

# EMERGENCE OF

# SMALLER FOOTBALLING NATIONS

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Right before Euro 2016 started last week, a small nation that didn't even come close to qualifying for the tournament beat defending champions, Spain. It sent shockwaves around the world, especially the Spanish camp, which still hasn't recovered since their dismal World Cup performance.

How did this come about? In the late 2000s, all the smaller nations had learned that the Euros would be expanded up to 24 teams which could climb to 32 in a decade's time. They needed to compete with the bigger boys and to do that they needed to fix their grassroots system, their professional leagues, and more importantly, bring funding to the youth systems.

While Germany and Spain set the best examples, they were always powerhouses in international football. They laid a solid, yet non-expensive pathway. Iceland for example, with a population of only 300,000, have not only ousted and completely dominated my beloved Netherlands from qualifying to the Euros, they've also competed with a pretty good Portugal team since qualifying. This has come from redeveloping 330+ indoor stadiums/pitches, fully equipped with state of the art facilities. They have 669 individuals with at least a UEFA B license, which goes to show they've made serious strides in giving their youth the best possible coaches to further train their abilities.

Lars Lagerback, the famous Swede, is

Iceland's national team coach and the day he walked in he did so to make the team a force to be reckoned with. He helped their football association KSI lay the groundwork for future generations. Iceland have players playing all over Europe, most notably England. This isn't something that only Iceland have implemented.

Countries like Albania, Austria, Hungary, Belgium, Northern Ireland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Georgia and others have also done something similar. Belgium, like Germany, started their plans back in the '90s and have now climbed to the number 2 spot in FIFA rankings, and with someone like Eden Hazard who has the capability of being the best in the world one day playing his trade for them, they have a very bright future.

Surprisingly, England have yet to implement such changes, although they have a really good youth



system and coaches coming through with UEFA badges. They simply haven't given their youth that level of importance and maybe that's why the future of English starlets isn't the brightest. However, England has the EPL and its sheer competitiveness will always drive younger players to go the distance.

Spain had focused quite

heavily in revamping their youth system and it paid off massively back in the 2000s, when they dominated the world and won the Euros twice with the World Cup in between.

This clear concept and strive to make their country better has served all the smaller nations and the bigger ones to get better and now, the smaller ones can not only compete but beat the big boys. Which now begs the question, why have the Asian countries been left so far behind?

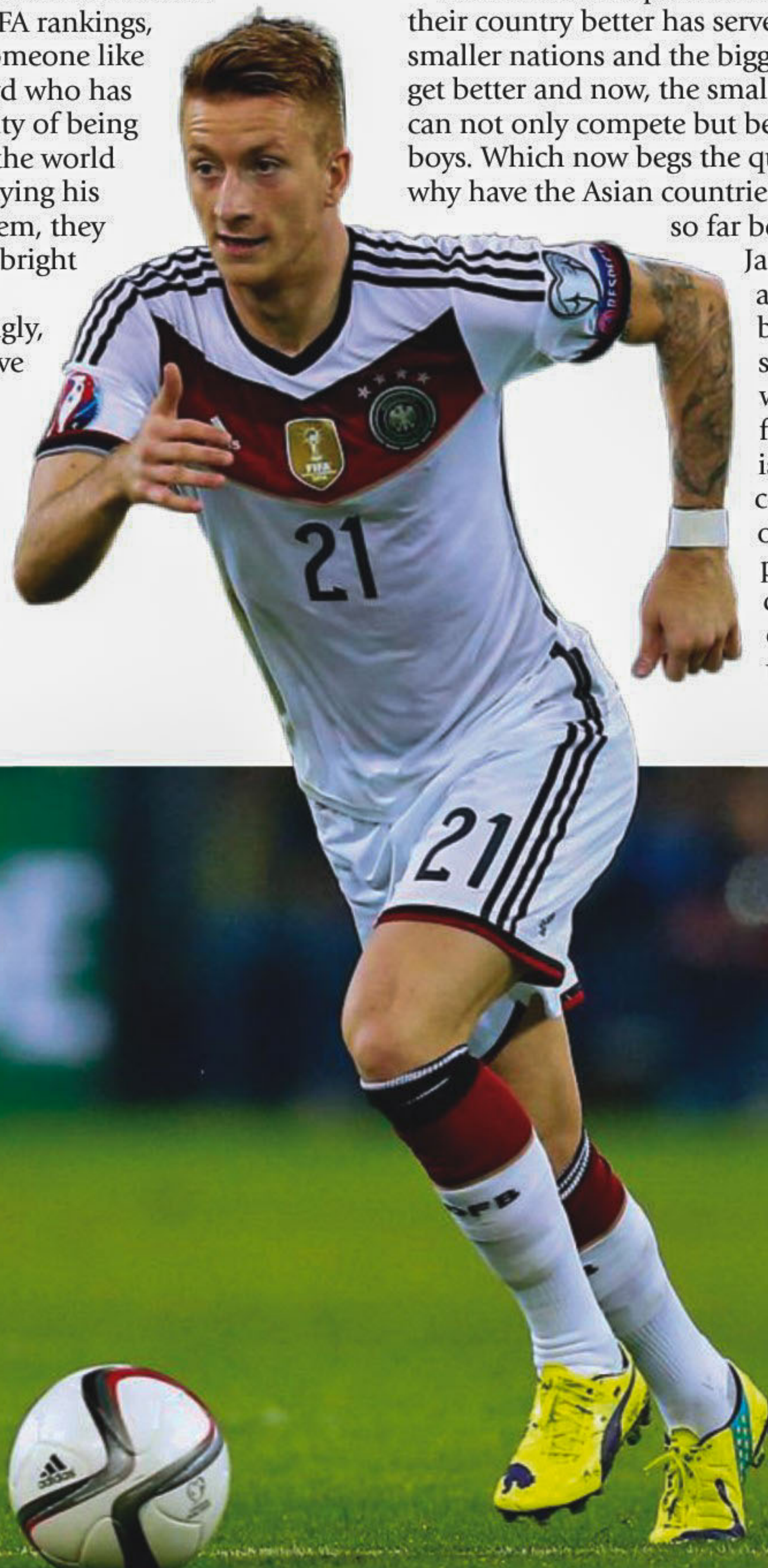
Japan, arguably the best Asian side in world football, isn't competing on the pitch. This comes down to them not

renovating their coaching system. In fact, the Asian Football Confederation does not have the UEFA level training that's needed to further these coaches' education.

And how about a much lower ranked Bangladesh? From the heydays of the late '80s, we have gone backwards at an alarming fashion. In 1993, Ukraine was ranked 14 places below Bangladesh. Since then they have gone on to reach World Cups and Euros, also producing players like Andriy Shevchenko, a Ballon d'Or winner.

Bangladesh Football Federation, or BFF, have limited funding and supposedly no idea what they're doing. They promised overhauling of the youth system, education and higher badges for the local coaches, and to make the league more professional and competitive. They promised to better the clubs by giving stricter regulations. This simply hasn't come close to happening. Gone are the days when we beat India regularly; we can't even beat Nepal these days.

Bangladeshi football needs funding. We cannot rely on lower grade foreign coaches to automatically fix things for us, and repeat the cycle when it fails. This has to be a process that needs months of planning, proper funding and the sincerest dedication of everyone involved, with further help from the AFC. Only then can we dream of a day when Bangladesh can compete with not only our neighbours but the rest of Asia, and who knows, maybe the world.



Marco Reus is probably one of the best examples of a good youth system.