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'Russians Don’t Love Football, They Love Victories' (Op-ed)

On both fronts, the country is proving to be wholly unpredictable.

By Marc Bennetts

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Kai Pfaffenbach / Reuters

If there’s one phrase commonly associated with Russia’s national football team, it’s probably the memorable words uttered by Viktor Chernomyrdin, then the country’s prime minister, during Russia’s disastrous budget reforms in 1993.

“We hoped for something better, but things turned out like they always do,” he said, striking a chord with the deeply fatalistic Russian psyche. His comment was used for years by sportswriters to describe the national team’s countless failures and its apparent appetite for self-destruction, characterized by a sad litany of last-minute defensive mistakes and missed goalmouth chances.

Unsurprisingly, with a pitiful reputation like that, no one gave Russia much of a chance at this summer's World Cup. Even Match TV, the Kremlin-funded sports channel, described the current side as the country's worst team ever. "We can only hope for a miracle," a commentator said ahead of the month-long tournament.

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But Russian football, like the country itself, is nothing if not unpredictable. Two wins in two games have propelled Russia into the play-off stages of the World Cup for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. And Russia has qualified with style, hammering Saudi Arabia 5-0 before beating Egypt 3-1. Along with Belgium, they have scored more goals than any other side at the tournament. Indeed, their total of eight goals is the highest ever recorded by a host nation since 1934.

It's a common saying here that Russians don't love football, they love victories. The outpouring of national joy after the win over Egypt seemed to confirm that. As Russians celebrated until dawn, some wondered how many of the national team's newly-found fans could name more than a few of its players. But cynicism was generally in low supply. "The young people running along Nevsky Prospekt with flags and shouting 'Russia!' will remember this for the next 50 years," wrote Igor Rabiner, one of the country's leading football journalists. "Whatever happens next in the World Cup, nothing can take those emotions away."

Next up for Russia is their final group stage match against Uruguay on June 25. Assured of noisy home support, the national side will be hoping to break more records and become the first Russian team to beat South American opponents at the World Cup. Russia's underwhelming total of four World Cup victories since 1991 have all come against African or Middle Eastern sides, and so a win against Uruguay on Monday would likely trigger new scenes of nationwide revelry.

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There were accusations ahead of the World Cup that the Kremlin would exploit the event for propaganda purposes. But while the scenes of happy crowds and smiling police officers have undoubtedly been a soft-power success so far for Russia, President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings have actually fallen during the tournament, according to VTsIOM, the state-run pollster. The reason? The government's announcement that Russia would increase the national retirement age from 60 to 65 for men and 55 to 63 for women. It's one of the most unpopular policies of Putin's long rule, and even an apparent attempt to bury the announcement during the World Cup opening ceremony has failed to dilute public anger. Don't expect any public protests in Moscow, though. The government has effectively banned demonstrations in World Cup host cities until July 25.

Besides their goal-scoring feats, Russia have also run farther than any other side at the World Cup, clocking 118 kilometers against the Saudis and 112 kilometers against Egypt, according to stats. The side also had three players in the Top 10 for distance covered during the first round of matches, with Alexander Golovin, Russia's skillful midfielder, in first place. After

allegations of a Kremlin-sponsored doping program at the Sochi Winter Olympics, which also saw stunning improvements by Team Russia, it's no surprise that some critics have suggested the side's World Cup achievements might likewise be down to steroids. Russian football figures have dismissed the claims. Stanislav Cherchesov, the Russian manager, has refused to take questions on the topic, while the team's doctor, Eduard Bezuglov, has said Russian players have passed numerous doping tests. Not that the denials are likely to hush skeptics. Like the tireless Russian team, the issue seems set to run and run.

Marc Bennetts is a journalist and author of "Football Dynamo: Modern Russia and the People's Game." The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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