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Reggina, the Serie A survivors from Calabria's badlands

By Gideon Long

REGGIO CALABRIA, Italy, May 4 (Reuters) - Life at Italian Serie A side Reggina has not always been a barrel of laughs.

When former club president Pino Benedetto allowed Nevio Scala to leave for a prestigious coaching job at Parma in 1989, his car was firebombed outside his house during the night.

Vice president Gianni Remo recalls how, when the club faced bankruptcy in the mid-1990s, he regularly found 1,000-lire bank notes slipped under the windscreen wipers of his car.

In Italy that implies just one thing - "thief".

A year ago, when Reggina were on the verge of their historic promotion to the first division, someone sent club president Pasquale Foti a severed calf's head through the post.

In the badlands of Calabria, where the local mafia is still fearfully active, such things cannot be simply shrugged off as tasteless pranks.

But these days the men in charge at Reggina are smiling.

Barring an unsuspected crash in their final two matches, the side from the toe tip of boot-shaped Italy will have achieved the prime objective of this, their first season in Serie A - survival.

What is more, they will have done it in style.

Reggina, a third division side just five years ago, have held their own with all the giants of Italian soccer this term.

They drew with both Inter Milan and AC Milan at the San Siro, held Juventus 1-1 at the Delle Alpi stadium and took a point off Lazio (0-0), Fiorentina (2-2) and Parma (2-2) at their own Oreste Granillo ground.

On March 19 they recorded the biggest result of their chequered 86-year history - a 2-0 victory over Fabio Capello's AS Roma at the Olympic Stadium.

A couple more performances like that and Reggina could clinch a place in July's Intertoto Cup, gateway to Europe.

"Qualifying for the Intertoto Cup would be another historic step in our history, just as reaching Serie A was a historic step," Foti said as he watched his squad train at their idyllic practice ground on the edge of the city.

With the waters of the Messina Straights glistening just a few hundred metres from where he stands and the snow-capped cone of Mount Etna volcano rising up behind the goalposts from the nearby Sicilian shoreline, Foti cuts a relaxed figure.

"Our secret above all is being conscious of our own limits," he said. "We've managed to do that this year and it's had a very positive effect."

The team which brought Reggina up from Serie B last year was a tight-knit group of little-known Italians.

"It was a solid squad - that was it's strength - but this year we've added real quality," the president said.

Midfielder Roberto Baronio arrived in the close season after having been shut out of the Lazio first team. One year on, the Rome side are thinking of buying him back and Real Madrid have also sent scouts to Italy to keep tabs on him.

Sierra Leone striker Mohamed Kallon has scored 11 league goals this season - as many as Marcelo Salas at Lazio and Oliver Bierhoff at AC Milan.

Italy under-21 forward Andrea Pirlo has had a superb campaign since he arrived on loan from Inter last September. No one doubts Inter will suck him back into their squad next term.

In goal, Massimo Taibi has found the consistency he never showed during brief spells at AC Milan and Manchester United.

"We're under no illusions and we're sure some of these players will leave Reggina at the end of the season," Foti said. "But that's to be expected when there are big clubs interested. They've served us well and we've served them well too."

Many fans at Reggina feel the club should have had the chance of a crack at Serie A 11 years ago, when they came desperately close to promotion.

With Scala at the helm, the Calabrians forced a Serie B play-off against Cremonese at the end of the 1988-89 season but lost it on penalties. Scala left soon afterwards and in 1991 Reggina were relegated to the third division.

But glimmers of a brighter future were visible even then.

In 1992 their emerging players reached the final of the national youth team tournament, losing out to a Torino side inspired by a young Christian Vieri.

Three years later they went back in Serie B, building themselves a new training ground and preparing for last year's big push for a place in the top flight.

The local council in this cash-strapped city ploughed 18 billion lire (\$8.29 million) into stadium development after they won promotion and new coach Franco Colomba bolstered his squad in preparation for the likes of Juventus and Lazio.

Reggina have also shown a flair for marketing.

Last spring, - before they had clinched promotion - they started selling season tickets for this term's matches at a discount, willing their fans to bet on their chances of making it into the first division.

"Bet on Reggina", the slogan ran.

One year on and with another first division campaign, beckoning, few people now will be prepared to bet on Reggina making a swift return to the lower leagues.

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