

LEANDRO VIGNOLI IN THE SHADOW OF GIANTS

A HEARTFELT JOURNEY INTO THE
MOST FAMOUS SMALL FAN BASES
OF EUROPEAN FOOTBALL



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LEANDRO VIGNOLI



CONTENTS

Preface	9
1. Espanyol and the Wonderful Minority.	17
2. Love Rayo, Hate Racism.	34
3. The Incredible Failure of 1860 Munich	50
4. Blood for Union Berlin	66
5. Sometimes St. Pauli; Always Anti-Fascist	85
6. Fuck Off, I'm Millwall.	104
7. The Last Kings of Scotland	122
8. Nobody Hates Fulham	143
9. There's No Football Without Orient.	157
10. There is Only One Belenenses	175
11. Red Star Paris is a Feast	190
12. This is Sparta	207
13. The Glory and Tragedy of <i>Il Grande Torino</i>	222
Postface	240
Afterword	245
Acknowledgements	251
About the Author	253
Credits	255

CHAPTER 1

ESPANYOL AND THE WONDERFUL MINORITY

Real Madrid 2-0 Espanyol
Estadio Santiago Bernabéu
Saturday, 18 February 2017
La Liga (First Division)
Attendance: 72,234

The avenue was blocked for vehicles with barricades and mounted policemen. It is adjacent to the Santiago Bernabéu, and everyone wears a Real Madrid jersey, except for one person. On the pavement, amongst an ocean of white shirts, he seemed to know what nobody else there could: the bus that was about to appear in front of us was not bringing Cristiano Ronaldo, but a large blue coach with the less glamorous Espanyol players instead. Carlos Iglesias, 19, wearing a blue and white jersey with the number 21 on the back, raised his team's scarf above his head, and then put his fist in the air towards the bus, a powerful gesture.

People come from all over the world to see Real Madrid play, which makes the stadium's surrounding area full of tourists with no clue from where their team's bus will come.

Iglesias was not in Madrid to see the multi-champion *Galacticos*, but his beloved Espanyol from Barcelona. He lives in Salamanca, a two-hour trip from the capital, where he studies, and this is the first time he will watch an away game at Santiago Bernabéu. ‘I’m here to support Espanyol and Espanyol only, but obviously Real Madrid is normally the team responsible for taking the league title away from them [FC Barcelona],’ he says. ‘I think that being an Espanyol fan is also being anti-Barça because they mistreat us. We need to celebrate when they suffer.’

Espanyol fans hate the big club of Barcelona almost more than they like their own. There is a widespread theory in football circles that Espanyol supporters represent an alliance with the Spanish monarchy (and Madrid) while the FC Barcelona fans are mostly Catalan separatists. Of course, RCD Espanyol’s official name can be translated into English as ‘Royal Spanish’ and the club’s crest is literally a crown, like many other clubs in Spain. However, this is not as simple and binary as it seems and many fans agree to disagree. Espanyol fans have two mantras.

The first mantra is that they support an apolitical football club. They claim that FC Barcelona use politics as a marketing tool, portraying Espanyol as the city villains. ‘They are obviously a bigger club, but the problem is that our media in Catalonia is all about Barça, Barça and Barça,’ Iglesias says. ‘When it comes to Espanyol, they always have something negative to say, as if we are not a Catalan club. Barça is a very political club and everyone bought into their agenda.’ Iglesias, nevertheless, believes that Catalonia is part of Spain.

Three hours before kick-off, I waited in front of Espanyol’s hotel, a 15-minute walk from the stadium, to

meet and greet some fans. There was not much action, but I was able to talk to a group of three students coming from a city outside of Madrid. They wore Espanyol jerseys and also carried a Spanish flag with them, even posing for a photo in front of the parked bus. The bus driver, Jose Manuel Martín, 49, himself a fanatic *perico* (the Espanyol fans' nickname, meaning parakeet), was also around smoking, a grey-haired man of few words. He was born and raised in Barcelona and he's firmly against Catalonia's independence from Spain.

If that was only a myth, all the Espanyol supporters that I came across up until that point proved the opposite. At the same time, this is an away game, at the epicentre of Spanish administration. These days in Barcelona there is a vocal group of pro-independence *pericose*. However, it is inconceivable for them to even be associated with FC Barcelona fans, even though some of them may share the separatist cause. They don't consider Barça fans as the spokesmen of the movement. Most supporters would not even admit that FC Barcelona is a local club. This is the second Espanyol fans' mantra right here: RCD Espanyol is the real Catalan club.

When I asked Martín, the grumpy bus driver, about this topic, he had a speech ready. 'Espanyol was founded by a Catalan student, while Barcelona was founded by a Swiss man with English players,' he says. 'We don't buy successful foreign players to win titles. They [Barcelona supporters] call us anti-Catalonia, but what do they really do for our community instead of just talk?' This is not as simple and binary as he says either, although he is correct about some FC Barcelona historical facts. It was founded by

Joan Gamper, a former player from FC Basel, Switzerland, from whom the club might have taken its iconic colours of blue and garnet (*blaugrana*) and the crest (the *balón*). The blue and white from Espanyol, on the other hand, are the colours appearing on the shield of a soldier from the Catalans' army.

In terms of historical players, FC Barcelona had László Kubala (Hungary), Johan Cruyff (Netherlands), Ronaldinho (Brazil) and Messi (Argentina). But when we think about Espanyol greats, everyone always has a Catalan player in mind. 'When you talk about Tamudo then you are talking about Espanyol and vice versa,' Carlos Iglesias says. The retired striker Raúl Tamudo holds the record for the most goals and appearances for Espanyol. He was not only born in Catalonia, but he is the Catalan-born footballer with the most goals scored in Spanish La Liga history with 146.

Tamudo and Espanyol were predestined for each other. He scored in his first professional game at the age of 19; he scored in two Copa del Rey Finals (a cup title ending 60 years of drought); he scored in all three stadiums that Espanyol has called home. And he scored a goal that made him revered by any *perico* supporter. *That goal he scored against Barça.*

Espanyol faced their local rivals at Camp Nou in June 2007, and with only two games left to play in the league, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona were level on points. Barça led Espanyol 2-1 after two goals scored by a 19-year-old Lionel Messi, while Real Madrid trailed Zaragoza away. Then in the 89th minute, Raúl Tamudo received a ball close to the FC Barcelona box and waited for the goalkeeper

Víctor Valdés to come out to meet him, so he could slip the ball home. Real Madrid eventually tied against Zaragoza and became champions in the final round. Raúl Tamudo's goal was ultimately what really sealed the deal. It has become known as *Tamudazo*.

The last-minute goal he scored against Barça was exactly what Tamudo needed to become Espanyol's top goalscorer in history. Every Espanyol supporter will tell this story as if it was an epic battle from the movie *Braveheart*. He became a legend not only for his accomplishments wearing the Espanyol jersey, but for taking FC Barcelona's league title away. Before I even asked, Carlos Inglesias told me why he supports a club that barely fights for big trophies.

'When you support a club in a city with a gigantic monster on your doorstep, you get to really appreciate the small victories,' he says. 'A goal like that one [against Barcelona] is perhaps not much when you support a team that wins the league every year, they [a Barça fan] would forget a week later. But for us that memory [of Tamudo's goal] is forever.' At the time I met Carlos, I didn't have a name for this book, but his speech about the giant stayed with me.

During the 1990s, Espanyol began using their motto *La força d'un sentiment* (The strength of a feeling) in their stadium's decor, marketing products and a documentary film released in 2011. The idea behind it was to show that their passion is not dependent on championships. They admit that their club is not as big as their rivals, but when Espanyol wins, it is always something special for them. Note: the slogan is in the Catalan language.

It always seems like Espanyol fans are fighting against their inferiority complex. A tourism campaign made by the

regional government of Catalonia sparked a lot of controversy in 2016, after a promotional video ran with the tag line, 'If you feel FC Barcelona, you feel Catalunya'. *Los pericos* promptly launched a social media hashtag stating, 'We feel Samoa'. This is what they must deal with for supporting the other club from Barcelona: it's anything but easy.

Not long after that video aired, FC Barcelona beat Paris Saint-Germain 6-1 at home, which became a historical comeback in the UEFA Champions League (they lost the first leg 4-0). The president of *La Generalitat de Catalunya* (head of the regional government), Carles Puigdemont, would say that FC Barcelona's triumph was an inspiration in Catalonia's fight for independence. 'Nothing is impossible,' he wrote. 'Barça have just demonstrated this playing football. And Catalonia will demonstrate this by deciding its future,' he wrote in his Twitter account. In election campaigns, it is totally normal to see politicians wearing Barça jerseys, as if Espanyol voters did not exist.

The two largest sports newspapers from Barcelona, *Mundo Deportivo* and *Diario Sport*, respectively, dedicate an average of 25 of their pages each to FC Barcelona and no more than two pages to Espanyol, which is less than what they will devote to basketball coverage (also heavily focused on Barça I should mention). The message in the media is truly clear: Barcelona is not a football club within a city; it's more like a city within a football club.

More than their dynasty in football, FC Barcelona became a representation of Catalan culture, a community that preserves its own identity. However, pro-Catalonia symbolism was never a huge presence in the club before General Francisco Franco took over the country. The political

divisiveness between Espanyol and Barça is a direct heritage of when the dictator ruled over Spain from 1939 to 1975. He took power after a bloody civil war, a conflict where Catalonia ended up defeated. The regime wanted national unity, so teaching Catalan in schools became illegal as did any public demonstration of the Catalan flag.

Franco's idea was to shut down any identification with Catalonia. His populist project used football as a platform to promote the country's strength (fascist propaganda at its best). He picked Real Madrid, the club from the capital, to give Europe a taste of his power. It is important to emphasise Franco was not a Real Madrid fan or even a football fan. It was all about his ideology.

FC Barcelona became then a symbol of resistance. Barça's Camp Nou stadium was a safe space for Catalan patriotic rebels, where people would come to express their political discontent, also forbidden during dictatorship. That is how FC Barcelona supporters' nationalism was born. It was not really only about football anymore. The club was not political for its first five decades, but this is how they are seen today. The civil war is a vivid memory in Spain and no football club wants to be attached to General Franco, even tenuously.

FC Barcelona fans routinely imply that Espanyol had a Franconian ideology and the club was favoured by the regime – an allegation also made against Real Madrid, especially after they won eight league titles in the 1960s. However, even if many Espanyol fans are pro-monarchy, the club had nothing to do with dictatorship. There is no time in history (before or after Franco) that Espanyol came close to competing with FC Barcelona in terms of results on the pitch.

In more than 70 years of La Liga history, Spain's national league, Espanyol finished above FC Barcelona in the table only three times. Even during Franco's darkest times, Barça managed to pull off a couple of national titles. Espanyol never won the league, not once, and the club's origin is actually largely connected with the city's hard working class. FC Barcelona, on the other hand, was always a rich club representing the city's elite. The inconvenient truth is that when General Franco died in 1975, FC Barcelona was, and still is, incredibly rich.

Espanyol fans really struggle with the Franco connection made by their rivals, which they claim is largely unfair. The club didn't take part in the war, and according to Espanyol fans, FC Barcelona used the dictatorship to reinforce their elite status in the city. Not only that, but the way their supporters see it, Espanyol was arguably a smaller club and they suddenly watched their biggest rivals 'steal' the Catalan identity from everybody else.

Nationalism and Catalan identity is a boomerang subject in the conversations I had. Espanyol fans have an urge to show the world that they are not anti-Catalan. Since 1995, the club has adopted a 'Catalanised' form of its official name, Reial Club Deportiu Espanyol de Barcelona (the word *deportiu* derives from the original word *deportivo* in Castilian). The club anthem and the stadium's announcements are in the Catalan language. *La força d'un sentiment* is Catalan.

The far-right ultra group *Brigadas Blanquiazules* (Blue-white brigades) with strong ties to anti-separatism, and pro-monarchy, pro-Spain and remarkably racist, were banned in the stadium for more than a decade. The group considers that spreading Catalan is a betrayal to the 'Espanyol roots'.

However, upon closer inspection, the yellow and red flags of Catalonia were seen at Estadio Sarrià for a long time (in the UEFA Cup Final that they lost in 1988, for example).

According to Dutch sociologist Ramón Spaaij, ‘Espanyol fan bases accuse FC Barcelona of exploiting their favourable social, economic and political position to recruit young talent from the region, driven by the ambition to overpower all the others, ultimately killing smaller clubs in Catalonia.’¹ It is a fair statement when you compare with clubs from the Madrid region, where several teams from the capital frequently play in Spain’s first division (Getafe, Leganés, Rayo Vallecano). On the other hand, Catalonia has been basically Barça and Espanyol for a decade – an exception being Girona in the 2017/18 season, a club co-owned by Pere Guardiola (Pep’s brother) and the City Football Group (owners of Manchester City). A third club from Barcelona, CE Europa, a historical founder member of La Liga, currently plays in the fourth division. Nobody remembers they exist unless you’re a football fanatic.

All that being said, in case some of you are tracking whose club is ‘more Catalan’ than the other, during a *Derbi Barceloní* in 2017, Espanyol had three times more Catalan-born players on the pitch than Barça. Ironically, Espanyol’s owner is a Chinese businessman, who, I could only assume, has no affiliation with this history (FC Barcelona, meanwhile, is an associative club and since 1978 their elected president has been born in the city).

Even if Espanyol was founded by students from

¹ Spaaij, R., *Understanding Football Hooliganism: A Comparison of Six Western European Football Clubs*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006)

the University of Barcelona, at the same time the club suffers from its lack of *local* identity. Its current training facility is in Mina, on the outskirts of the city, and its ground at Cornellà-El Prat, the club's third stadium, is not even technically in the city. The fan favourite Sarrià stadium, a historical venue used in the 1982 World Cup, an area with the highest income per capita in Barcelona, was also a contrast to a historically working-class fan base. Montjuic, where they played after Sarrià was closed in 1997, is a pleasurable tourist area, but the stadium was a white elephant from the 1992 Summer Olympics, with an awful racing track separating the pitch and the crowd.

Barcelona has more than one club and Espanyol fans want you to know that. They have been playing in the first division for 25 consecutive years, and they are considerably bigger than other clubs in this book. Espanyol have won four Copa del Rey titles (2006 being the most recent), and played in two UEFA Cup Finals (both lost on penalty kicks). The club's average attendance is 20,000 per game, which is only small compared with the 80,000 from their rivals *blaugranas*. There is no Messi and co., so tourists are not lining up at the Espanyol stadium.

When Espanyol opened the Cornellà-El Prat in 2009, it was supposed to be the beginning of a new era for the club. The stadium is big, with a capacity of 40,000, modern and beautiful, but the reality proved different. A decade after its inauguration season, Espanyol's average attendance has been going down each season. Each game feels half-empty, with less attendance than smaller clubs like Málaga or Levante. The lack of transportation is an issue, but *perhaps*

Espanyol have only 20,000 fans willing to attend a game after all.

The concept of globalisation in football suits the big clubs perfectly, like FC Barcelona, and other European giants. Their games are on live TV in the United States, Indonesia and Singapore every week. It's even on live TV in Brazil, for God's sake! These clubs attract supporters worldwide because of their Ronaldos and Messis. But for smaller clubs with no superstars like RCD Espanyol, the Asian market is a distant reality. They are oceans apart.

A recent survey promoted by the Catalan government stated that Espanyol have only three per cent of fans in Barcelona. The city has more supporters of Real Madrid (ten per cent) than Espanyol fans. After the survey had been published, the club released a statement (again) by saying that 'no survey is necessary to understand that those three per cent are the most honoured'. The club and the Espanyol supporters started calling themselves *maravillosa minoría* (the wonderful minority).

When we compare Espanyol to FC Barcelona's popularity, the Camp Nou Museum was the most visited tourist site within Catalonia in 2016 (according to the Catalan Tourist Board). The museum had sold more entry tickets than the Picasso Museum or Gaudí's Casa Batlló. In fact, more people visited Barça's museum in that year than all of Espanyol's actual games.

The divisiveness between the two clubs is not social, political or religious. This is because every single category in the city has a *blaugrana* prevalence. Espanyol's resistance comes only from family tradition, not from a specific region, something passed from generation to generation.

Carlos Iglesias had to rely on his father's best friend to take him to his first Espanyol game. 'I felt like being part of a family, and after the game I could not explain my excitement,' he says.

I wanted to be part of this wonderful minority as well, so I sent an email to the club expressing my interest to buy a ticket for the away section at Santiago Bernabéu. The response was vague and bureaucratic. 'To buy tickets to attend the away visitors' area you have to be a member of Espanyol and buy them in our stadium,' they told me. The superclubs may be the villains of this book, but FC Barcelona would have handled that request differently, I'd assume. They wouldn't have wasted the opportunity to gain a new supporter (or *customer*, if you will).

Not entirely convinced, I persevered and just bought a ticket online for the fourth tier in the North End zone, close to where away supporters are concentrated at the Bernabéu. Only a handful of stewards separated both fan bases, and the ultras from Real Madrid stayed on the other side of the stadium. It was just like being an away fan. Mission accomplished.

Away fans is not a huge tradition in Spain as it is in Germany or England. I was not surprised that less than 100 Espanyol fans turned up, but disappointed nonetheless. The pre-match experience outside was non-existent: no chants, no pints, no greasy street food. I approached several *pericos* close to the entrance gates, but none of them made the trip from Barcelona exclusively to watch the game – they were mostly Madrid residents. The away section inside wasn't any different, as it could have easily been mistaken for a John Mayer concert.

Real Madrid fans were no more enthusiastic though. The *merengues* crowd is not exactly famous for being noisy, and everything felt a bit theatrical like a ballet performance, with an intense celebration only after goalscoring. The atmosphere is definitely different from South American stadiums (and by this I mean much worse). Real Madrid's Ultras Sur are probably the most awkward ultra group in Europe, with the average crowd being more interested in taking a Cristiano Ronaldo snapshot than watching the game. Tourists are visible everywhere (and of course, I don't exclude myself from this category). The Bernabéu has a history and mystique, but the whole experience is really flat compared to what I'm used to.

I spoke to a supporters' club member of the *Penya Espanyolista* of Madrid, an organised Espanyol fan club living in the city. There are advantages of living apart from their team, he concluded. 'We're not as exposed to the Barcelona media and the government celebrating Barça all the time. It is the opposite here [in Madrid] because all the newspapers have nothing good to say about Barça,' he laughs. 'The Catalan press only remembers that we exist when Espanyol is taking on Real Madrid and they need us to win. It's like magic.'

He is not far from reality in this case. *Mundo Deportivo's* columnist Tarzán Migueli, an iconic Barcelona defender who played 20 seasons for the club, once wrote that if Espanyol was not in the league, Real Madrid would have six less points in the table. Which is not exactly accurate according to the numbers provided by the journalist Pedro Martin. 'Espanyol has earned 109 points against Barcelona and 111 against Real Madrid in the league's history,' he writes.

This is the only away game I attended in a different city for this book, essentially because many Barça fans believe that Espanyol don't play hard enough against Real Madrid. I've seen Espanyol play at the Cornellà Stadium on a different occasion, so I took this game in Madrid as an opportunity to understand the alleged alliance. To get a sense of whether there was a political brotherhood in place, both clubs being named Real, and whether they are (allegedly) pro-monarchy.

Before the match, I asked fans if they supported both Espanyol and Real Madrid, but I couldn't really feel a true fraternity (the exception being a military man I talked to in front of the hotel, who confessed supporting both teams equally). At least for those fans I spoke with, it seemed like their connection to Real Madrid is mainly because they can beat FC Barcelona. As one might say, if Barça played against a dog, an Espanyol fan would start barking.

In the 2015/16 season, Real Madrid beat Espanyol twice with the score of 6-0 (including the infamous game where Cristiano Ronaldo scored five goals). In fact, before the kick-off Espanyol hadn't beaten Real Madrid for more than 20 matches, and nothing changed that afternoon. Gareth Bale and Álvaro Morata scored one apiece, and Real Madrid won 2-0 in front of a crowd that celebrated a Ronaldo elastico nutmeg against a defender more frenetically than the goals. Espanyol had zero shots on target and their fans quietly left before the final whistle.

While it is true that Espanyol cannot beat Real Madrid, it is also true that they cannot beat FC Barcelona (like almost every team in Spanish football). Espanyol never beat Barça in the league playing in their new-*ish* Cornellà

Stadium; their last victory at home was in 2007, under head coach Ernesto Valverde (who went on to become the FC Barcelona coach). Espanyol's last derby victory at Camp Nou was more than ten years ago, under head coach Mauricio Pochettino, an Espanyol favourite who once declared he will never coach FC Barcelona.

After I concluded all the travelling for this book, I came to the conclusion that Espanyol fans are the ones with the most resentment towards their local rivals. Apart from their individual political beliefs, what really brings Espanyol fans together is their aversion to FC Barcelona. The club once faced disciplinary action after their fans raised a banner that read *Shakira es de todos* (Shakira is everyone's), since the singer is married to Gerard Piqué. (The Barça defender scored a late goal against Espanyol in 2018, and celebrated in front of their fans holding his finger to his lips; the goal sealed a record-breaking unbeaten league run for Barcelona.)

Espanyol fans also frequently carry a banner that says, *Catalunya es mes que un club* (Catalonia is more than one club) to antagonise FC Barcelona's famous slogan *Més que un club* (More than a club). Later in the 2016/17 season, amid local unrest, Barça requested a game be postponed after a Catalonia independence referendum was rejected by the authorities. La Liga denied their request and threatened to punish the club by taking away six points, and FC Barcelona eventually played behind closed doors instead 'as a protest'. This is what makes Espanyol fans consider them to be hypocrites. According to them, if FC Barcelona were really 'more than a club', they would support the Catalan demonstration for independence at all costs. At the end of the day, it proved itself to be just a football club.

Another symbol of the strong Espanyol link to Catalonia was the defender Dani Jarque, who started playing for the club in the youth system and appeared in more than 250 professional games. In 2009, Jarque became the team's captain in the Cornellà-El Prat Stadium inauguration, but he was found dead a week later during Espanyol's pre-season in Florence, due to a heart attack. He was 26 years old and left behind his girlfriend who was seven months pregnant. He is not only a symbol, but a martyr for the *pericos*.

Espanyol fans stand up and clap every game in the 21st minute, Jarque's jersey number. Gate 21 at Cornellà is a must-visit sanctuary with pictures, flowers and scarves. The T-shirt worn by Andrés Iniesta under his Spanish jersey in the 2012 World Cup Final is on display there – Iniesta scored the winning goal, and ran towards the cameras showing that exact same T-shirt with the words *Dani Jarque siempre con nosotros* (Dani Jarque forever with us). For all the hatred that Espanyol fans feel for what FC Barcelona represents, an incredibly touching gesture came from a Barça player (Iniesta and Jarque played together for Spain's youth teams).

With all that in mind, I knew the significance of the number 21, right there in front of me before kick-off, on the pavement close to the Santiago Bernabéu. 'Dani Jarque gave his life for this club, literally and metaphorically,' Carlos Iglesias says, wearing Jarque's jersey. 'He gave everything he had, for every game he played. He represented our sentiment on the pitch, and if it was up to me to decide, nobody would ever wear the number 21 again. It should at least be worn only by a homegrown player just like him. The number 21 is sacred for us.'

Iglesias couldn't enjoy a better result visiting Madrid for the first time, but he had nonetheless a good football experience with his older brother. 'What is your biggest dream for Espanyol?' I ended up asking. 'I wish we could win a European trophy,' he says. 'We lost two [UEFA Cup] finals in the past on penalty kicks, so I reckon that it would be possible for us to win it one day.' However, what I really wanted to know was an *impossible* dream. 'Oh, if we're talking about a crazy, crazy, crazy dream, then *it has to be* winning the league against Barcelona, that is for sure,' he confesses.

Well, that is unlikely to happen soon (if ever). It has been a long time since the *Tamudazo* goal, but when Espanyol visited the Santiago Bernabéu on that Saturday afternoon, once again Real Madrid and Barcelona were battling for the league title, like they always do. Espanyol showed no resistance to Real Madrid, another casual help for the enemy's enemy. Three months later, Real Madrid won La Liga and the UEFA Champions League. Not ideal for the Espanyol fans, but good enough to keep their anti-Barça sentiment alive.

Next stop: Vallecas, Madrid

Distance: 5km (3 miles) from Metro Puerta del Sol

How to get there: 25 minutes by Metro

The best advice: Grab a *bocadillo de jamón* and a San Miguel beer, and enjoy the day.

Soundtrack: 'Mala Vida' by Mano Negra