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Maree hit with 24-point sanction

■ Declan KING

THE opening weekend of the Men's and Women's Super Leagues provided some super games and some shocks.

The big news was Galway team Maree being hit with a 24-point penalty for the season, for allegedly attempting to register players using falsified documents.

Maree have also been fined €3,000, while the individual involved in filing player registrations has been given a two-year ban, with the second year suspended.

This weekend, we have the first of the double header weekends in the men's, the teams playing today and tomorrow.

Darren McGovern of Griffith College Ennna is not pleased with the changes.

"I'm sure it is great for the fans but honestly, it's unfair on the players, especially our home players who are amateurs with full-time jobs."

Eanna play Vincent's tonight, who have Daniel Heaney back at his old club.

Test

"Sunday brings Maree to us," continued McGovern. "It's a serious test on a 'back to back' weekend but it's the same for them."

"They've recruited well and made changes."

Garvey's Tralee are away to last season's runners-up Killester.

Garvey's coach John Dowling gave us his thoughts on the big changes.

"It was the right decision to level the playing field and go to an all-Ireland league with a big playoff structure, part of that we knew would be double headers."

"Everyone is going to have wins and losses so you just try and get better over two games, make adjustments and rest more next week."

"As for the game, you don't win in Killester unless you are at your very best."

In the pick of the rest, High Flying Energyswive Ireland Neptune play UCD Marian while Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind Ballincollig play Belfast Star and EJ Sligo All Stars.

In the Women's Super League last years double winners Killester face a short trip to Oatlands to play Trinity Meteors.

Elsewhere, The Address UCC Glanmire go down to Killarney to play newly promoted Utility Trust St Paul's, SETU Wildcats are at home to Catchy's R. Matthews and UCC Mystics face Gurranabraher CU Brunnell.

FOOTBALL IN THE TIME OF WAR

HOME and away, war and peace, Ukraine football has been complicated since February 2022 and the outbreak of war.

I'm here with their football team for a home game with Albania and an away game with Czech Republic, both at Sparta Prague's epet Arena.

Possibly mirroring the war effort, the Ukrainians are tiring; they dominate Albania for the opening 55 minutes, fade right out of the game and lose 1-2.

Something similar happens as they lose 2-3 to the Czechs.

Their fans, brash, bright, hopeful on both nights begin with exuberance.

But the reality is they are tiring too, of a team made up of players doing very well at very big clubs who, seemingly, can't handle the weight of the Ukrainian shirt.

Not least as 'home' is now places such as Leverkusen, Munich, Stuttgart, Poznan and Wroclaw.

The war continues and the team and the fans, all looking to do their bit, are at a low ebb.

Supporter Julia Stehniak is deeply concerned about the war, the continuing death toll, the future, and sees the football team as a chance to get Ukraine's plight on to TV.

She passionately pushes the motto which will flash all around the blue-and-yellow bannered ground 'Stronger Together'.

"It is important we are here, seen to be together and strong," says Julia, "important for Europe to see this and how we are strong in different places because we need help to protect our skies, otherwise we will



Derek FOLEY EXCLUSIVE

lose a lot of people, soldiers and civilians.

"In my city, Dnipro, this week there was a huge missile attack and many people died in other cities."

"It is every day and I am very disappointed at the world just not supporting us properly. The support, sometimes it seems just words."

"I think the world can do more. It is easy, everybody says human lives are the most important thing in the world and that 'everyone protects human rights in Europe'."

"But less than 1,000km from the heart of Europe everybody can see the things that are going on and they don't act."

"They say they are afraid, they say the Russians won't accept the sharp answer to their aggression, they say we support democracy and human rights and we must protect the people but what of the Ukrainian people who are in captivity, the women who are being raped?"

Wrong

"It is a poor help so if the world thinks they are protecting human rights and protecting democracy, the world is wrong."

It's not that there any weaknesses about the Ukraine football squad per se: Serhiy Rebrov, formerly of Dynamo Kyiv, Spurs and West Ham, is one of the most famous Ukrainian players to have ever played the game, is the manager.

Anatoliy Trubin, still only 23 and starring at Benfica, is possibly the best young net-minder in the Europe; there is Arsenal's Oleksandr Zinchenko, o Vitaliy Mykolenko o Everton; Bournemouth's 22 year-old Ilya Zabarnyi; Viktor Tsygankov who is at Girona; and Ruslan Malinovsky of Genoa.

Chelsea's Mykhailo Mudryk and Roman Yaremchuk, now at Olympiacos, missed the Albania game but, back from injury, started against Czech Republic.

Yet almost all of them are wiling under the turmoil, the pressure, as their nation is willing them to win on every occasion.

Bogdan Antokhov from Dnipro, close to the fighting in the south-east of country, is distraught at the collective performances.

"Everyone knows we are in, and have been in, a war but it is really important for us to show we are stronger here."

"I live here in Prague



PLEASE WORLD: Julia Stehniak shows her banner to the world ahead of the game against Albania



INVESTED: Ukraine fans going to the game against Albania and (main pic) defender Yuhym Konoplika celebrates after scoring in the League B Group B1 game against Albania in Prague

Ukraine team carrying huge weight of expectations

now but I try to support every Ukraine game. I was in Poland, Germany for all four of our games last year; Milan, Bratislava, Chisinau, Warsaw, every Ukrainian match I try to visit.

"I really want us to get us up to Nations League A to send our message to the world but the team is uncontrolled, the coach makes such strange tactics."

"We didn't make the chance to win against a very poor Albania side although three days later

we had a bit of a better game against Czechia."

Rebrov's listless, downtrodden, post-Albania interview is delivered in a tent in Prague where there is just one teenager eating a packet crisps on the door and three reporters present.

None of the players show up afterwards either.

"It was a hard match for us," drones Rebrov, staring hard at the table in front of him. "We played well but at the back Al-

bania were very focussed in defence and didn't give us many moments."

"We weren't balanced in defence. We added to the side in the second-half and I don't understand how we conceded two goals."

Pride

It is far from Shakespeare's St Crispin's Day speech as delivered by Henry V before Agincourt, or "Where's your I?" "king pride?" as Ciaran Fitzgerald famously exhorting Ireland on to a then-scarce Triple Crown.

According to Andrew Todos is a reporter for Zorya Londonok, the Ukrainian football agency: "The reason there's so few TV radio and news journalists here

is because the majority of male reporters, for example, aren't allowed out of the country because of martial law."

"If you're 18 to 60 you need special permission and all that kind of thing. Hence, our agency has picked up the gig because I live in London."

Bodhan Tsapiv was hoping some of the Ukraine players will come and talk with the fans who have travelled so far (the players did not):

"I live in the west of the Ukraine, near Lviv, I feel for those fathers and mothers who lost their children, their farms, their homes."

"Unfortunately I suppose this war will last a lot longer, this action will be freezing and then become hot but essentially it

will be going around in circles."

"Football is a platform where we can speak about Ukraine, talk about what is happening."

"Here were can show the world where we stand, how we are together. We need to show more heart on the pitch, fight more stronger."

Worse

Anastasia Pariychuk studies at the dance academy in Prague and she sees the situation in her homeland as getting worse "month by month."

Last night Ukraine were at 'home' to Georgia in Poznan, this Monday they will host Czech Republic in Wroclaw.

High profile Nations League matches such as these allow Ukrainian fans attract atten-

tion to the country's plight.

"We must show all of the people that we are all together. I'm from Lviv which is getting increasingly under attack. My parents are still in Ukraine and I worry about them, the war is spreading month by month."

Dmytro Mykhaliev and Dmitro Babin have left their homes near Donetsk in occupied eastern Ukraine for the Czech Republic.

"Ukraine is united like it had never been united before," says Mykhaliev. Football inspires us.

"My town is in the fighting and I have had this large yellow and blue flag made especially, it is styled as an American stars'n stripes but with our Tryzub symbol (three-pronged spear) representing the number

of our provinces in place of the stars."

Babin is far more pessimistic: "The only way is to fight it back, I don't think there will be peace at the moment — I can't see the Crimea, Donbas or Luhansk provinces simply being handed back by Russia."

Support

"I hope that Europe will be more involved. Everyone there seems to be looking for excuses. But everyone in Ukraine is looking for more support, more help."

"The way Europeans are looking at Ukraine it is like a grandfather thinking 'Oh just stop fighting and make peace'."

"It is far more complicated than just that."

Continues Todos of reporting on the team: "We're coming into the third year of this and you can tell that if these matches were at home, there'd be even more fervent support and maybe that would help get Ukraine over the line in the face of playing all of these matches away."

"It's been good in the sense that there is still support because it's a poor team results-wise which makes it harder to attract so many fans."

"The UAF are doing the best, for example, Prague, where there's over 500,000 Ukrainians in the Czech Republic."

"It's good that they attracted so many fans and, fingers crossed, going forward, Poland, where there's over three million Ukrainians."

"Then we see recent performances. They had chances but other than that, it was pretty poor and the question is how will it get better?"

Julia Stehniak is not confident for the immediate future.

"I don't think this war will end soon, I wish, but I don't see the light, the end of this time of such wrong bloodshed."

"If you are talking about 'peace' the way some Europeans see it, that is Ukraine just giving up, the land they have fought for, I can't really answer that, the Ukrainian soldiers, they must answer this question."

"Maybe something will come from America, I hope Kamala Harris wins the US election. Ukraine needs something, needs help."



'Football is a platform where we can speak about Ukraine, about what is happening'

MARCHING ON: Ukrainian supporters demonstrating ahead of the UEFA Nations League game against Albania



COUNTRY AT WAR: Soldiers of Ukraine's 154th Separate Mechanized Brigade man a 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled Howitzer covered with camouflage netting in the Kharkiv region of northeastern Ukraine