

# POLE POSITION

Glory at last in football's Arctic frontier

As far as clunky literary devices go, the train from Oslo to Bodø is hard to beat. Stretching 1,300km up Norway's spine, the route conveniently traces the country's modern football history in an efficient, narrative-friendly fashion.

**S**ure, you could fly it in a fraction of the time, or even drive in shifts and shave off a couple of hours. But we're in lockdown and imaginary travel is a luxury we can afford - especially if it helps sculpt a magazine article's intro. So, all aboard! We've got an 18-hour ride ahead of us and a scene to set.

The train doors have locked and we're pulling out of Oslo. Like most capital cities, it has a perfectly respectable footballing pedigree, dotted with league titles and cup runs. But it's clean and orderly, and there's an unshakeable suspicion people are having more fun elsewhere. While Lillestrøm (1976 and 1977) and Vålerenga (1981, 1984 and 1985) enjoyed success in the early years after the last major league restructuring,

Oslo has never really been the beating heart of Norwegian football. For that, we need to head north.

At this point, it's worth noting that there is a very real difference between north and North, a silent capitalisation used to define 'us' and 'them'. The North has historically suffered entrenched social prejudice, the Arctic Circle's rural society and traditional industries dismissed and it's indigenous Sámi populations discriminated against. The word 'apartheid' has been used to describe the split, with 'No North-Norwegians' disclaimers added to southern apartment vacancy signs well within living memory. Like all social divides, this spilled over into football: teams from the North were outright banned from joining the national league until 1972 - a handicap that





has taken decades to shake off.

Given the harsh weather conditions, the travel distances and the smaller talent pool, it's no surprise silverware does not often make its way beyond the 66th parallel north. In fact, when the coronavirus pandemic brought the world to a halt last year, no Arctic Circle team - whether in Norway, Finland, Sweden, Russia, Canada or the US - had ever won a top-flight title. It had been a long, cold winter. Things were about to change forever.

But we're jumping ahead! After all, we've only just arrived at Trondheim, where we're switching trains. Trondheim is Norway's fourth-biggest city but without question its most successful on the football field. Perched on Norway's southern rump, before the country tapers off into a fine, icy point, the city is home to serial winners Rosenborg. As the new millennium approached, they wrestled control from Oslo's teams and never looked back. They won the top flight in 1990, missed out in 1991 and then claimed every single title between 1992 and 2004. They've since shared the spoils with a handful of other clubs - all far below the country's Arctic border - racking up another seven titles. They've also played close to 300 European fixtures, scalping Real Madrid, Ajax, Porto, Celtic and Valencia over the years.

But we're not here to talk about Rosenborg. Like all good tales of the unexpected in Norway, we need to head North. Bodø is the end of the line, literally and figuratively, with the town of 50,000 people serving as the rail network's terminus. It is not an easy place to play football. Located on a peninsula jutting out into the frigid Norwegian Sea, the city is battered by some of the strongest winds in the country. From December to March, the daily mean temperature is sub-zero, and in December and January the weak winter sun is completely blocked by nearby mountains. It's a windswept, chilly city on the edge of thousands of miles of black, rolling waves.

But there's still always time for a kickabout - and this year, FK Bodø/Glimt made history, shattering a sporting voodoo that stretched from continent to continent. When football cautiously returned between the first and second wave of coronavirus last summer, the Norwegian football league was just getting started. Glimt kicked off with a 4-2 victory over Viking on June 16 and never

looked back. Their form for the opening 10 fixtures read WWWWWWWWWW and it didn't vary much over the months that followed. Their first defeat came 21 games into the season, by which point they already had one hand on the trophy.

Playing football in Bodø is one thing but playing good football is another, Glimt's CEO Frode Thomassen tells Pickles. Attracting foreign talent to the Arctic Circle is no mean feat and developing home-grown players, given the small population scattered across huge distances, isn't any easier. But clever management, astute signings and focus on development - what's the Norwegian for moneyball? - has seen the club inch closer and closer to glory.

'The club has gradually developed from 2017 until today,' he told us. 'This is mainly due to the people in and around the club, and that they work with a common culture, values and goals. We have an extreme focus on development and try to see opportunities in every situation. We build the club with small resources, and are concerned with building stone upon stone.'

In 2018 they came 11th - a respectable enough position asterisked by the fact they drew 14 of 30 games. The following year they turned these draws into wins, finishing second after stumbling at the finish line and winning just 2 of their final 11 games. And last year, 2020, they made no mistake, finishing 19 points clear of second-placed Molde.

It's difficult to overstate the fairytale nature of their triumph. Glimt, tagged an 'elevator club' in Norway due to their habit of moving up and down between the divisions, were promoted as recently as 2017. They battled centuries of lazy Northern stereotypes and decades of footballing failure but, like that train from Oslo, kept moving forwards even as the wind howled.

'They thought we were primitives up here,' sporting director Orjan Berg told the media after Glimt's league title was confirmed. 'We were direct, we spoke our minds, but we were not primitive. They used to advertise flats for rent in Oslo but say 'no people from the north of Norway' on them. We were bullied. They thought that we were only farmers, fishermen - and some still think that we are.'

There are farmers and fishermen in the Arctic Circle, sure. But for the first time in the history of football, there are also champions 🏆

**It's difficult to overstate the fairytale nature of their triumph**