



PASA BALOIA NESKA

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In collaboration with local organisations, a sporting initiative aims to make football more accessible for young girls in the Basque Country.

Athletic Club strive to provide pathways into professional football by improving coaching and facilities across the region, highlighting the campaign ahead of their local derby against Real Sociedad in February by inviting 2,000 young girls to watch their role models at San Mamés. They delivered, securing a 2-0 win and edging closer to a return to UEFA Women's Champions League participation.

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Athletic Club Femenino have flown under the radar for decades, both in terms of their on-pitch achievements and their off-pitch efforts to create a level playing field. Some 17 years before Barcelona Femení were afforded the opportunity to play at the Camp Nou, *las Leonas* first played at San Mamés in 2003, lifting their first-ever league title after putting five goals past Puebla in front of 35,000 fans. It set the record attendance for a women's football match in Spain, and kickstarted an impressive run of form that saw the *Zurigorri* claim the league title in three of the following four seasons.

But while that era of dominance came to a close and the league title has been off the cards for the Basque side - and anyone other than Barça in recent years - Athletic Club are heading in the right direction again. In January, eight months after the Blaugrana claimed their second successive UEFA Women's Champions League title at San Mamés in front of 50,827 fans, David Aznar's side defended valiantly against the European champions before ultimately conceding twice late on as their Catalan visitors headed back home with three points.

It was, despite the result, a statement performance from an Athletic side nearing a long-awaited return to the European stage, having last appeared in the competition in 2016/17 when they were eliminated in the first round by Fortuna Hjørring.

The crucial test wouldn't come until a month later, however, as the *Zurigorri* welcomed Real Sociedad to San Mamés for a tantalising Basque derby - and the second of three matches to be played at *la Catedral* in 2024/25.

The two sides found themselves level on points ahead of kick-off at San Mamés, trailing third-placed Atlético Madrid and the UEFA Women's Champions League qualifying spots by just a single point.

A crowd of 21,153 made their way to *la Catedral* for a midday kick-off, including 2,000 girls from across the region invited to attend free-of-charge as part of the "*Pasa Baloia Neska*" ("Pass the ball, girls"). Developing the next generation of talent has tangible benefits for the Bilbao side, who only recruit players with Basque heritage. Some clubs

take a half-hearted approach to attracting the next generation of young girls; Athletic Club certainly aren't one of them.

Described as "*a pioneering and innovative initiative*" by the Basque representative for Culture, Media and Sport when the scheme launched in 2023, the programme aims to make football more accessible to girls across the region and establish a pathway into professional football by improving coaching methodologies, sports management and facilities across the youth game.

To reinforce the notion that the young girls of today have the possibility to follow in the footsteps of their idols and take to the pitch as Athletic Club players in the future, 51 girls representing clubs across Bizkaia were invited onto the pitch before kick-off - and

when they joined their teammates to watch the match from the South Stand, their idols did not disappoint.

Ane Azkona, Athletic Club's 26-year-old forward, stole the show; bagging a goal either side of the interval as the hosts claimed a 2-0 win over Real Sociedad. Born in Iruña, Azkona swapped the rock-climbing gear and ballet shoes of her childhood for a pair of football boots, playing futsal for years before signing for Athletic at age 18 following a season in the fourth tier with Ardoi. The rest, as they say, is history: Azkona now captains her side in front of five-digit crowds as they edge towards a return to European football.

"*The derby is always exciting; it's unpredictable,*" she said following the victory, suggesting that the team are "*on the right track*" to end that decade-long absence from the UEFA Women's Champions League.

And so, with the right support and investment, it's clear that there is a pathway to greatness for young girls in the Basque Country to realise their dreams of playing football professionally. Their role models will have walked the same streets as a child, honed their skills in the same football cages and had kickabouts in the same plazas - and now, with the help of "*Pasa Baloia Neska*", there will be more opportunities for the next generation to keep following their heroes' footsteps.



AUPA ATHLETIC!

