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Euro 2022: Iceland and their prime minister discover small can be beautiful

By Neil Johnston

BBC Sport at Manchester City Academy Stadium

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Iceland fans perform the Viking clap during the Euro 2022 game with Belgium at Manchester City's Academy Stadium

Size is not everything, as Iceland discovered playing at comfortably the smallest venue at Euro 2022.

"We are all very excited to play in England, on some of the country's most famous stadiums, and I think that this will be a fantastic tournament," Iceland's captain Sara Bjork Gunnarsdottir said

after her country qualified for the tournament.

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But Gunnarsdottir's tone soon changed when she discovered two of Iceland's three group games would be played at the Manchester City Academy Stadium, and not at an established Premier League or Football League ground.

"It's shocking," **she said**. "You're playing in England, you have so many stadiums, and we have a training ground from City. It's just embarrassing."

The Academy Stadium, home to Manchester City's women's team and in the shadow of Etihad Stadium - which hosted England's opening game of Euro 2005 - has a capacity of 4,400 for the Euros.

That is tiny compared to Old Trafford, a few miles across the city, where a record European Women's Championship crowd of 68,871 watched hosts England defeat Austria **on a memorable** opening night.

Yet the fans inside the Academy Stadium on a baking Sunday helped create a fine atmosphere as Iceland brought noise, the Viking clap and even their prime minister to Euro 2022.

They had failed to register a point at two of their previous three Euro tournament appearances, but Iceland are up and running after a hard-earned 1-1 draw with Belgium.

"It's great to be at Euro 2022," Katrin Jakobsdottir, Iceland's prime minister, told BBC Sport after flying to Manchester to support "stelpurnar okkar" (our girls).

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Iceland's Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir (left) in the fan park before the Euro 2022 match with Belgium

Iceland bring Viking clap to Euro 2022

It is six years since the Viking clap came to prominence at the men's Euro 2016 in France, as Iceland reached the quarter-finals.

The action involves fans raising their hands in the air before a thunderous clap and a chant. A rough estimate indicated that about 8% of the Icelandic population accompanied the team to France for Euro 2016.

Although the numbers in England for Euro 2022 are nowhere near on the same scale, the estimated 2,000 Iceland supporters inside the Academy Stadium added to a carnival atmosphere, with the Viking clap heard throughout their side's opening Group D game.

Back in Iceland, thousands more watched the game live on national television while others packed into a fan park in the capital Reykjavik as the women's game continues to expand on the island, where 33% of registered players are female.

"I was five when I started to watch English games on television with my dad," added Jakobsdottir.

"Women's football in Iceland was definitely not a thing until maybe 25 years ago.

"Even then, many stopped playing when they became teenagers. It has now become more normal to continue and we now have players who are at teams in Europe and the United States.

"When I was growing up we had much more gentle sports. But that has changed, and for me as a feminist, who has been fighting for women's rights, it is very important girls have a choice to play football.

"As you can see internationally, women's football is having a lot more attention."

Jakobsdottir wore Iceland's colours as she visited the Manchester fan park before the game to mix with supporters before changing into more formal wear for the match.



Hundreds of Iceland fans marched from Manchester city centre to the Academy Stadium

'Fans were fantastic'

Euro 2022 organisers defended the use of the Academy Stadium after Gunnarsdottir's criticism, saying it would generate a "great atmosphere", while arguing it is better to play games in front of sell-out crowds than thousands of empty seats in big stadiums.

With Belgium fans wearing red, the Academy Stadium was a sea of colour and noise.

Iceland's Sveindis Jane Jonsdottir, who was named player of the match, revealed afterwards that the players struggled to hear each other because of the noise.

There was not a spare seat in the ground as the aggregate attendance for the tournament passed 140,000, seven matches into Euro 2022.

"I thought the fans were fantastic," said Thorsteinn Halldorsson, Iceland's coach. "There was a lot of noise, singing and cheering.

"You can hear everything and you feel more in contact with the fans. Even though this is a small ground, it is quite loud here."

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