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Meet the Brain Behind World Cup Mascot Zabivaka

By Lena Smirnova

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Yekaterina Bocharova (FIFA / Getty Images / TASS)

Walk around any of the 11 World Cup host cities and you'll come face to face with a mischievous wolf, donning a sporty outfit, goggles and a football. This is Zabivaka, the official mascot of the 2018 World Cup. Less conspicuous, however, is Yekaterina Bocharova, the university student who designed him.

Bocharova, 22, grew up in the small Siberian town of Strezhevoi, with a population of around 40,000, before going on to study graphic design at Tomsk State University.

Two years ago, Bocharova submitted one of her drawings to the World Cup mascot contest. After making the shortlist of the top three designs out of more than 500 submissions, her drawing was chosen as the winner in an online vote. The results were announced on the most popular evening show in the country, Vecherny Urgant.

The other contenders — a tiger and a cat — have since been forgotten, but Zabivaka is now a constant fixture on billboards and in shop displays across Russia.

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Bocharova only received $500 from FIFA for the copyrights to Zabivaka, she says. But her life has taken a significant turn. Two sponsors have given her private funding to move to Moscow to continue her studies and pursue her dream of working at an animation studio.

The Moscow Times spoke with Bocharova about Zabivaka, her new life and plans for the future.

How did you come up with Zabivaka?

When I was first told about the contest, I started looking at examples of different mascots from the Olympics and other competitions. I studied them to see what worked and what didn't ... My favorites were Fuleco the Armadillo in 2014 and the long-haired leopard from South Africa in 2010, Zakumi. My dog Tyson was also an inspiration. He formed the basis of Zabivaka.

Tyson is a dog, but Zabivaka is a wolf. How did your dog transform into a wolf?

All dogs were wolves at one point. I used a little imagination to make Tyson bigger and turn him into Zabivaka. In the early sketches, Zabivaka was almost a mirror image of Tyson. He had the same big ears and the same kind, innocent eyes.

What is Zabivaka like as a character?

He is very energetic and very friendly. He is always looking for adventure and is very sociable. And he loves football – that's obvious.

When your illustration was chosen as the official mascot of the World Cup, what was your reaction?

When I found out I was among the three finalists, I couldn't believe it. I thought that maybe it was a joke. But then I realized that almost no one knew I had submitted my drawings, and then there was shock and joy, of course. The winner was announced live on air on the Vecherny Urgant program. I was in the studio with all the other contestants. I cried tears of joy.

How did your family respond?

They were very happy for me. But the live broadcast was in Moscow and my entire family lives in the east, with a four-hour time difference. So when the results were announced it was 4 a.m. there. They only found out that I had won the next day.

Were you expecting to win?

No, I didn't have any expectations. Usually it is someone from Moscow who wins. I know that

there are a lot of schools and artists across Russia that are a lot cooler. It's like a lottery and you don't know what will happen. I just sent off my drawings without giving it much thought.

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You recently moved from Tomsk to Moscow. Is the move connected to winning the contest?

Yes, I got help to do this. A couple of sponsors helped me make the move to start studying here. I chose the school where I wanted to study and got help to enroll there.

What are your upcoming goals? You said before that your dream is to work for Disney. Is that still the case?

Of course. That has been my dream my entire life. Right now I am studying computer graphics. It's given me an insider's look at the industry and how it works. Before that I didn't have a clue, but now I look at it in a more sober way. I know there's a lot of work involved. Zabivaka is everywhere right now.

How do you feel when you see him on souvenirs?

When I see him in FIFA stores, I don't really have any special emotions about it at all. But when I see people walking around with him, that probably means that they like him and I find that more touching.

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Do you have any Zabivaka souvenirs?

I have three small statuettes and a soft toy.

Now that you've already created one mascot, are there more in the pipeline?

Yes, of course. I draw a lot. After I won the World Cup contest, there was a junior world championship in Tomsk for swimming with fins. They chose my mascot there, too: an otter.

This interview has been redacted for length and clarity.

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