

ALEX BYSOUTH

FOOTBALL FOR THE SOUL



Rediscovering the Beauty
in the Beautiful Game

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Chapter One

A Sense of Belonging

FEW PRE-GAME rituals compare to the Txoko. But first you have to find it. That's a rite of passage in itself. Can't locate the Txoko? Well, you'll go hungry, thirsty and probably be the butt of an inside joke or two. A hop across the River Nervión from Bilbao's La Ribera Market, pacing the pavements on the waterfront trying to frantically decode an address, only the sight of two red-and-white-scarved men gives up the location, creaking open a large yet unassuming heavy door and ushering us up a staircase into a dining area decked in Athletic Club paraphernalia.

Warm faces glowing in the dint of winter sunshine appear familiar despite the fact we are meeting for the first time and the welcoming smell of grilled meat and seafood wafting in from the kitchen gives the charm of a traditional family meal. 'What took you so long?!' chime our hosts, joking and gesticulating in a heady mix of Basque, Spanish and English, posing a question that transcends merely pre-match dinner and drinks.

The designated chef for the day is serving enough traditional dishes and local delicacies, it seems, to feed

half of Estadio de San Mamés. And that's before he wheels out the chocolate cake.

Traditionally, the Txoko is a cosy venue rented out by Basque friends, or cuadrillas as they call them locally, where they meet to cook, drink and spend time together. For the Mr Pentland Club, an international supporters' group, the gatherings are reserved for special occasions, this one being Athletic Club's 125th anniversary. Amid the food, so much food, old friends who have travelled from the United Kingdom and beyond reacquaint themselves with their companions in the peña and are treated to personal video messages from Athletic Club legends Andoni Goikoetxea, dubbed the 'Butcher of Bilbao' for an infamous tackle on Barcelona's Diego Maradona, and former left-back Aitor Larrazábal, who played more than 400 games for the club.

Bellies bursting and spirits heightened by lashings of Kalimotxo, a mix of red wine and cola, many then make the half-hour stroll through the bustling city to San Mamés, the stream of supporters gathering velocity as it reaches the streets approaching the stadium, where fans bounce out of bars after finishing their beers and pintxos, ready to take their seats for the pre-match anthem. 'Athletic, Athletic, eup!' they cry in spine-tingling unison, a 48,000-strong choir almost lifting La Catedral from its foundations. Among the many former Athletic Club heroes present in the crowd, most gearing up to play in an exhibition match against Porto later, is the legendary José Ángel Iribar, who featured a club record 614 times for Athletic and was honoured with the unveiling of his own statue

outside the stadium before the anniversary game against Atlético Madrid.

If supporting Los Leones is like a religion, then San Mamés is a place of worship. Built next to the site of a chapel dedicated to Saint Mammes, a Christian orphan thrown to the lions by the Romans, fans have gathered here for more than a century to express their faith in Athletic. The new ground, opened in 2013, can proudly boast of being one of the most iconic in Europe. A landmark and point of reference for so many, its nickname, 'The Cathedral', is apt. As former coach Luis Fernández put it: 'Bilbao without San Mamés would be like Paris without the Eiffel Tower.'

Athletic Club contrive to make it a memorable occasion for Iribar and the raucous capacity crowd inside San Mamés, with Gorka Guruzeta's goal and a sublime finish from the unstoppable Nico Williams sealing an emphatic victory. The bars that fell silent for a couple of hours fill up again to the point fans spill out on to the streets with their drinks in hand. Joyous chatter and an occasional chant ripple through a pleasantly balmy December evening in the north of Spain. Once you have experienced football in Bilbao, immersed yourself in Athletic Club, the culture and all its charming idiosyncrasies, it is hard to view the sport through the same prism you once did.

Locals call it a city of former players because it is common to see Athletic Club icons wandering the streets but perhaps Bilbao is the city of current sports stars, too. The morning after the victory over Atlético Madrid, reigning Masters champion Jon Rahm is casually strolling the quiet neighbourhood next to

the stadium and happily, or perhaps out of politeness, stops for a chat with my brother and I about the game. Rahm was invited to take a ceremonial kick-off before the win over Atlético and was expected to don his Masters Green Jacket for the occasion but instead opted to complement a red and white scarf with the vintage goalkeeper shirt of the legendary Iribar, who joined him in the centre circle. Somewhat hoarse in the aftermath of the previous day's festival atmosphere at San Mamés, where Rahm could later be spotted cheering and chanting with friends in the stands, the former world No.1 curiously asks what a couple of English lads are doing walking through Bilbao at such a time on a Sunday morning. Casually dressed and typically understated, you would be surprised to learn Rahm signed a deal with the Saudi-backed LIV Golf a few weeks earlier to the tune of more than \$500 million.. The golfing superstar just sees himself as another fan when it comes to football.

He is a proud exponent of Basque culture, too. When it came to picking his menu for the annual Champions' Dinner at Augusta, an honour bestowed on the defending Masters champion, Rahm, born near the sea on the outskirts of Bilbao in Barrika, treated the world's best golfers to a veritable Basque feast. It began with a mix of tapas and pintxos – Ibericos, Idiazabal cheese and black truffle, Spanish omelette, Basque chorizo and potato, his mum's classic lentil stew and croqueta de pollo, creamy chicken fritters and potato. There was a Basque crab salad, followed by a main of either Chuleton, a ribeye steak or turbot and white asparagus in a pil pil sauce. The only surprise, especially

as an Athletic supporter, was that Rahm opted for turbot; he doesn't like the more traditional Basque salted cod. Bacalao, the local name for such a cod dish, is synonymous with Athletic Club and shouted by local radio commentators whenever the team score a goal. This began in the 1980s and was made fashionable by Radio Popular's chief football commentator, José Irigorri, whom the press room at San Mamés is now named after. In fact, you normally know when Athletic have scored because fans' WhatsApp chats fill up with fish emojis.

Athletic have always been one of the marvels of world football because of their unique philosophy. They are both a global phenomenon and the heart of the local community. 'Athletic Club plays only with people of the land,' explains Galder Reguera, project manager of the Athletic Club Foundation. 'One of the consequences of this is that the people feel that the players are part of the stands. When we see the team, we see our brothers or sisters play. The relationship with them is very different than at other clubs. They are not idols, they are part of the community, and they have this very special link with the fans and the city.'

With around 350,000 inhabitants, Bilbao is the largest city in the province of Biscay and the wider Basque Country region, Euskal Herria as it is also known, which contains a number of territories in northern Spain and also the south-west of France. The club's philosophy dictates that they may only field players born or essentially raised in the area ('formado' is the word the club use). The idea of being 'raised' in the Basque Country can be a little ambiguous and

sometimes creatively moulded to incorporate a young prospect with high potential, such as Aymeric Laporte, who, despite having Basque heritage, was born outside the region in Agen and sent to play in Bayonne. But it effectively means a player who was trained in the Athletic academy or that of another club in the Basque Country.

‘We represent more than a football club. We represent a region,’ says director of football Mikel Gonzalez, referring to Euskadi, the Spanish Basque provinces. ‘We have this feeling that we have to defend our culture, the Basque Country, our history. So, it is more than football. Football is our way of representing our culture and our way of living.’

There is a sense of belonging to being Basque. Euskera, the Basque language, is thought to be the oldest living language in the world and bears no relation to any other. Its origins remain largely a mystery to linguists yet around a million people in the region now speak it. A century ago, Basque was in danger of disappearing, an issue furthered when the Franco regime forbade the teaching of it in schools or its use in the workplace. Some suggest migration to Bilbao was also encouraged in a bid to dilute Basque culture, although the region’s role as Spain’s industrial powerhouse of the time meant workers were naturally drawn to the Basque Country, too. Instead of replacing Basque culture, they embraced it. ‘In the past 40 or 50 years, the Basque governments and the social movement in schools have done lots to recover the use of the language,’ explains Reguera. ‘But this is sometimes too much associated with work and studies

by children.’ The club’s foundation is doing its part to try and make learning the language more engaging for youngsters. ‘You must bring it to their social lives, too, and football is a part of this,’ adds Reguera.

As well as community projects, Athletic Club provide Basque language lessons for all players and employees. The club is an embodiment of Basqueness, celebrating its history and culture, but also a vehicle through which the Euskadi people can present their proud heritage on a global scale. As one taxi driver suggests: ‘Ninety per cent of people here support Athletic Club but Bilbainos who live away feel they have to protect the Basque heritage even more so than locals.’

‘It is something that you feel since you are young,’ says Gonzalez, explaining how kids learn Athletic songs in schools, that their first football jersey is typically the red and white stripes of their local club and that the first ground they visit is, of course, La Catedral. ‘The first history you hear about football is about your parents or your grandfather’s first time in San Mamés or the first time they saw Athletic win a title,’ adds Gonzalez. ‘Since you are very young – family, people, school, everywhere – you start receiving a lot of input about Athletic. It is something you feel that is a lot of you; about your family, your friends, everything. It is not about football – of course, it *is* football, 11 v 11 – but a lot of times we don’t speak about *just* football here.’

Athletic have become a Basque institution in their own right. But they were not always a club for exclusively Basque players. Football first arrived in the

city via Basque students returning from their studies in the United Kingdom and through British miners and shipyard workers who brought coal, and a ball, to the docks with them. Indeed, there was an Englishman, Alfred Mills, among the founding members of the club in 1898 and Athletic featured a number of foreign players in the early years. However, their unique philosophy has stood since 1911, when Andrew Veitch became the last non-Basque player to represent the club. The birth of the now-renowned tradition was not a slight on Veitch, rather a way of sticking up two fingers at Athletic Club's rivals from the rest of Spain, who complained about them winning the Copa del Rey that year with foreigners in the team. The club were initially stripped of the title before being reinstated as champions. Their headstrong reaction to the criticism was inherently Basque.

'Stubbornness is what defines it and it is probably part of Basque character,' concedes Basque journalist Beñat Gutiérrez. 'I guess now, even if Athletic wanted to stop being stubborn, it wouldn't make sense. The identity is blended with this idea of just signing Basque-born or raised players because this is what makes them unique in the world. You need to have a positive narrative; you need to have a message that brings people together and I think Athletic has a perfect one.'

It is a philosophy, rather than something written into the club's statutes or agreed on between Athletic Club socios (Athletic are one of four clubs in La Liga, alongside Barcelona, Osasuna and Real Madrid, who are still run by members) and is, therefore, one open to interpretation. A description of the policy on the

club website is what tends to be taken as gospel. 'I know some people who want to have a proper debate between the members of the club and write down what they agree on but it feels like the kind of topic that would create more tension than anything else,' adds Gutiérrez. The interpretation has changed over time, though. At first, it just incorporated players born in the region of Biscay, then the wider Basque Country and now, of course, stretches to players raised or trained there. Some suggest it should include all players of Basque heritage and in the past, usually when presidential candidates are jostling for power before club elections, rumours have circulated about tweaking the model to attract high-profile players with Basque heritage. Such stars to be discussed have included Uruguay's Diego Forlán and Argentina forward Gonzalo Higuaín.

'It is true that now there is a bit of an attempt to add some nuance to the signing policy, maybe consider signing players from Basque heritage,' explains Gutiérrez. 'I think it is really difficult to put that on paper.' Gutiérrez uses Mexican side Club Deportivo Guadalajara, better known as Chivas, who only play with Mexican players, as an example. 'It's easy to know when a player is Mexican. Can he hold a Mexican passport? We don't have a Basque passport. So, to refine what Basque is and be like "Okay, the son of this person can sign because he has Basque heritage" is really difficult. And, right now, it is lax enough that if you want to bring in a player that is good, there are ways to do it and natural ways. If you have your son playing for a big academy and you want him to play for

Athletic and you're a Basque man, you probably have some relatives there, so send him [to Bilbao].'

It is a method that has proved sustainable and successful. Athletic have never been relegated from Spain's top tier and they are the third-most decorated team in Spain in terms of trophies won behind Real Madrid and Barcelona. They have won eight La Liga titles and, as of 2024, have won the Copa del Rey 25 times. The first cup success in 1902, however, is disputed. It is not recognised by the Spanish football authorities because it was a combined Athletic Club and Bilbao FC side and was played as an invitational tournament. The sides merged under the Athletic Club banner the following year and the trophy is proudly displayed by the club in their phenomenal museum at San Mamés.

Restricting the pool of players Athletic can pick from means there have been fallow periods without silverware and times where the club have finished lower in the table. Indeed, they narrowly avoided relegation in 2007. But, sticking to their principles, Athletic ended a 40-year wait for a trophy when they won the Copa del Rey in 2024 and have regularly qualified for Europe since that nervy campaign in which they battled the drop. 'To stay 125 years in the first division, without relegation, with 25 cups, with eight leagues, three Super Cups, just with Basque players ... pff!' says sporting director Gonzalez. 'In one year in 125 years, normally you go to the second division. To have 125 years of success and not make big mistakes, I think that is the biggest strength for Athletic.'

Reguera, a lifelong Athletic fan before he began working for the club, believes the club's sustained

success is underpinned by their use of local players. Not because they produce world class stars but because Athletic continuously produce a succession of role models for the next generation. 'Because we only play with people of the land, talent is something there is and something there is not,' he says. 'If you are lucky, you may find five very talented players in ten years. But if you are not lucky, in the next ten years maybe you only have one? The rest are people who give 150 per cent every match and [this] behaviour is like a disease. It is there in the room, it is contagious. It is a spirit. If you have in your team one guy, two guys, three guys that give 150 per cent every match, you will have this in all the team. If you have three talented players, okay, give the ball to them and maybe you are lucky ... like Real Madrid!'

Of course, when Athletic do not have a good season, there are arguments in the newspapers and local media that maybe the club should change philosophy or relax the restrictions to some extent. 'You never know what will happen in 50 years,' says Gonzalez. 'But in this moment, you can't imagine Athletic playing with Basque players plus players from other countries.'

Gaizka Garitano has experienced it as a fan, a player and a head coach. He was born in Bilbao, came through the club's youth academy and was first-team manager for two years. 'We all are very proud of our philosophy,' he says. 'It is the reason we feel something special about our club and we will continue this way. I know it is difficult to achieve trophies, to achieve titles with this philosophy, because we can't sign foreign players, but if you ask every single supporter of the club,

all of us agree with the philosophy. We are proud and it is for this reason we are very special. It is not about money, it is not about business, it is about *feel*. We feel different for that reason.'

Ander Herrera, the former Spain, Paris Saint-Germain and Manchester United midfielder, was one of those eligible to play for Athletic Club thanks to being born in Bilbao. His father, Pedro, is a huge Athletic fan and played his youth football at the club but never made it as a first-team member at San Mamés, instead enjoying a career in the Spanish top flight with Salamanca, Real Zaragoza and Celta Vigo. It was while his dad was working as general manager at Zaragoza that Herrera fell in love with football, enjoying the chance to kick a ball around with players after training and, thus, becoming a lifelong Real Zaragoza fan. Herrera progressed through the Aragonese club's ranks before living out his father's dream by joining Athletic. In fact, he has joined them twice, either side of spells in Manchester and Paris. That was before he fulfilled another dream by moving to Boca Juniors in January 2025, inspired by stories of his father's travels to Argentina.

Herrera is a football romantic. Even as an outsider, in the sense he is not a diehard Athletic fan like many of his former team-mates in Bilbao, he is a staunch believer in the club's philosophy. 'In my opinion, that should never change, because that makes the club so special,' he told me before the Copa del Rey Final against Mallorca. 'You have to experience this feeling of being part of this group, of this club, how important it is for society as well.' Herrera says he would come

across people in the city who are not necessarily into football but care deeply about Athletic Club. There are people who have been season ticket holders at San Mamés their whole lives, yet they have no interest in watching any other football or seeing any other team. Herrera, for example, recalls being stopped in the street by pensioners who would insist to him that Athletic win the cup and qualify for the Champions League.

Athletic are such a huge part of everyday life for people in Bilbao and the Basque Country. They are visible everywhere, from the many flags flying from buildings in the city to Athletic-branded crisps and pictures of current stars and club legends in bars and restaurants. In 2023, they sent a bib commemorating the club's 125th anniversary to every baby born in the region. Newborns are regularly showered in Athletic gifts and even maternity wards are decked in red and white. Most kids here are Athletic fans from birth. They have the passion and desire to represent their hometown club. Athletic's challenge is just moulding enough of those enthusiastic youngsters into elite talents who can compete in La Liga and Europe. And that work is done at Lezama.

Around a 40-minute train ride from the centre of Bilbao sits the sleepy village of Lezama, nestled in the tree-lined foothills of Monte Ganguren amid the vast, fertile Basque countryside where fresh air and spectacular views meet in a marriage of peace and tranquillity. A short stroll from the station and the silence is punctured by the voices of young men shouting and the slap of synthetic leather. Since 1971, Lezama has been the venue for Athletic's training

ground and home to its esteemed academy. The 13-hectare complex boasts four grass pitches, one with a 3,200-capacity stadium and the magnificent arch from the old San Mamés, four outdoor artificial pitches and another inside, plus a state-of-the-art gym, medical facilities and even a goalkeepers' cage. Howard Kendall famously stayed at Lezama with caretaker and former player Jesus Renteria when he was manager in the late 1980s and, since 2021, the club have been able to host young players on the campus after building a residence with 30 double rooms.

Getting the right players to Lezama ready to start their journey with the academy at the under-11s age group is one of the most important parts of the process. Athletic Club invest a lot of money and resources in scouting for the cantera, the word Spanish clubs give their academies and which translates as 'the quarry'. Athletic have 20 designated academy scouts, plus another 20 working across their partnership clubs, of which there are more than 160 in the region. Before the age of 11, Athletic believe that every football-playing boy in the Biscay region will have trained with the club at Lezama at least once. Each season they put on around 45 sessions to get a look at more than 1,000 kids.

'It is their first filter to enter our academy,' explains sporting director Gonzalez in his office at the training base, which opens into a communal workplace where members of the recruitment staff are busy beaver away on their laptops. 'When they are 11, 12, 13, 14, we invest a lot of time and a lot of resources to know 100 per cent of the players that we can pick. Then we

have a lot of physical tests, investigations, because they are going to be the future of the club and if we make a mistake with one of them, this mistake in the future can be terrible. In other clubs, you can make I don't know how many mistakes in the academy, because you go to the first team, you invest money and you sign a good player. Here, you make a mistake when this kid is 12 years old and he goes to another club, maybe you can't correct this mistake. And in the future, you are light because of this mistake. It is a big pressure working in the academy in the small ages, because it is the moment you can't make mistakes.'

Athletic's dominance when it comes to recruiting youth from the region can be a source of frustration for their rivals. Real Sociedad abandoned their own Basque-only policy in 1989 to try and be more competitive, with John Aldridge their first foreign signing, yet they still boast a productive youth academy at Zubietta and regularly feature among the clubs to have fielded the most homegrown players. Gonzalez calls it a 'beautiful fight' for the best young talent. In 2023/24, no club in Europe's top leagues featured more academy graduates than Athletic and that route to the first team is something that can be attractive when speaking to prospective young signings and their families. 'It is very difficult to get into the first team,' says Gonzalez. 'We have very good players and it is not easy to have space. But, for sure, it is the easiest club in the world or in the five big leagues. We are playing with eight or nine players formed in the academy every weekend. So, when you go to an agent or to a family, [you say] we have great facilities, we have a great stadium, for sure

we can make you a good contract but, also, and this is the most important, if you want to arrive in professional football, here in Athletic you have doors more open than everywhere.'

Still, abiding by the club's philosophy brings its own challenges. What happens if Athletic need a centre-back, for example? Their options on the transfer market are far more limited than other top clubs and if there is not a suitable Basque option available, the solution must come from within. The club, therefore, work towards having a line of succession, projecting what players aged 15, 16, 17 years old need to reach first-team football and how long it will take them to get there. Young players are put on a programme with the performance department to meet their physical, mental, psychological and nutritional needs. Then, whether it is six months or three years down the line, they hope one of the three or four designated players from the B or C teams will be able to make the leap to senior football. And for those who don't, because not every youngster in the academy will go on to enjoy a career as a professional footballer, Lezama is set up to develop good people, not just good players. Many take university degrees or further studies and all appreciate the idea of Athletic being one big family.

It helps that most people working at Lezama, whether it be players, coaches or backroom staff, are predominantly Athletic Club fans. 'Here in Athletic, we go further and further because it is like our dream,' says Gonzalez. 'Since we are young, we dream to play for Athletic. When you are not a football player, you dream to work for Athletic and when you are working

for Athletic you dream to make history and to win every game and to try to explain our philosophy.' They are also essentially playing or working for friends and family that support the club, alongside team-mates they have known, in many cases, since the age of 11. 'That is huge because it gives people from Bilbao the chance to support groups of players that tend to be really close together, this idea they are a group of friends,' adds fan and journalist Gutiérrez.

Athletic are, and have for a long time been, the main social organisation of the Basque Country, explains Gutiérrez. Yet the club are not complacent about their role in society. In fact, many inside the organisation see it as their duty to be more than just a football club to local people.

The Ibaigane Palace sits in the heart of Bilbao, in many ways situated between the old and the new. It is 500m one way from the eclectic Café Iruña, opened more than a century ago with its distinctive tiles and Mudejar-inspired decoration, and 500m the other from the modern and contemporary Guggenheim Museum that dominates the waterfront. If you stroll down the Nervión in one direction, you reach Bilbao's old town, Casco Viejo, with its quaint cobbled streets and bustling plazas lined with bakeries, restaurants and bars. Head the other, past the Guggenheim, and you find peaceful parks, old shipyards and, eventually, San Mamés.

Ibaigane is as much a part of Bilbao's past as it is its present. Steeped in history, the grand, neo-Basque building was constructed in the early 20th century by Ramón de la Sota, who was one of the wealthiest businessmen in Spain and given a knighthood by King

George V. De La Sota admired Athletic Club, was a member of the Basque Nationalist Party and a patron of Basque culture. Because of this, when General Francisco Franco took power following victory for the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War in 1939, the dictatorship seized De La Sota's assets and turned Ibaigane into a military barracks. Under the regime, Athletic Club were also forced to change their title to Atlético de Bilbao, as Franco imposed a 'Spanishisation' on foreign names. Following Franco's death, Ibaigane was returned to the family and Athletic Club reached an agreement to purchase the property and restore it. Since 1988, it has been their headquarters.

There cannot be many other, if any, of the biggest clubs in world football with a head office like Ibaigane. Inside, the building is split over three floors with large, wooden pillars as support. Wooden balconies flank the whole perimeter of the upper two, meaning that, whichever level you are on, you can peer down at the grand, open inner courtyard. The real treasure, however, is in looking up. In doing so, you witness an incredible stained-glass ceiling created by renowned Basque artist Anselmo Guinea. On the ground floor, a huge Athletic flag flies and players come here to pose for photographs after signing new contracts. In the basement, fondly known as 'The Txoko', there is a bar and several boardrooms, covered with iconic pictures from throughout Athletic Club's history, that have recently been converted into office space for staff. It is down here that English manager Howard Kendall delivered his famous, emotional goodbye press conference in November 1989, calling

Athletic the best club in the world. It says a lot about Athletic that Kendall was invited to the next home game after his resignation for a meal in the directors' box and received a standing ovation from the home fans before kick-off.

Members of the public can also stroll through Ibaigane's grounds if they wish, again showing the openness between club and fans, while a postbox was set up by the front entrance for young supporters to send letters to the players before the Copa del Rey Final against Mallorca in April 2024. The club took them down to Seville for the players to read.

Galder Reguera's office with the Athletic Club Foundation is inside the main building. This is where many of the club's finest ideas come to fruition, many of which are more impactful on the community than anything the first XI do. That is, of course, when Reguera is not coming on as an impact sub for the Spanish national team of authors and writers in their own European Cup equivalent. 'I only play the last five or ten minutes,' he laughs. 'But the experience is wonderful.'

Reguera's work with the foundation began almost two decades ago, when the philosophy graduate pitched the idea of hosting an event for football writers to showcase their work and meet with readers. The initial response was lukewarm but now Athletic Club's Thinking, Letters and Football Festival is a fundamental part of the calendar and includes players and staff at the club who share the belief that football and culture are an entwined and important part of the community.

Every year, the club invite authors to the stadium to share their work. They come in many forms, from novelists, poets, journalists and columnists, to scriptwriters, musicians, cartoonists, film-makers, rappers and more. They all discuss life and sport from their perspective. 'Normally it is people who don't have a voice in the world of football,' explains Reguera. In the past, it has even included Athletic Club players. In 2019, the club published a story by defender Óscar de Marcos which detailed the high and low points of his first year with Athletic and how a visit to Togo in West Africa helped put his life as a young footballer in perspective. De Marcos, as well as having played almost an hour of a league win over Real Zaragoza with a tear in his scrotum that required 25 stitches, is well known for his regular visits to local hospitals and for his charity work in Africa and South America. At the same time, the club published a Basque-language book by women's goalkeeper and captain Ainhoa Tirapu called *Bizitzu Eskukadaka*, while Igor Porset from Athletic Genuine, the club's team for people with intellectual disabilities, wrote a biographical piece. Athletic distributed 13,000 copies of the players' work to schools, local clubs and bookshops before hosting discussions with the writers. Club legends such as Iribar, Andoni Zubizarreta and Andoni Iraola, as well as former Real Madrid and Argentina striker Jorge Valdano, an admirer of the club, have all been known to join in the discussions, too.

'There is a very beautiful thing that we make book clubs with players from the first team of the men's and women's team,' explains Reguera, referring to another

initiative, the Athletic Reading Club. Here, fans put forward books they enjoyed and one is selected for the players to read. They have a month to finish it. Then they come together with the readers to discuss the book and sometimes make suggestions of their own. 'When you finish a book, in the first moment you think of your friends and you share it with the people you love,' says Reguera. 'To share a book is a very social experience. It is great to see a professional player of the Spanish league share two hours talking about the book with "normal" readers. It is very good for the people but it is more important for the players, because the players must always remember they are "normal" people but in a strange world. They are very young, they have no experience in life, they are at the top at 20 years old and surrounded by lots of people and they can lose their perspective.'

Reading the same book, sharing the same experiences and interpreting the story in their own individual ways is a wonderful leveller between players and fans, as well as a means of keeping the Athletic stars grounded. 'When you bring the players into a social project, the atmosphere changes and the people are very happy and a lot of beautiful things can happen,' explains Reguera. The players are undoubtedly the club's biggest ambassadors; what they do and say resonates. Generally, Athletic's stars are also very happy to volunteer their time; whether that is for a book club or to play corridor football with children in hospital. 'One of the incredible things about football is it is like an animal, it adapts to any space,' beams Reguera. 'Most games have not got 11 v 11. It is six v six or ten v

five, if you play with the kids! We almost never play in a full team. We play in the square, we play in the streets and it is one of the most powerful things. Football is the best sport and it is so universal because you hardly need anything to play, even a ball. You can play with paper or the heart of the enemy!’

One day, a fan came to Reguera’s office and explained how he had witnessed lots of children in hospital who wished to play football, whether that be with a soft ball or a pair of socks, but they were unable to leave the hospital to do so while having treatment. He suggested a championship of corridor football. ‘I thought “wow, this is so powerful”,’ says Reguera. ‘These children are going through pain and they spend all day in their bed. We went there, we talked with the hospitals, said we would bring some players to play with the children in the corridor and one of the beautiful things is we don’t want to announce this, it must be a secret. One day, some players will come here, they will take a ball, go to the room and say to a child “do you want to play?” and the child says “what!” This kind of project is wonderful to a child but it is wonderful to the players, too. Many times, clubs say, “Just go to this [kind of] project and shut up, stay there, sign some autographs; if anyone asks you any questions, talk with the press officer and he will send you what you need to know ...” We go to the locker room and say, “We are going to organise a football corridor championship, who wants to come?” It is incredible and it is so beautiful. The players who have done it before just say to their team-mates it is very beautiful and they go happily. I think this relationship

with the players and the experience of the people is the secret of the Athletic Club Foundation.'

The foundation, and the players, are involved in a number of similar projects; working with people with disabilities around inclusion in the community, for example. They also work in Basque hospitals with more than 600 adults who have mental health problems, providing hospitals the materials to play football and putting on coaching sessions. They then host a championship between the hospitals. 'Our model of the project is to be there every week with them,' says Reguera. 'They feel they are part of an important question for them, which is the club. They play with the emblem, they represent us when we go to play another club and we do a lot of things with them.'

Another of the most successful projects is the Thinking Football Film Festival, which has been running since 2013. Every year, the club screens around 14 films and follows these up with forums for the audience to discuss the topics, often social or political, with representatives from the film. It often attracts well-known names from the game; Ossie Ardiles, Ledley King, Thomas Hitzlsperger, Bob Bradley, Georgios Samaras. The list goes on. And then there are the Athletic players themselves, who are regular attendees. 'There was one moment I thought "Okay, we are doing a great job,"' says Reguera. 'It was to see Mikel Vesga waiting with the people to go into the cinema. He was just like anyone. I said to him "What are you doing, you can just go in!" And he said he didn't know, he just wanted to see the film. The star of the team, waiting with the people to go into the cinema,

and he came because he wanted to see the film! He was so happy. At this moment, he was not a star of the club, he was just part of the community. It was wonderful.' One year, the festival even concluded with a rendition from Orsai, the band made up of Athletic Club footballers at the time – Vesga, De Marcos, Mikel Balenziaga, Iñigo Lekue and Asier Villalibre. Their most popular song is, of course, 'One Club Men'.

Previous winners at the film festival have included *Kenny*, which documents how Liverpool legend Kenny Dalglish's life became entwined with his adopted city; *Democracia em preto e branco* (Democracy in Black and White), a film about how football and music helped in the search for a more democratic Brazil; and *Next Goal Wins*, the story of the American Samoa national team, who once lost a game 31-0. 'It is very useful to the club in terms of thinking about the role of football in contemporary society,' explains Reguera. 'Because one of the problems for clubs is that they don't think too much about *why* football is so extraordinary. You feel your feelings are extraordinary, you feel they have always been there, you don't need to think too much [about why]. We have a very special club, I usually say we are a club of philosophers, because when you talk to a fan of Athletic Club, we are always thinking of who we are, where we are going and where we come from. They are the three big questions of philosophy. We are always thinking about the role of the club, what is the role of the club in the contemporary world, "Maybe this change in the world will be effective for the club ..." The film festival is a very good tool for a club to think about what their role is.'

One of the most unique projects, however, is something that encapsulates the passionate and unprecedented Basque rivalry between Athletic Club and Real Sociedad. It is a derby like no other, where fans mingle in the streets beforehand and in the stands, regardless of whether the stripes on their shirts are red or blue. They are clubs with two distinct identities but with a shared culture and heritage. ‘Bertsolaritza’ is the tradition of singing improvised songs in Basque; it’s somewhere between improvised poetry and a rap battle. Before the Basque derby, Athletic versus La Real, you will find Bertsolari competing against one another, three versus three, a ‘fight between poets’ where they criticise, mock the other club or sing about relevant topics. It is all in good humour, of course. And organised by the clubs. The artists have even performed on the pitch at San Mamés before kick-off. ‘We are very close rivals. We hate each other very much,’ says Reguera. ‘But only in the stadium. We go together to the stadium. We are friends, them with their shirts, us with our shirts. We discuss a lot but we are friends. There have never been problems in the stands. You can go with your Athletic Club shirt and stand with Real Sociedad fans and there will be no problem. This kind of rivalry shows what football has to be. It is a symbolic rivalry. As fans, there is a beautiful bond when there is a rivalry. I saw one of these [Bertsolaritza] and thought it was very similar to a football rivalry. If you don’t understand the symbolic question, you may feel they hate each other.’

Indeed, one of the biggest travesties in Basque football in recent years is that the Coronavirus

pandemic denied fans the chance to witness the first Copa del Rey Final between Athletic Club and Real Sociedad in 112 years of rivalry. The match was due to be played in 2020 but was delayed by 12 months to give supporters the best chance of being able to attend. Come April 2021, restrictions in Spain meant that was still not possible and the game took place behind closed doors at Seville's La Cartuja Stadium. Back in Bilbao, a minority of fans clashed with police who tried to prevent them gathering in groups to watch the game together near San Mamés. La Real won 1-0, clinching a first major trophy since 1987. Athletic got another shot at ending their own drought two weeks later, when they faced Barcelona in the final of the 2021 edition. Back in Seville, however, they were beaten in a sixth successive final, and second in as many weeks, as the Catalan giants ran out 4-0 winners.

Three years later, Athletic earned another chance to end their trophy drought. 'It would mean a lot because a lot of generations have never seen Athletic win a Copa. It is a dream for all the lads that have come up through the ranks,' Iñaki Williams, one of the team's stars alongside younger brother Nico, told me before the final, as Athletic hosted a packed pre-final media day at Lezama. The anticipation in Bilbao was tangible. A city decked in red and white, from metro stations kitted out like San Mamés to bridal shops with Athletic Club scarves draped around the shoulders of their wedding dress mannequins, and everything in between. Back in Seville, with fans allowed to travel this time, more than 100,000 descended on the city by plane, train or epic drive from the north of Spain to

the south. They laughed together, sang Athletic songs and hundreds even serenaded a newly married couple in one of the city's picturesque squares. The most magical thing was just being there together. 'I went to the final with my son,' explains Reguera. 'It was two days, 18 hours of car journeys. But the important thing was to share the moments we will remember for all our lives – this first trip together to a final. And it was incredible. The important thing was the travel!'

The journey back was made sweeter by the fact Athletic won, on penalties, fans travelling deep into the night or, in fact, even the early hours of the following morning by the time the final concluded. 'Thank you to our extraordinary fans for their faith and unwavering devotion,' professed manager Ernesto Valverde afterwards. 'They've shown the world what Athletic is about. If there's anyone out there, wherever you're from, who now wants to support Athletic, we'll welcome you with open arms.'

That was a poignant message. Athletic's critics suggest the club's policy of only selecting Basque players is xenophobic or racist. The club refute that, of course, and it is a policy only applied to the playing squad. Managers and fans are welcomed from around the world. Indeed, Howard Kendall, Marcelo Bielsa and Fred Pentland, one of Athletic's most successful bosses and whom the international supporters' club is named after, are all celebrated honorary sons of Bilbao. The club's uniquely endearing nature can captivate even the most hardened football souls, Basque or otherwise.

Born in Mexico, it was curiosity about his Basque heritage that led Gaizka Atxa, one of the Mr Pentland

Club's founders, to support Athletic Club. Now, he lives in Bilbao and was in Seville for the final. And, of course, two of the club's biggest stars are the Williams brothers, whose parents are Ghanaian. Atxa says it has been rewarding to see how Athletic Club have evolved over time. 'Athletic is a reflection of our society here and seeing the Williams brothers flourish means that any immigrant or son of immigrants has a decent opportunity to play for our club,' he adds.

The Williams brothers' story is in itself remarkable and inspirational, never mind the barriers they have broken by becoming the first black players to star for Athletic, following in the footsteps of one-time Angola international Jonás Ramalho, who played a handful of games for the club after his debut in 2011. 'We had to suffer a lot,' Iñaki told me. 'But thanks to God we are all here together now, living a really good life. My parents are getting to watch their sons prosper, which is why they came here. Everything we do is for our parents. We have to be grateful to them, and we thank God that we have such a good life now.' Their mother, Maria, was pregnant with Iñaki when she left Ghana with his father, Felix, and crossed part of the Sahara barefoot. Felix burned his feet on the scorching hot sand and the couple had to jump a border fence at the Spanish territory of Melilla in North Africa to find safety. They were advised by a lawyer to say they were from war-torn Liberia and seek political asylum. The couple wound up in Bilbao and were introduced to Catholic priest Inaki Mardones when Maria was seven months pregnant. He found them an apartment, took them to the hospital where Iñaki was born and

he became his godfather, even introducing the young boy to Athletic, gifting him a red and white football shirt. Iñaki donned the same classic jersey, with Kappa print down the arms, while lifting the Copa del Rey trophy in Seville.

‘If you look at the latest signings for the youth teams, you have a strong number of black players,’ explains journalist Beñat Gutiérrez. ‘It was just part of the historical process of the country. The Basque Country got a lot of immigrants but they were coming from other parts of Spain, therefore they were mainly white. And then African immigrants started coming in the late 80s, early 90s, probably the bigger influx in the 2000s. It was just younger adult men who were not ready to start a sports career here. It has been a process until we are seeing the sons or even the grandsons of those new Basque citizens that are starting to be really important for Athletic.’

Nothing highlights the new face or globalisation of Bilbao more than the incredible celebrations on the River Nervión five days after the Copa del Rey Final. Videos and pictures from the early 1980s, when Athletic won back-to-back La Liga titles and the double in 1984, portray an industrial city with shipyards, steelworks and factories billowing out smoke as a backdrop to the celebratory boats cruising through murky waters. ‘Bilbao was dirtier!’ exclaims Gutiérrez. Now, with the gleaming Guggenheim on a clean and attractive waterfront, it is a renewed and revitalised city of services and culture, with input from renowned architects across the world. On the day of this Copa del Rey celebration, because there were many

impromptu ones in the week prior, including veteran Iker Muniain dancing on fans' shoulders in an old-town street party that brought a ticking-off and a fine from local police, there are a million sets of eyeballs locked on the Nervión. La Gabarra holds almost mythical status in Bilbao. Fans, players and media alike were all wary of mentioning the barge on which the 1980s team celebrated in the build-up to the final for fear of jinxing proceedings, adding a seventh successive loss to the pile and extending the 40-year wait for a major trophy. But, finally, the blue barge with a red bottom earned its day in the Bilbao sunshine. Athletic players sporting tailored red-and-white smart shirts with crisp collars, matching the 1984 team, board with the Copa del Rey trophy, shaking hands and high-fiving fans on the way. Iñaki Williams wears his shirt unbuttoned, white vest beneath, shades on, uber cool, shaking the trophy to the sky. Members of the 1984 team join them, along with legend José Ángel Iribar, of course.

Fans line the route from the beginning of the estuary at Bartola, others hang from balconies with flags, waving and cheering La Gabarra along its two-hour journey, past San Mamés to the Bilbao City Hall steps. Many follow on the water in 160 boats and all manner of vessels, anything that will float. They include Barcelona defender Iñigo Martínez, who spent five seasons with Athletic. Some players scatter red and white petals in memory of those who are no longer around to witness the celebrations. Tears of joy and remembrance among the watching fans run both red and white. Ultimately, it is a day that solidifies the idea that Athletic Club is about much more than just

football. Being an Athletic fan is a sense of shared identity. Winning, losing, crying, just being together. It is a unique, collective belief.

‘It is important to understand that, always, football is secondary,’ concludes Galder Reguera. ‘There are a few people who go to the stadium alone, they go to meet people they only know from the stadium. When we changed from the old San Mamés to the new, there was the possibility to choose your place with your friends you met in the old stadium. Two guys forgot to put their names together and they didn’t know anything about the other, apart from going to the football! They were trying to find the other one, talking with other people, “Do you know this guy? He hates Fernando Llorente? He has two feet!?” They knew nothing about each other.’ Somehow, Athletic fans, obliged by a sense of care to their elderly companions, managed to connect the dots and reacquaint the old friends. Now, they sit side by side again in the new San Mamés. ‘In the end, they are together,’ smiles Reguera. ‘It is a very special relationship.’ Perhaps that is the power of ‘The Cathedral’, the unifying force of Athletic Club. In the end, it is about belonging.