

# Soccer taunts and real racism

By Dominic Standish  
Special to Italy Daily

**O**n the Sunday before the Italian soccer team departed for the World Cup finals, coach Giovanni Trapattoni was asked on "Porta a Porta" about the absence of any black players on his squad.

The trainer, nicknamed "Trap," began his response with "fortunately" — but then corrected himself and acknowledged the gaffe.

Such sensitivity to making any racist remarks is hardly surprising with the anti-racist campaign that has spread through world soccer during the past year and is a prominent World Cup theme.

FIFA passed a resolution demanding that soccer clubs and officials take active steps to stamp out racism at its first anti-racism conference in July 2001. The world football federation's Italian vice-president, Antonio Matarrese, proposed the resolution, largely because it is in Italy that the problem of soccer racism is considered most serious.

"We want to oblige people to do something about this problem," said Keith Cooper, director of communications for FIFA. He identified Italian soccer as the number one offender. "It may be that other countries, like Italy, can learn from what is being done elsewhere."

The controversy surrounding racism in Italian soccer grew during the 2000-2001 season. Lazio's Yugoslav midfielder, Sinisa Mihajlovic, was forced to publicly apologize for calling France's Patrick Vieira a "monkey" and was placed under investigation for inciting racial hatred. Strangely, Vieira did not receive similar treatment for allegedly calling Mihajlovic a "gypsy."

Most of the criticism has focused on Italian fans. At clubs like Lazio, Hellas Verona and Treviso, racist chanting and banners have been frequently reported and bans were imposed by the last government.

But should name-calling, banners and chants really be treated so seriously?

"I don't know whether you could really call that racism," said Dino Zoff, former national player and coach. He believes such incidents are just part of the normal name-calling in the game. "It's more a question of people making fun. Fans pick on someone tall, short, gray-haired."

Black players at Inter Milan have shown they can shrug off racist abuse. "It was all finished after 90 minutes," Matteo Ferrari once said of an abusive

opponent he declined to identify. "The player in question asked for my forgiveness."

"When these things happen I don't feel offended," said Dutch star Clarence Seedorf. "I think with sadness of those people, of their education, which must be very low."

While name-calling, banners and chants do not seem significantly disturbing, what about racist violence that undoubtedly causes harm? Despite many incidents of violence in Italian soccer, it is difficult to find clear evidence of violence linked to racism.

A new book by Tim Parks, "A Season with Verona", has provoked a discussion on what The Observer referred to last March as "Hellas Verona's racist and thuggish supporters."

Parks's book, for which he traveled with hardcore Verona fans to every match in the 2000-2001 season, records no incidents of racist violence.

Overall, violence in Italian soccer stadiums declined last season. Incidents and fan injuries decreased by 28 and 42 percent, according to the Interior Ministry.

Italian soccer appears to be less racist now than in the past. The Italian Soccer Federation decided in May 2001 that the rules permitting only three non-EU players on the pitch for a team and only five on their books would be scrapped. Although these rule changes may not have been motivated by anti-racism, they benefited foreign players wishing to come and play here.

While Italy's World Cup squad does not include a black player, Italo-Somalian Fabio Liverani recently became the first black player to appear for the Italian team in a friendly against South Africa.

Despite declining racism in Italian football, the international focus on Italy has encouraged anti-racist campaigns here promoted by clubs and governments. The Lazio team has attempted to appear anti-racist by eating kosher meals in Jewish restaurants and wearing anti-racist T-shirts. Club officials have tried to remove banners they felt were racist during matches.

It is easy to be cynical about such stunts in terms of having any real impact on racism. The adoption of anti-racist campaigns by Italian clubs and governments is more to do with promoting their respectability than doing anything that really reduces racism.

Can we treat soccer's anti-racist campaigns seriously while governments with teams in the World Cup, including Italy, Britain and Denmark, have approved new legislation that restricts

the rights of immigrants?

Real anti-racists should challenge the actions of governments that make a profound difference to the lives of black people. The focus on soccer merely allows sporting authorities and politicians to claim the moral authority associated with liberal anti-racism.

As the World Cup continues, we should measure any accusations of racism by fans or players against the records of governments.

*Dominic Standish runs Veneto-based Progress Consulting. Comments to him can be addressed to [dstandish@europa.com](mailto:dstandish@europa.com).*