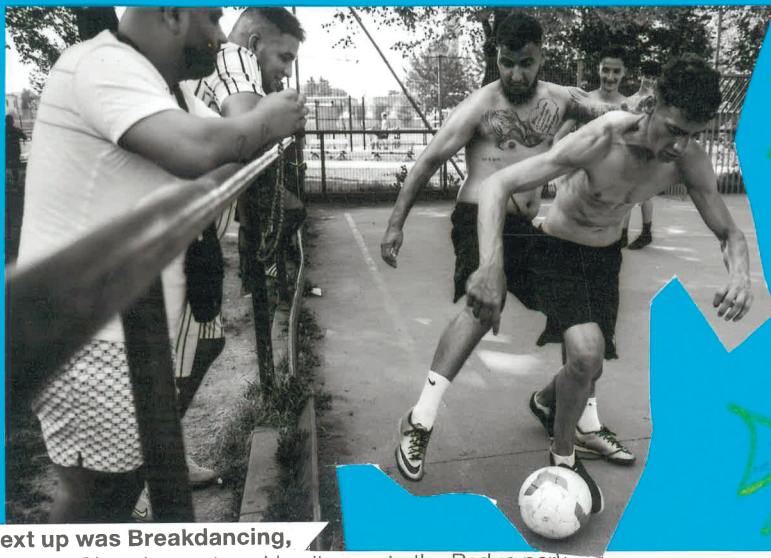
Yes, you read that right, Frisbee. 'Ultimate' Frisbee, in fact.

I didn't know what to expect either, but there I was on the field, thinking that we'll pass it around like at the beach. I couldn't have been more wrong; these people were throwing themselves on the grass, diving through the air, bumping into each other. No-one was there to explain to them that this isn't rugby. I raised my hand, a worried expression on my face, with a question but all I got was a scolding look. The Italian home side provided coaches for every sport, including this one. My understanding is that, ultimately, the coaches were there just to calm everyone down, but I have to admit, although it's fun to watch, I'm not sure this is the sport for me.

Music is the answer

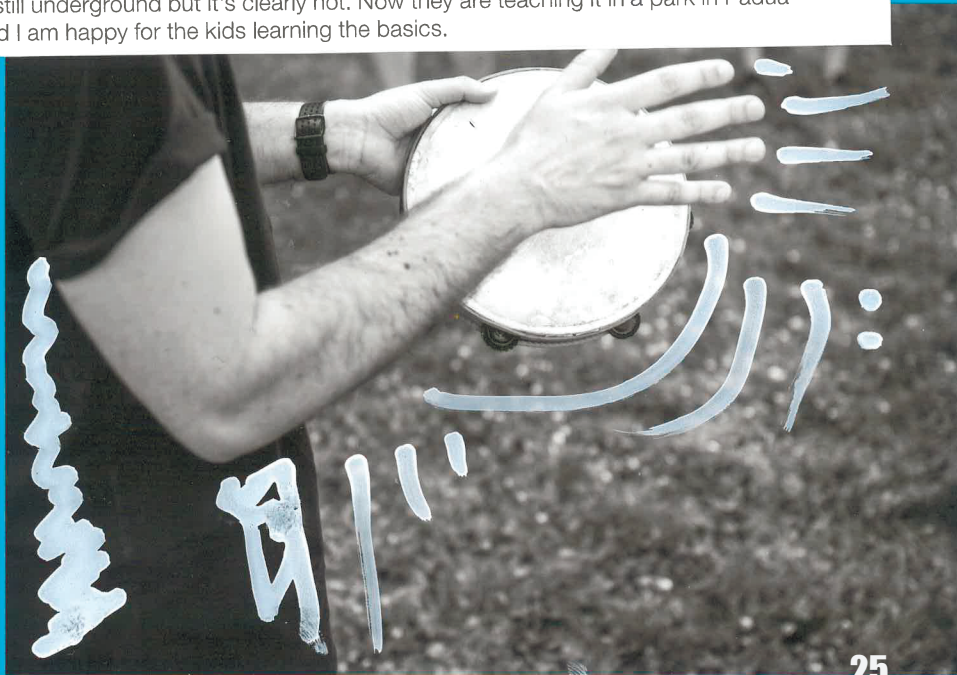
Next in line was the dance martial art, Capoeira. The only team that signed up for this was Ireland. I tried to find some symbolism in that, but it escapes me. This is not my first contact with this sport. I saw it in Serbia, about fifteen years ago, when I attended a Capoeira demonstration in my hometown. All that slow motion dancing provoked a flood of sarcasm in me that I couldn't keep inside. Seeing as I had an opinion, they invited me to join them on the mats for a little bit of sparring. I lasted five whole seconds until I took a head shot and ended up on my back. I came away with a new-found respect for the sport. In Padua, it looked exactly the same. The coaches performed the exercises slowly while the Irish calmly followed their movements. If you looked at them from a distance, they appeared like a mirage in the scorching weather. I admit that I found it interesting to watch the slow-motion movements, something about it made me think about my life...where I am...who I am.





Next up was Breakdancing,

the 2024 Olympic sport, making its way to the Padua park. As a hip-hop kid, this grabbed my attention. The Spanish delegation was also eager for this part of the programme. At the beginning, everything seemed simple and easy, every move was demonstrated and repeated. But when it came time to put the movements together and create a choreography there was a problem. It's easy to sit on the sidelines and comment, it's another thing to be there and actually do it. Since I sat this one out on the sidelines, I'll take care of the commentary. It took a few tries to master the choreography, but once they had it down it was actually pretty good. As hip-hop fans, most of us never considered Breaking a sport, but it seems that times have changed and, honestly, I'm sort of glad. I've always been convinced that music, my music, is still underground but it's clearly not. Now they are teaching it in a park in Padua and I am happy for the kids learning the basics.



The main event

Americans call it soccer, but we simply call it "footy". The largest delegation, the delegation from the Czech Republic, oversaw the beautiful game. The concrete court, which seemed allergic to shade, was the centre stage in the park. They split up, four against four, the atmosphere was electrified. You would think that the game was being played for a spot in the Champions League. Angry glances, no one even blinked an eye, they were obviously there to prove themselves. The game started fiercely, no one paid attention to the time or the score: they simply played.

In the first five minutes of the game, the tactics of both teams seemed to be to tire out and annoy their opponents. The ferocity of the passes and the defence took its first casualty on the field; the twisted ankle of a young athlete from the Czech Republic. The sub was called in. A kid no older than fourteen stepped up, who, as it turned out later, would cause some serious problems for the opposition defence. The intensity of the game did not decrease. Passes intended for grassy fields skidded across ruined concrete. Football of the people.

After the 20th minute and several goals, which no one even counted, the atmosphere on and around the field changed. Everything became more casual, and football was played just for the sake of the game. Sport as it should be, if you ask me. The people watching from the sidelines slowly got involved in the match. It reminded me of summer nights in my own neighbourhood, where everyone is welcome to participate as long as they are willing to run a little and take a joke at their own expense.

The match ended in fellowship and the sharing of watermelons that the team from Italy had purchased for the occasion. As the light changed from bright to golden, local kids and elderly people from Padua approached and got involved in the day's activities, initially intended for Europe's Roma, Sinti, and Travellers but, in the end, for everyone. The whole idea of the project, played out organically in the microcosm of a single football match.

This is what sport is all about.



Super Rabbi Howell: The First Romani Footballer

By The Welsh Socrates

Arguably the first professional Romani sportsman was an Englishman named Rabbi "Rab" Howell. Rab made his international football debut on Saturday 9th March 1895 against Ireland during the opening match of the Home International Championship. England were on a record 15-match unbeaten run, with a home record of six wins in a row. As they took to the rain-drenched field of the Derbyshire County Cricket Ground wearing their trademark "white jerseys and navy-blue knickerbockers", a 10,000 strong crowd urged them on. Just three minutes in, a corner ball came off Irish defender Sam Torrans and, as the commentator remarked, "*glanced into the net harmlessly*" as an own goal. In just over 10 minutes, England scored twice more and by 30 minutes another Irish own goal from Tom Gordon put England 4 – 0 up.

At 36 minutes, Rabbi Howell "*sent in a beautiful shot out of a loose scrimmage, against which [Irish goalkeeper] Gordon had no chance.*" Another four English goals in the second half brought the match to an eyewatering 9 – 0 close. The following Monday morning, The Times described "*a brilliant victory*" in which "*both forward and behind, the superiority of the Englishmen was very marked.*"

Born in the middle of the afternoon...

Rab was born in a tent at a Romani camp in Dore, Sheffield in 1867. As a child he travelled with extended family before settling in Ecclesfield. There Rab worked as a coalminer while playing football for the local side. He played a short while for the Rotherham Swifts before signing his first professional contract with Sheffield United in 1889.

Rab only played one more time for England, despite being regarded as one of the best half-backs of his day while playing for Sheffield United. In 19th-century England, selection for the national team still favoured gentlemanly players with a certain sentimentality towards amateur (and therefore upper-class) sportsmanship and values. Rab was a player who was frequently brought before disciplinary hearings at Sheffield United and his ungentlemanly ethnicity was never far from the minds of those in the club or selection committees. His teammate Ernest Needham once said that Rab "*a Gypsy by birth, perhaps owes some of his inexhaustible vitality to his lucky parentage. Certain it is that no man is more untiring.*" In the press, Rab was simply known as "The Gypsy" and often played up to the image by telling reporters that he lived in a caravan in the woods.

A very Victorian scandal

Rab's 200 match career at Sheffield United was cut short when he was suddenly transferred to Liverpool in 1898, just two games before the end of the season in which United won the league. Reasons for the move are not clear, but several accounts point to Rab having left his wife and family to be with another woman as the probable cause. This was still Victorian England, and adultery was a public scandal that the football club could ill afford.

Rab began his career at Liverpool, following a £200 transfer, by starting against Aston Villa. He went on to make 68 appearances for Liverpool over three years before moving to Preston North End in 1901. After more than 60 appearances in Preston, Rab's footballing career was ended in a match against Burnley in 1903 when his tibia was badly fractured in a tackle. The sound of the break could be heard around the ground and spectators, knowing his career was over, did a whip-around to collect 24 pounds, 15 shillings and six-pence for him (the equivalent of about two months wages at the time).

Retirement, racism, and remembrance

After his retirement from football, 36-year-old Rabbi Howell worked as a labourer and a night watchman, before running a fruit and vegetable business in Preston until 1931. He died in 1937 at his home in Preston at the age of 69 and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Rab's potential legacy as an early England great was never established because of the prevailing views of the time. He was likely passed up for international duty because of a combination of his class and his ethnicity. There are no records of the racist abuse he undoubtedly faced from the terraces, but we can assume he received his



share. To this day, chants of 'gyppo' can be regularly heard around football grounds across the United Kingdom and are hardly remarked on by the footballing public or commentators who would otherwise be rightly outraged by other ethnic slurs cast at ethnic minority players.

Rab's story has been resurrected and his name remembered in recent years in no small part thanks to the biographer Stephen Kay, who researched and wrote a book on the life of the player. Stephen also organised a campaign along with Rab's remaining family to buy a tombstone to mark the footballer's final resting place, saying that "no-one who has played for their country should be buried in an unmarked grave."

In 2015, following a public campaign and many donations, including from Preston City Council and Football Unites Racism Divides, a new headstone was placed over the grave. It bears the inscription: *Here lies Rabbi Howell of Sheffield United, Liverpool, Preston North End and England. First Romani Professional Footballer.*

