



# All Hallow's

On the Friday before All Hallow's Eve I went to the cemetery. To watch a football match. Wiener Sportklub were playing at home, their home is next to a local cemetery in the Vienna district of Hernals.

The home end is the cemetery end. In case you didn't notice, huge graffiti featuring the grim reaper himself tells you that "home is where the graveyard is".

There is a certain Mexican "day of the dead" feel about the place. Add to this the derelict state of the ground. Mind you, it's a charming place normally attracting a crowd of just over 1800 fans. But it needs repairing fast or there will be licensing issues.

The Sportklub is one of Austria's oldest clubs. The same goes for the stadium they play in. Its roots go back to 1883 when a group of cyclists set up "Wiener Sportklub" (note the different spelling, we will get to that later). In 1907 the football section was set up. 1 October 1958 saw the greatest triumph in club history. Wiener Sportklub beat the mighty Juventus at home 7-0 in the European Cup, throwing them out of the tournament. To this day this represents the highest victory of any Austrian team in the European Cup

and the worst defeat of any Italian team in the history of the competition.

Today, the major Austrian players are SK Rapid Wien, FAK Austria Wien, Sturm Graz and a team based in Salzburg named after a global energy drink brand which will not be mentioned here. The state of Austrian football is one of permanent crisis. Big business runs the show in many places. Sponsors' names do not only appear on players' shirts, but also on stadium names and club badges. Few proper fans and community-owned clubs remain in the upper echelons of the sport, they all have a fight on their hands to carve out a future for themselves.

The Sportklub has been through some tumultuous decades, including the bankruptcy of the football section. Hence it was separated from the main club and renamed "Wiener Sportklub". The relationship between the football club and the remaining parts of "Wiener Sportklub" has been fraught but attempts are under way to merge the two again in the not too distant future.

Today, the Sportklub plays in the "Regionalliga Ost", the highest level of Austrian non-league football. It aims for promotion into professional football, however many fans have split emotions about this. On the one

hand, fans want to see their team progress. On the other, severe lack of funds could mean promotion leading to disaster further down the line. The budget for players is one of the smallest around. One fan put it to me like this: "The smallest budget in the league above us is double the amount of money we haven't got today".

Despite all the problems, there is life and soul about the place sadly lacking at most big modern day football clubs. The Sportklub is fan-owned and kept going by a dedicated band of volunteers. Apart from being members of their club, many Sportklub fans are also active in the "Friends of the cemetery end".

Among many other things, this group organises coaches for away travel and runs its own pub called "the flag" underneath the Sportklub home end. Post-match parties there are legendary, the graffiti art inside is also worth a look.

Once more, the graveyard grim reaper theme dominates the scenery.

All things deadly and macabre run deep in Viennese popular culture and folklore.

Georg Kreisler, one of Vienna's most famous singers, liked to sing about poisoning pigeons in the park and setting curses on fire as early as the 1950s. Vienna is a place of dark humour and sometimes brutal satire. Wiener Sportklub perfectly reflects this attitude. "Sportklub fans will never be sober" the fans sing in honour of their club president, Udo Huber. In a former life he was a rock radio DJ who liked a drink or two.

Fan culture here is chilled out. Expect the smell of herbal smoke, rather than smoke bombs, hovering over the stands. It's more a main stand kind of place. On the fringes of the hard core, there is an eclectic set of football fans from all walks of life who have made the place their second home.

There is a Panathinaikos fan who migrated to Vienna decades ago, as well as a United fan who used to go to Old Trafford in the 1980s. A family of migrant newspaper couriers go to the Friday evening games, then

start work delivering newspapers to thousands of homes during the night.

The stadium announcer is blind, yet he manages to follow each twist and turn of the game. I was told he has got such a feel for the way the atmosphere changes that he knows what happens often before being told. I met a Leeds fan there who likes FC United and hates everything English football has become. I also met a misguided Austrian footballer who thinks that there is something likeable about city. Nothing is ever perfect...

The Sportklub is a haven for fans of Austrian football teams who hate what is going on with the sport. This is why they also visit Sportklub games. In a small way it shows there can be a different manner of running

things. Rivalries are set aside here. In the "Flag" you'll find "I was here" stickers from all over, whether it is Wacker Innsbruck, Viktoria Hamburg, St Pauli or TeBe Berlin.

The club and its supporters take their responsibilities to the wider community seriously. The Sportklub stadium hosts numerous events, among them a tournament in support of Ute Bock, an organisation taking care of asylum seekers. Despite limited funds, there is a youth team. The Sportklub is also the first well known Austrian club with its own women's team, which is entirely funded through fans' donations.

Henry Rollins's band "Black Flag" played in the Sportklub catacombs a few years back. This year, the Sportklub hosts a special gig by US folk punk band Flogging Molly. Once a year, the stadium opens all floors, catacombs and the pub for an all night "free of charge" music festival.

Needless to say, no sponsor's name will ever find its way onto the Sportklub badge as long as the fans have got anything to do with it. Budding groundhoppers should give it a look. Feel free to put an FCUM sticker on the wall.

Home games are on Fridays, 7:30pm. Homepage: [wienersportklub.at](http://wienersportklub.at)

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