



MARCELO DEL POZO/REUTERS

Real Sociedad, the pride of Gipuzkoa

No country's soccer is as much a reflection of regional identities as Spain's La Liga.

There's Real Madrid vs. Barcelona — Castilla vs. Catalonia. Deportivo Coruna and Celta represent Galicia. Then there's case of the Basque clubs, Real Sociedad and Athletic Bilbao.

First-place Sociedad's success marks the return of the Basques to the forefront of Spanish soccer.

Athletic Bilbao dominated Spanish soccer in its inception, winning five of the first 12 titles. Real Sociedad, located in San Sebastian, won league titles in 1981 and 1982, and Athletic followed with its seventh and eighth titles in 1983 and 1984.

After that, the Basque clubs struggled as they tried to maintain their regional identity.

Athletic still sticks by its policy of only using Basque players. Sociedad broke its all-Basque policy with the signing of Irishman John Aldridge in 1989, but it was only last summer that it recruited its first non-Basque Spanish player with the acquisition of 22-year-old midfielder Sergio Boris from Osasuna.

Sociedad's rise is remarkable, considering it finished 13th last season and spent the last three years in the bottom half of the league. It went through six coaches, including former Spanish national team coach Javier Clemente, in three years before

naming Frenchman Raynald Denoueix as coach this season.

Many Sociedad observers say the quiet Denoueix reminds them of Basque coach Alberto Ormaechea, architect of the great Sociedad teams of the early 1980s.

Sociedad relies heavily on Russian Valery Karpin, Yugoslav Darko Kovacevic and Turk Nihat Kahveci, who form the big three in the Sociedad attack. Karpin (1994-96) and Kovacevic (1996-99) both had previous stints at Sociedad. Nihat, 23, has been one of the revelations of the Spanish season.

Sociedad has a small youth program, but the emergence of winger Javier De Pedro and midfielder Xavi Alonso has been a big factor in its success this season.

San Sebastian fans aren't as vocal as Athletic fans in Bilbao. It doesn't help that Sociedad's Anoeta Stadium, completed in 1993, has a running track around the field. But Sociedad regularly plays to capacity crowds of 32,000 and is responsible for pumping \$60 million into the local economy, 0.5 percent of Gipuzkoa province's revenues.

Sociedad, which has a two-point lead over second-place Real Madrid, is in excellent shape to make next year's Champions League, but its 39-year-old president, Jose Luis Astiazaran, isn't about to go wild on the transfer market.

With a budget of less than \$40 million, Sociedad has no debts, and Astiazaran intends to keep it that way.

"We won't go crazy," he insists.

By Paul Kennedy

Yugoslav striker Darko Kovacevic (left) forms part of the big three in the Real Sociedad attack.