



The girls from Athletic, four-time champions

Itxaropen guztiak gainditu dituzte eta emakumeen futboleko konfiantza handirik ez zuen futbolzale bat baino gehiago isilarazi dute. Athleticetako neskek, lanean eta sakrifizioan oinarriturik, lau Superliga ez ezik, jarraitzaile zuri-gorrien baldintzarik gabeko babesaren lortu dute.

Since the girls from Athletic started up this team as part of the Bilbao club in the 2002-03 season, women's soccer has completely turned around in Euskadi. They were capable of congregating 35,000 fans at one of their matches in the San Mamés stadium and they have won four Superleagues in the five years that the competition has been running. These young women's effort and enthusiasm, channeled by the no less enthusiastic Iñigo Juaristi, have been rewarded by support from

club's 'red&white' fans and the press who give their successes fervent coverage.

Mid fielder, Itziar Gurrutxaga, is their captain. She joined the team when it started and has played more than one hundred games with them. She has lost count of the number of goals she's scored for them, although her official tally says 25. Born in the Gipuzkoa village of Elgoibar, where she still lives, she travels to Lezama for training four days a week. A Business Studies graduate and newly married to a soccer fan who shares her passion for this sport, Itziar Gurrutxaga has also been a regular player on the Spanish Women's Soccer Team for the last six years.

Like her 21 teammates, she does what she can to combine her job with her sport. "For the last three years, I worked as a secretary in a company in Trapagaran, but I spent the whole day on the road

and I've had to take some time off to rest. Now I'm looking for something closer to home so I can combine my working hours with training and leave me a little time for myself." It's far from easy and affects the whole Athletic "squad" who, for the time being, only get expenses for traveling with the team. "None of us can work in a well-paid job because we prioritize other things, such as flexible working hours, or part time work or a job where we can build up time off and use those days to play soccer.

Part of the girls' success on the soccer field is owed to Iñigo Juaristi, who Itziar qualifies as "a serious coach, very hard working, very professional and demanding." She admits that they've worked well thanks to these qualities and the players' dedication. "We have a tough time, training after work, from seven to nine everyday except Tuesday and Friday, never getting any holidays, almost no private life, but in this sport it's the only way we'll get anywhere." Juaristi expands this idea and adds that "everyone is asked to make a big sacrifice." However, he adds that "as it is a relatively new sport, we have to lead the way. We also have to think that they are there because they enjoy it. I'd love them to be professionals but right now we have to take what we can. Soccer generates vast amounts of money which is why first division players earn such succulent salaries. If they reach that level one day, things will change. For the time being, we have to concentrate on being pioneers, getting to a good level and being a competitive team. Then there are other factors which come into play in the financial aspect. It depends on the clubs, on the competition attracting more spectators, more press, more sponsors, everything is linked.

Both Itziar and Iñigo admire their red&white fans' behavior. "In this respect," says Iñigo, "Athletic is



There was a new celebration in the "Cathedral" on May 6th when nearly 30,000 spectators turned out to cheer on their team.



better off than other teams. It means a lot to attract an average of 2,000 spectators to normal games in women's soccer." Itziar adds that the Bilbao fans were "impressive, from the very first game. You could put it down to the novelty factor, but people have kept coming and supporting us for all five seasons."

They got a record turnout for the last match in the first Superleague played in the San Mamés stadium, when 35,000 people filled the stadium to applaud their champions and these fans just don't give up because on 6th May this year, almost 30,000 spectators filled their "Cathedral" for yet another celebration. Nobody wanted to miss seeing the Athletic girls taking their fourth Superleague. The Eva, Gurpegi Uriagareka and Orueta fan clubs, created to support the team, play an essential role in motivating players.

Their press coverage is also exemplary. Specialized press, newspapers, local radio and TV stations make the effort to report on their soccer skills.

A firefighter by trade, Iñigo has been training women's teams for 18 years and says that it would be wrong to compare men's soccer with women's soccer because this would belittle the women's game: "Men and women have different physiques, their speed and power is not the same, but it is possible to enjoy both games. It's like comparing heavyweight and featherweight boxing."



The women's team during their official reception.

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