



SERVETTE FC

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New era begins for Servette

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Swiss football's newest stadium, the Stade de Genève, opened its doors to business yesterday when Servette FC drew 1-1 with BSC Young Boys in their first home match of the Swiss league's championship round.

Official inauguration

The 30,000-seater stadium, one of the four designated Swiss venues for the 2008 UEFA European Championship, to be co-hosted with Austria, will receive its official inauguration on 30 April when Switzerland meet Italy in an international friendly, an occasion which will be followed by a concert and fireworks display.

Leisure complex

For Servette, however, yesterday marked the dawn of a new era in this shiny €93m stadium on the outskirts of the Swiss capital. Located in the industrial district of La Praille, the Stade de Genève forms part of a leisure and hospitality complex, which cost almost €150m to develop and includes a 126-room hotel, restaurant and club shop. It is a world away from the antiquated appeal of Servette's former home, Les Charmilles, which had served them so well for more than seven decades.

'Increasing revenue'

By the 1990s, however, various renovations had reduced the capacity of Les Charmilles - now the site of an ornamental park - to just over 9,000 and the club had already begun considering moving to a new ground. According to former Servette president Christian Hervé - who played a key role in the stadium project - a move was "imperative" as "a means of increasing hospitality facilities and marketing revenue".

'An attraction'

The club's link-up with the broadcasting company Canal+ in 1996 - a partnership which ended last year - provided the impetus for change and in June 1997 an architect, Bernard Mocellin, was selected. In March 2001, the first brick was laid.

Mocellin said: "It was not just a case of designing a football stadium, but a place for people to come together, to enjoy themselves. In brief, an attraction."

Hallyday season

Seven investors shared the costs of the development, which also features a three-storey shopping and leisure complex, open since last November. Mocellin has described 'La Praille' as "an excellent, multi-functional stadium, which is technically equipped for all kinds of activities" - indeed the French singer Johnny Hallyday has already been booked to perform two concerts there in June. Hervé stresses, however, that "football will remain the main attraction".

Final venues

The Stade de Genève will doubtless become familiar to a Europe-wide audience when it will host matches at EURO 2008 in five years' time, along with Grasshopper-Club's new home at Stadium Zürich, FC Basel's Saint Jakob Park and BSC Young Boys' Wankdorf Stadium in Berne.

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