

# Union pays its dues

Union Berlin, surprise finalist in this year's German Cup, has endured hard times before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

**BY PATRICK VIGNAL**

in Berlin

For years, the Olympic Stadium was in another world for the fans of Union Berlin. Now they are looking forward to the short trip there to cheer on their heroes in the German Cup final.

The stadium is only a few stops away on public transportation, but once the Berlin Wall stood between the district of Koepenick, the amateur team's home, and the showcase stadium where it will challenge Schalke 04 in the German Cup final on May 26.

*"Die Mauer muss weg!"* ("The wall must go"),



Union fans used to chant in the days of a divided Germany every time their team had a free kick. The wall they meant was not the defensive one formed by the visitors.

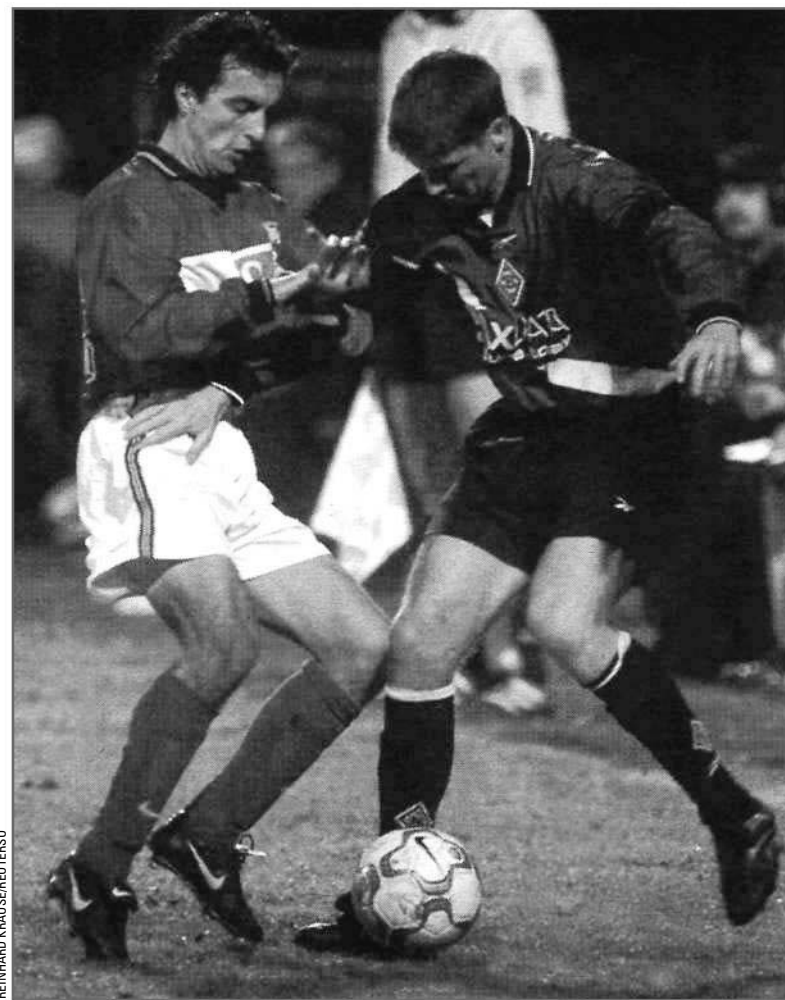
**FINEST HOUR.** Union was never as successful as state-sponsored rival Dynamo Berlin, whose No. 1 supporter was feared Stasi leader Erich Mielke, but Union was East Berlin's most popular club.

While Dynamo kept winning titles, Union relied on the faithful following of those opposed to the Communist regime.

The proud little club bounced between the First and Second Divisions. Its top players were often forced to move to Dynamo, which enjoyed the privileges of party endorsement, leaving Union out in the cold.

Union's finest hour came in 1968 when it won the East German Cup. But the East German government forced Union to boycott the European Cup Winners Cup in response to UEFA's reaction to the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Union embraced capitalism. But it soon had to sell players to pay its considerable debts and survive in



REINHARD KRAUSE/REUTERSO

**Bozo Durkovic (left) fights with Borussia Moenchengladbach's Peter Nielsen in amateur Union Berlin's win in the semifinals of the German Cup.**

the minor leagues.

Twice, in 1993 and 1994, Union won the Oberliga title, but both times it was denied a license to play in the Second Division because of its financial troubles.

**STRICT APPROACH.** Union was on the verge of bankruptcy when businessman Michael Koelmel, the owner of media group Kinowelt, saved it by injecting millions into the club in 1998.

The following year came experienced Bulgarian coach Georgi Vassiliev, who was soon nicknamed "the General" for his strict approach to the game.

Last summer, Union thought it was going to make it at last. It needed only to beat Osnabrueck in a playoff to join the glamorous world of German pro soccer. But Union lost on penalties and had to watch Osnabrueck move up to the Second Division instead.

That bitter moment was still on the minds of Union players before the Shootout that decided its semifinal match in the German Cup against Second Division Borussia Moenchengladbach.

"This makes up for what happened against Osnabrueck," goalkeeper Sven Beuckert said after stopping two penalties.

**EPIC BATTLE.** The match, played in driving

rain on a muddy field, was an epic battle that ended 2-2 after regulation and overtime.

There were fears the game would be postponed after snow fell at Union's stadium, but 100 fans showed up to help clear the field, allowing the match to kick off as planned.

Deafening cheers from the crowd of 18,000 in the packed stadium inspired Union, which was clearly the better team. Moenchengladbach, five-time German champion and three-time German Cup winner, struggled in atrocious weather conditions.

"We all fought for it," said Beuckert. "I didn't have that much to do before the Shootout."

Union has little chance of advancing to the Second Division next season, but it may finally play in Europe.

If Schalke, currently two points behind Bayern in the Bundesliga standings, finishes in the top four, it will qualify for the Champions League. Union Berlin would play in the UEFA Cup even if it loses to Schalke.

The Berliners will not be content with that.

"Now that we're in the final, we want to win it," said Beuckert.

After the semifinals, a fan approached the goalkeeper and asked him for his shirt.

"Come on, Svenni, please give it to me," the fan said.

Union's hero refused.

"Sorry, no," he replied. "I need it for the final." *(Reuters)*