

Rioting fans arrested as Euro 2012 kicks off

A weekend of entertaining football was overshadowed by violence yesterday morning, as rival fans clashed at the 2012 European Championships. The tournament has been dogged by controversy.



CITIZENSHIP
PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Leaders squabble, jobs evaporate and economies crumble. For Europe, these are dark days. Yet for the next three weeks, debt and disaster will be relegated to a supporting role: Euro 2012 has begun.

With only three of the sixteen competing teams ranked outside the world's top twenty, this is probably the most elite competition in international football. The World Cup may be more prestigious; but the European Championship is the toughest challenge around.

Already there have been surprising results. World Champions Spain could only manage a one-all draw against a scandal-hit Italian side. A Dutch team featuring superstars like Arjen Robben and Robin van Persie suffered a shock defeat to Denmark in their opening game.

And more drama is expected later today, as England face bitter rivals France and tomorrow when the Polish team take on Russia – an old enemy.



A fan celebrates Germany's 1-0 win over Portugal over the weekend © Getty Images

But competition on the pitch has already been overshadowed by violence off it. Early yesterday morning, fighting broke between fans ahead of a match between Ireland and Croatia. Police arrested 14 men, but were too late to prevent the incident from damaging the reputation of an already troubled tournament.

First there were the questions over the human rights record of Ukraine, one of the tournament's two host nations, where the government is becoming increasingly undemocratic. Because of this controversy, leaders from across Europe – including Prince William and French president François Hollande – have boycotted matches played in Ukraine.

At the same time, a major row broke out over racism among fans in Ukraine and in the other host nation, Poland. A BBC documentary last month revealed ugly footage, including Asian supporters at one match being abused and football crowds giving what appeared to be a

Nazi salute. Players from teams including England have threatened to walk off the pitch if they hear any racist chanting from the stands – which would be a major embarrassment for the tournament's organisers.

GRAND INTERNATIONAL

For fervent fans of national teams, nothing compares to the pride and passion of events like this. International football brings a country together like nothing else, they say: millions of people from every background willing their nation on to triumph.

But others are less enthusiastic. After all, they point out, supporting your own country often means hating everyone else's. With such a divisive and exclusive form of nationalism on display, is it any wonder that unpleasant scenes sometime break out? There is a fine line, they say, between passionate sporting rivalry and vicious xenophobia.

Q & A

Q I hate football. What impact could this possibly have on me?

A Perhaps not very obvious one, besides the annoyance of having to be surrounded by football talk. But football does have an

impact beyond the pitch – in politics for instance.

Q Politics? How?

A A country's government always becomes more popular when their sports teams do well. When Tony Blair was trying to topple Britain's Conservative government in 1997, he went to a football match which England lost. As soon as the cameras were out of

the way, he smiled: the resulting national disappointment, he said, would win him the election.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Football isn't a matter of life and death – it's far more important than that.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► 'Luckiest team in football' win Champions' League

WORD WATCH

The toughest challenge – Three of the world's highest-ranked teams are South American – Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. But while the world cup has thirty-two participants, the Euros have just sixteen, meaning fewer teams of lower quality are involved. In 2016 that number will rise to twenty-four.

Ukraine – In the early Middle Ages, the area in Eastern Europe now called Ukraine was part of a great empire. But this empire was defeated, and for centuries the region was dominated by foreign powers (especially Russia). Ukraine finally gained independence in 1990, following the breakup of the Soviet Union – but many social and political problems remain.

Old enemy – Trapped between the two enormous powers of Germany and Russia, Poland has often been caught in the crossfire – earning it the title of 'battleground of Europe.' It was invaded by Russian forces during the Second World War before being conquered by the Nazis.

YOU DECIDE

1. Does international football encourage xenophobia?
2. Are politicians right to boycott a sports event for political reasons?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design a sports tournament. Would it be big and open like the World Cup, or small and elitist like the Euros? Would it be a knockout all the way?
2. Write a factfile on the two host countries, Poland and Ukraine.

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 **NOTES**

