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Igor Akinfeyev: Russian Football's Saving Grace

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Grigory Dukor / Reuters

This is part two in a print series on Russia's unlikely football heros. Read part one, Artyom Dzyuba: Russian Football's Prodigal Son, here.

Igor Akinfeyev dove to the right. The ball sailed down the middle. But as the Russian goalkeeper's left leg swung out behind him, it blocked the penalty kick and knocked Spain out of the World Cup.

The victory on Sunday is arguably the Russian national football team's most famous. Going by FIFA's rankings, it was a historic upset in the knockout rounds. Russia will now appear in the quarterfinal stage for the first time since 1970, when its squad was stocked with players from all over the Soviet Union.

The undeniable man of the match was Akinfeyev. Because the team's coach Stanislav

Cherchesov had set up his team in a defensive posture — "they are better than us in many ways," he explained before the game, "so I don't believe we should risk going forward" — Akinfeyev was forced to make key save after key save. And that was before he stopped two of Spain's penalty kicks following overtime.

After the match, Akinfeyev, the team's captain, was quick to deflect attention. "I'm not the man of the match," he told a scrum of journalists. "The man of the match is our team — and our fans."

The fans, however, disagreed.

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Late into the night, Muscovites spilled into the streets to celebrate their national team, and their hometown hero. (Technically Akinfeyev was born in Vidnoye, a town three kilometers outside city limits.) Everywhere in the capital, the chant rang out: "Igor, Igor, Akinfeyev, ey, ey!"

Others pledged their loyalty to the new king more explicitly. Papa John's promised the goalkeeper a year-long supply of pizzas. On state television, a man standing next to his wife told a reporter, "If my wife wanted to go marry Akinfeyev right now, I'd be fine with that."

Akinfeyev, however, was not always so unanimously loved. Although he has been Russia's starting goalkeeper for the past 13 years, he has made his fair share of mistakes in pivotal matches. Going into the World Cup, supporters were undecided as to whether he was still the man for the job.

In the first match of the last World Cup, in Brazil in 2014, a long distance shot from a South Korean substitute floated directly at the goalkeeper. Somehow, the ball slipped right between his hands and into the net. The football magazine FourFourTwo lists the blunder as the fifth "most incredible howler" in World Cup history.

"*In his career, Akinfeyev has always been very good about bringing himself back after making a mistake.*"

Although Russia managed to salvage a draw, they lost the next match. Then, against Algeria in the final group stage game, Akinfeyev committed another error — badly misjudging a cross and leaving his net wide open — sending his team home.

After yet another botched save knocked Russia out of the Confederations Cup last summer, calls to oust the goalkeeper grew louder.

"After that, people were talking about needing to replace him," said Russian football journalist Igor Rabiner. "But it's clear Russia doesn't have a better goalkeeper. And the important thing about Igor is that, throughout his career, he has always been very good at bringing himself back up after making a mistake."

Indeed, in Russia's third match of the group stage this World Cup against Uruguay, Akinfeyev was slow to react during two of Uruguay's goals, eliciting post-match criticism.

In the next match against Spain, his play was spotless.

The goalkeeper, who has spent his entire career at CSKA Moscow where he started at five years old, had also long been the butt of jokes cracked by supporters of rival clubs, particularly Spartak Moscow and Zenit St. Petersburg. Mostly they made fun of him, Rabiner said, for holding by far the longest streak of games without a shutout in the UEFA Champions League: 43 consecutive matches. The keeper in second place has just 16.

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"He finally broke the streak in November and I think that gave him some extra confidence going into this tournament," Rabiner said.

If domestic supporters had their doubts about Akinfeyev heading into the World Cup, the goalkeeper's love for his home never wavered.

Reportedly, Akinfeyev refused multiple offers to move abroad to bigger clubs throughout his career because he likes "Russian nature, especially birch trees" too much.

"I believe in God and like to walk by Orthodox churches with their domes," Akinfeyev said. "Obviously, I can't get enough of that in Europe."

The patriotic goalkeeper was also a surrogate for President Vladimir Putin during the president's election campaign this year.

Yet that did not stop even Putin's loudest critic, Alexei Navalny, from swooning over Akinfeyev's heroics following the win over Spain.

The opposition leader known for organizing street protests tweeted: "YESSSS! We need to announce a series of protests demanding the Hero of Russia honor" — the country's highest honorary title — "for Akinfeyev."

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