

Against All Odds, Ukraine's Dnipro Ready for Europa League Final

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Dnipro's Konoplyanka and Kankava take part in training session at team's training camp in Dnipropetrovsk, May 22, 2015.

KIEV — Win or lose, Ukrainian outsiders Dnipro Dnipropetrovsk are banking on being able to lift some of the gloom in their war-weary country when they face holders Sevilla in Wednesday's Europa League final in Warsaw.

With fighting raging on the doorstep of Dnipropetrovsk, the club's players, staff and fans have had to travel 500 kilometers (310 miles) to play Europa League home matches in the capital, Kiev, often at near-empty stadiums.

Yet, despite the odds stacked against them, Dnipro have battled through to their first ever European final and say they will have their front-line compatriots firmly in mind when they run on to the pitch in Warsaw.

"It is clear these are hard times for our state and for us too," Dnipro defender Artem Fedetskiy

said.

"We are hoping our sporting achievement will inspire our heroes who are defending our country from the enemy. May God protect them, and we will do everything that we can to help them."

Dnipropetrovsk, an industrial city of just under one million, has avoided being sucked into the war against Russian-backed rebels, a conflict which has killed more than 6,200 people in just over a year.

The team had to fly back and forth to Kiev for their qualifying matches after a ruling by European soccer's organizing body UEFA that the Dnipro Arena was too dangerous.

"We had to play all our home matches in Kiev and when we played in the group the stands were practically empty and without the Eurocup feel that there should be," said Fedetskiy.

"But we fought on, gritted our teeth and eventually people got interested. And it was a pleasure that at the game with Napoli there was a full stadium," added the 30-year old player.

Befitting a team whose historic roots lie in Soviet era industry, Dnipro are rugged, hard-working and well-organized, but far from easy on the eye.

They have scrapped their way through to the final, winning respect but few admirers, having claimed only six wins since the start of the group stage, losing four times and scoring 13 goals, less than one a game.

"Things are not easy for our country now," head coach Myron Markevych, whose team recorded a 2-1 aggregate win over a heavily fancied Napoli in the semi-finals, said at a recent news conference.

"The soccer players and I, we understand that we should strive to do better in European Cup matches so that people in Europe can see — and elsewhere — that, though things are difficult for us now, football is alive in Ukraine."

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