



by Vasili Petrakov

SUPPORTERS' CLUBS IN RUSSIA

As we think about sport, we should not underestimate the world of professional sport and the many tens of thousands of people who watch and actively support their local and national teams. In this environment sport is not used directly and a tool for personal development. It does however provide a platform for young people – often those who do not normally engage in organisations – to meet together for a range of non formal (and sometimes more formal) educational activities.

Work with fans clubs around Europe has developed over recent years – particularly in response to violence and hooliganism in and around sports stadiums.

In this article, Vasili Petrakov presents a less well-known piece of work involving young people who are supporters of football clubs in Russia. We hope that this will both inform and inspire you to explore ways of working with similar clubs and young people who might otherwise not engage in non-formal learning.

At the beginning of 2005, there were several dozen supporters' clubs covering various types of sport: football, ice hockey, basketball, volleyball, rugby, field hockey, etc. In the European part of Russia, the largest and most numerous supporters' clubs are attached to the Premier League football teams, the main ones being in the Moscow region (Spartak, CSKA, Dynamo, Torpedo, Lokomotiv, Moscow and Saturn) and in three other cities – Zenit (St Petersburg), Krylya Sovetov (Samara) and Kuban (Krasnodar).

We will begin with these last three cities, where a single team represents a large region in the Premier League. The high attendance at home matches, the tremendous popularity enjoyed by players in the local community and the attention and support given by the authorities, the press and television all help to swell the ranks of the supporters' clubs, which are often organised and financed by the football clubs

themselves. The three supporters' clubs referred to here are extremely well run, with various initiatives designed to help fans find out more about the life of the team and individual players.



The supporters' clubs operate shops selling merchandise, and publish newsletters and "fan-zines". They also play an active part in organising group outings to away games. Up to 10,000 supporters, for example, regularly make the 650 km trip from St Petersburg to Moscow for crucial matches, and some 12,000 people travelled 1,100 km from Samara to Moscow for the Russian Cup Final.

All three supporters' clubs operate according to the same principle, with each football club having its own department for dealing with the fans. Usually, an Honorary President is chosen from amongst prominent

members of the local community to attend major events. The real work, however, is done by paid staff and volunteers. The members of the supporters' clubs are people of all ages, drawn from all sections of the local community, and local politicians, businessmen and artists are all proud to be involved in the life of the local club. The clubs have no need to compete for support in their own cities, for the simple reason that there is nobody to compete with.

In the stadiums, the atmosphere is usually good humoured and it is only with the arrival of the Moscow teams that a mild hysteria, fanned by the local media, sets in, but then anti-Moscow feeling tends to run high in all sections of society.



The battle for supporters is more intense in the Moscow region, where each of the seven football clubs has its own hard core of active members and its own traditional following. After the collapse of the Soviet Union however, and with the advent of the market economy, most of the older fans (over the age of 40) stopped attending matches, preferring to watch them on TV. The widely publicised brawls between supporters in and around the football grounds have not helped either to draw older fans back to the game. Whereas in 1989 for instance, average attendance at Spartak's home matches was over 50,000, by 2004 the figure had plummeted to 5,000 or so. And whereas in the aforementioned cities of St Petersburg, Samara and Krasnodar, the games regularly attract between 20,000 and 30,000 spectators, in Moscow the turnout is much lower. It is no coincidence moreover, that in recent years the Moscow teams have consistently come bottom of the league in terms of home game attendance. People may still turn out for particular matches (such as the Russian Cup Final or Eurocup) but in general most football fans show no interest in the internal competitions, even though both the standard of football and the calibre of the players have greatly improved.

The Moscow supporters' clubs have not been idle, however. Mindful of the difficulty, nay the impossibility, of winning back the older generation of supporters, the clubs' managers have turned their attention to schoolchildren and students.

The battle for young supporters is intensifying, moreover, with the introduction in secondary schools of branches of supporters' clubs which even have their own web sites. Leading the field here are those supporters' clubs which have the fewest older members, namely Lokomotiv and FC Moscow. A prime example is the web site run by school No. 506 – www.FCMoscow506.narod.ru.

Since as far back as the 1970s, hostility between supporters of the different Moscow clubs has alternately flared and faded. Supporters of CSKA and Dinamo (which, in the Soviet era, represented the army and the militia) currently find themselves ranged against Spartak and Torpedo (which used to represent the trade unions). Lokomotiv and FC Moscow play practically no part in these stand-offs because of the small number of older men among their fans.

Over the past two or three years, there has been much talk of creating a single, overarching body for football supporters in Russia. Granted, we do still see the occasional politically or commercially motivated flare-up between football fanatics, and there have been well-known cases where supporters have been paid to make trouble at party meetings but these days most fanatics realise that violence is not the best approach and that what is needed is positive interaction between supporters and a pooling of energies to form a single organisation, the Russian Supporters' Association.



All supporters have the same problems, whether legal or financial, which are best addressed through a joint approach. The new organisation would help to improve the situation at Russia's football grounds and could spearhead the campaign against violence, racism and chauvinism among young people.

The setting-up of a Russian Supporters' Association would pave the way for a large, unifying movement embracing all supporters, which would soon be joined by fan clubs in other former post-Soviet states as well.

In the meantime the leading supporters' clubs are endeavouring to involve their members in active sport by organising various football, bowling and darts tournaments both for their own members and between supporters' clubs. This year sees the third competition among fan clubs to find the best merchandise. There is also a newsletter entitled "Fan" which contains information on all the supporters' clubs and their social activities as well as the latest news.

One interesting development concerns an initiative by the FC Moscow supporters' club : supporters are invited along to computer clubs where they are divided into teams and play various computer games.

The winners receive prizes from the supporters' club. Plans to hold a championship among supporters' clubs encompassing various games are now being considered. The same computer clubs regularly organise on-line question-and-answer sessions with FC Moscow's top players, an initiative that has proved extremely popular with supporters from all over Russia.

Over the past two years, each supporter's club has provided back-up for the militia at home matches. Volunteers from the club, dressed in brightly-coloured vests, have helped maintain order in those sections of the stadium where their fellow supporters are gathered. Since 2004, special training

courses have been organised to teach volunteers how to deal with potential problems in the stands: fires, fights, acts of terrorism, etc.

For several years now, many supporters' clubs have been acting as patrons to children's homes, organising New Year parties there. The children are given free seats at football matches and kept posted on the latest news from their favourite teams.

The Spartak supporters' club acts as patron to a juvenile offenders' unit. Members visit the inmates on a regular basis, bring gifts and play football with the local team.



The FC Moscow supporters' club has teamed up with the Moscow Education Committee to develop a scheme whereby players from FC MOSCOW tour secondary schools, conducting master classes. They teach pupils the basics of football and organise mini-tournaments. In these schools (there are around a hundred of them) branches of the supporters' club have been set up, and there are special information stands with all the latest

news from the team. Before the start of FC MOSCOW home matches, the best school teams take part in relay races, and in the intervals, the winners have the chance to take 11-metre penalty shots at FC Moscow's second goalkeeper.

The supporters' clubs are extremely active in promoting "yard" football, forming teams among young fans who then go on to participate in district competitions. It has been discovered that teenagers who belong to supporters' clubs are, on average, only half as likely to become involved in crime as their peers from the same schools, and are less liable to develop substance abuse problems. Most supporters' clubs are also actively involved in the anti-smoking campaign.

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Reference :

Some useful information about related activities and organisations can be found on the following web sites:

<http://www.farenet.org>
<http://www.kickitout.org/>
http://www.coe.int/T/E/cultural_co-operation/Sport/Spectator_safety/