

Baku Celebrates its Wembley Hero

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English fans get a chance to pay their respects to the man who ruled in their favour in the 1966 World Cup final.

Legendary football stars gathered in Baku this week to commemorate the Azerbaijani linesman Tofik Bakhrarov ahead of the national team's World Cup qualifying match against England.

Sir Geoff Hurst unveiled the monument to Bakhrarov, who died in 1993 on October 12. Fate brought the two men together forever in the World Cup final in 1966, when England and West Germany were drawn at 2:2 in extra time. Hurst's shot struck the German crossbar and then bounced vertically downwards.

The incident has gone down in sporting history. The English players celebrated what they thought was a goal. The Swiss referee Gottfried Dienst was not sure. He stopped play and made his way through the German players to consult Bakhrarov, the linesman. Bakhrarov nodded to confirm he thought a goal had been scored. The Germans protested but the game went on and Hurst completed a hat-trick, making the score 4:2 shortly before the final whistle.

In his memoirs Hurst said that he was not sure himself if the ball had just bounced on the line or actually crossed it. In a tongue-in-cheek gesture he presented Bakhrarov's son with a shirt with the words "Thank you very much" in Azeri.

Bakhrarov was born in Baku in 1926 and played football for the local club Neftyanik. But after a serious leg injury he turned into a referee and made his international debut in 1964. In his final years he was the general secretary of the Football Federation of Azerbaijan.

The national stadium is named after Bakhrarov, but the statue ceremony, attended by Hurst, FIFA president Sepp Blatter and other footballing greats, such as Michel Platini, brings him posthumous international fame.

Under rainy skies fit for London at the opening ceremony, Blatter told the guests that he was honoured to be present. "To be honest I have never taken part in the opening ceremony for a stadium bearing the name of a linesman. I thank all citizens of Baku because it is you who have made this hospitable atmosphere," he said.

Blatter then added optimistically, "And I assure you that the Azerbaijan team will beat the English!"

Azerbaijani football fan Aydyn Zarbaliev commented,

"Maybe people in London won't agree with me but I think Tofik Bakhrarov from Baku deserves a monument from the English no smaller than Nelson's column.

"Largely thanks to his courageous decision, the English were world champions for the first and only time. That goal broke the Germans psychologically and in the end they lost 4:2."

One token of thanks Bakhrarov received immediately. Before 1966 only the main referee received a symbolic gold whistle at the end of the World Cup final. But at Wembley all three officials, including Bakhrarov, were presented with ones from Queen Elizabeth.

For many years Bakhrarov was known in England as the “Russian linesman”, because he represented the Soviet Union. Azerbaijanis are hoping that the ceremony will dispel that misapprehension forever.

“He was just a wonderful man,” said Akshin Kazimzade, a veteran Azerbaijani sports journalist. “He was one of the best referees in the world and I am proud to have been his compatriot. I was lucky enough to be at that match and I could see well how the Germans besieged him on all sides and shouted something angry and unpleasant at him.”

Kazimzade said that the Bakhrarov endured this onslaught calmly and firmly.

“I know that decades later super-powerful computers have different opinions, but it is a fact that the nation that invented football celebrated a great victory on that day,” he went on. “By the way, seven years later in Moscow Helmut Schoen, another manager of the West German team, which had come to play against the USSR, heard that I was an Azerbaijani and said to me, ‘Tofik Bakhrarov is a fine judge’.”

After the match German striker Uwe Seeler publicly apologised to Bakhrarov for his verbal assault on the linesman.

In his memoirs Bakhrarov wrote, “A huge crowd had gathered in front of the Royal Garden Hotel, where the final reception to celebrate the official closure of the championship was taking place. Thousands of fans sang and shouted out greetings, backed up by the horns of hundreds of cars.

“At the party Uwe Seeler came up to me and said ‘Mr Bakhrarov, accept my apologies. I was wrong, when I disputed your decision. We saw the replay: the goal was counted correctly’.”

In his memoir Bakhrarov described his never-ceasing excitement at his job. He described football matches as “duels” which were “full of unforeseen turns and even real miracles. And who does not want to be a magician if even for just 90 minutes?”

At the ceremony in Baku, Hurst returned to the few seconds that shaped both his life and that of Bakhrarov. He told the audience, “I can tell you 100 per cent that the goal I scored in the World Cup Final against Germany in 1966 was a real goal. On behalf of the whole of England I would like to thank the family of Tofik Bakhrarov.”

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Location: [Azerbaijan](#)

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