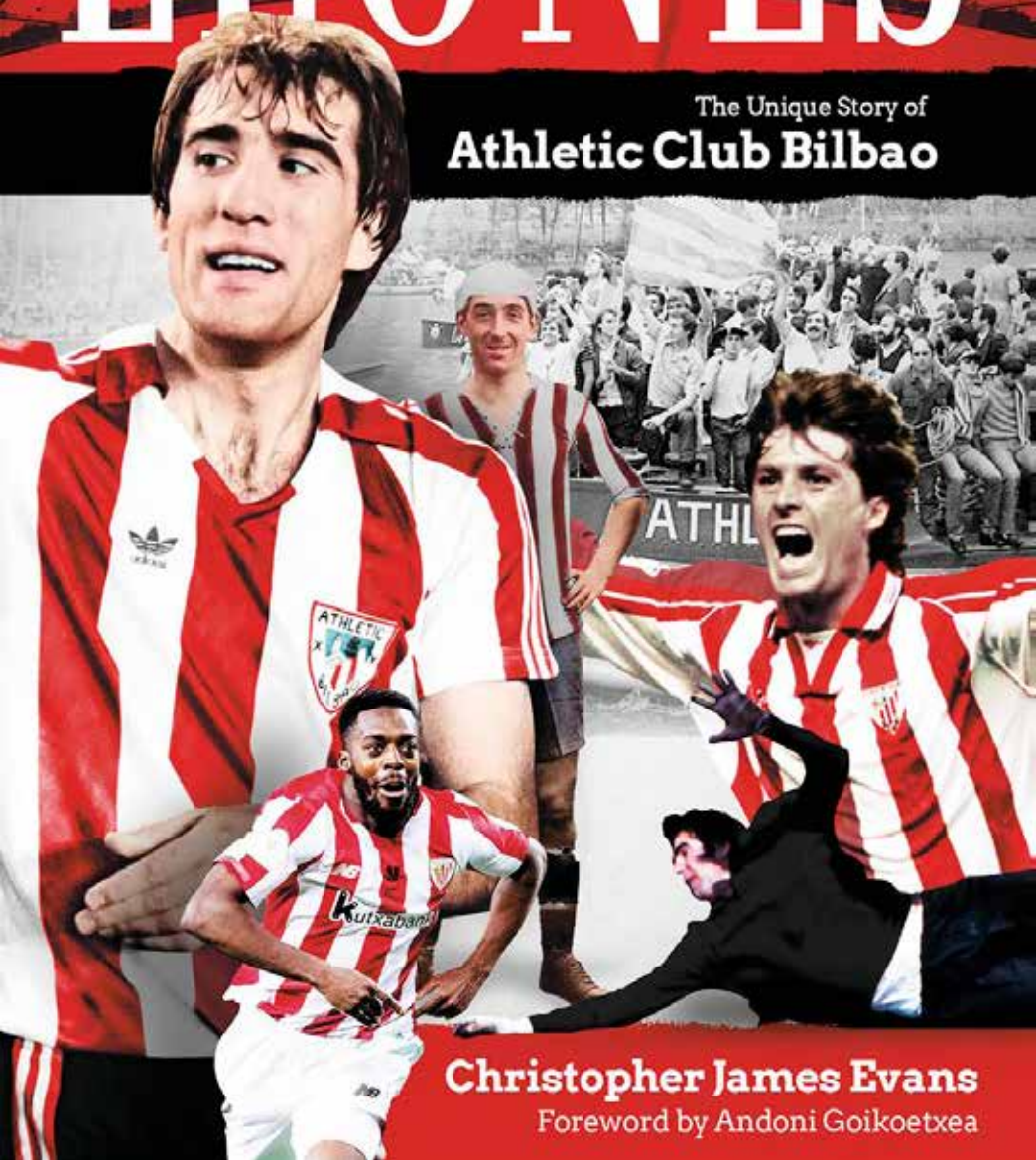


LOS LEONES

The Unique Story of
Athletic Club Bilbao



Christopher James Evans

Foreword by Andoni Goikoetxea

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Chapter 1

La Historia

The Beginnings and Formation of Athletic Club

FOOTBALL IS universal. It indisputably crosses social, political and cultural boundaries. It's inextricably linked and intertwined with history, geography and identity. Whether you love or loathe the beautiful game, it is ubiquitous. The history of Athletic is not just about the founding and formation of the club. It's about industry, international trade, cooperation and reciprocal immigration. Most significantly, it's about the birth of football in the Basque Country.

The late 19th century saw rapid industrialisation in the Basque Country. This industrial growth occurred largely in western Bizkaia (Vizcaya/Biscay) and particularly in and around Bilbao. Mining, steelworks and shipbuilding changed almost every aspect of what had been a relatively isolated, stable and unbothered society. This was a shock to the system, as throughout history the Basques have notoriously wanted to be left to their own devices, usually championing politics and social movements that allowed them to carry on and uphold their ancient laws, customs and liberties, or *fueros*. Indeed, this dates back as far as around 194 BC, when the Romans finally took control of the Basque

lands. In his seminal book *The Basque History of the World*, Mark Kurlansky says that ‘their defeat by the Romans marks the beginning of the first known instance of Basques tolerating occupation without armed resistance’. He goes on to explain that once the Basques realised Roman occupation did not threaten their language, culture or legal traditions, ‘the Romans came to understand that the Basques could be pacified by special conditions of autonomy’. Furthermore, Kurlansky states that ‘the Basques were left to their beloved sense of themselves, surrounded by an empire to which they didn’t belong, speaking a language that none of their neighbours understood’. It can be seen as a metaphor for Athletic’s uniqueness in a globalised and money-orientated football world.

The explosive industrial growth and transformation along the valley and estuary of the river Nervión around Bilbao made the area almost unrecognisable to what it had been. The industrial boom and need for labour meant that national and international migration to the area was inevitable. It’s estimated that between 1850 and 1900 the population of Bizkaia almost doubled. *Maketos*, a negative and derogatory term for immigrants usually from another part of Spain, was a word that would soon be on the tip of many tongues. The economic growth in the region contrasted with the social and political zeitgeist. In his article ‘Sport and the Basques: Constructed and Contested Identities, 1876–1936’, John K. Walton states that the ‘explosive, uncontrolled, often traumatic urban expansion to Bilbao and the Nervión estuary’ led to the mining settlements on and above the west bank being ‘scarifying exemplars of urban poverty and deprivation’. Basque nationalism was certainly nothing new. Basque Enlightenment thinkers, writers and historians such as Manuel Larramendi and Agosti Xaho had long championed the traditions, culture and language

(Euskera), as well as the concept of the Basque Country as a nation. However, the rising population and lowering standard of living had accentuated the social divides and tensions bubbling beneath the surface.

A combination of these circumstances meant that Bilbao became the birthplace of a new, more extreme Basque nationalism. In 1895, the *Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea* (EAJ) or *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV – the Basque Nationalist Party) was founded by Sabino Arana. Arana, ‘the father of Basque nationalism’, was from a wealthy wooden shipbuilding family from Abando. His father Santiago, a Carlist supporter, had been forced into exile in France during the Second Carlist War. He had been closely followed by his family, the experience haunting the seven-year-old Sabino, leaving him angry, bitter and politicised. Following the defeat of the Carlists, and as the family’s wealth declined due to their business becoming obsolete with the new booming steel industry, Arana set out on a one-man nationalistic mission. Indeed, he’s credited with the naming of the nation Euzkadi (the Basque Country, now more commonly spelled Euskadi), as well as creating, with the help of his brother Luis, the now omnipresent Basque flag, the Ikurriña, which is visible everywhere you go in the region. Arana was an Anglophile and keen admirer of the British. Such was the influence on him, it’s said that he based the red white and green flag of Euskadi on the Union Jack.

Among all this societal change and upheaval, just a few years earlier and brought on by the flourishing industrial revolution, the British would have an even bigger influence in Bilbao that would prove to be eternal – *foot-ball*.

Campa de los Ingleses (The field of the English)

'Athletic zelairik zelai' (Campo a campo/Field to field)

Campa de los Ingleses.

Aquí es donde jugaban los ingleses.

Aquí, en una campa junto a la Ría.

Entonces sólo había césped y un pequeño cementerio.

Algunas veces, el balón caía al agua y había que ir a buscarlo.

Si estaba lejos le echaban piedritas para que se acercara a la orilla.

Las piedras creaban ondas, pequeñas ondas que se hacía cada vez mayores.

Y así, el Athletic jugó en Lamiako, y después en Jolaseta.

Y, finalmente, en San Mamés.

Una ola, y otra ola, y otra.

Field of the Englishmen.

This is where the English used to play.

Here, on a field next to the river.

Back then, there was only grass and a small cemetery.

Sometimes the ball would fall into the water and they had to go and look for it.

If it was far away, they would throw stones at it to get it closer to the shore.

The stones created ripples, small ripples that got bigger and bigger.

And so Athletic played in Lamiako, and then in Jolaseta.

And, finally, in San Mamés.

A wave, and another wave, and another.

Kirmen Uribe

The burgeoning Basque iron and steel industry had quickly caught the attention of British industrialists at the end of the 19th century. A trading relationship was soon established,

with ships from Britain arriving in Bilbao carrying sailors, miners, engineers and the coal needed to smelt iron. This iron was then exported back to Britain. The synergy between the Brits and the Basques would become even more deep-rooted, as many of the sons of the industrial elite in Bilbao were sent to be educated at English boarding schools and universities. They would be exposed not just to British education, but to British sport, particularly football.

It was on the banks of the Nervión river, among the clattering of machines and the smog and smoke from the blast furnaces, that football would emerge. With British ships needing days to unload their imported cargo, the sailors and miners who had arrived aboard had plenty of time to kill. They had taken to regularly kicking a ball around on the left bank of the estuary opposite the University of Deusto, much to the bewilderment and interest of the local *Bilbaínos*. The site, a piece of wasteland in the Abandoibarra area where the Guggenheim Museum now stands in all its majesty, was known as the Campa de los Ingleses (the field of the English). This name was not coined after the migrant workers who were playing this unusual sport, but due to the fact it was also the site of a Protestant cemetery that was the resting place of British troops who had died during the Carlist wars. Previously known as Los Siete Árboles ('The Seven Trees'), the Campa de los Ingleses had been a cemetery since the 17th century, the Spanish Crown allowing the British government to use the land 'in perpetuity' by royal decree in December 1860. The area had also been sporadically used as a landing airstrip. In 1929, the cemetery was relocated to Loiu (Lujua in Spanish), between the Bizkaian towns of Sondika and Derio.

With Basque students returning from Britain having fallen in love with football, informal kickabouts between sailors, engineers, miners, students and locals became a

regular occurrence. This convivial integration, along with the swift rise in the popularity of football, meant that it became necessary to find a new, larger space for aficionados of Britain's most loved export. On 18 November 1892, the secretary of Club Atleta de Astilleros Del Nervión (Nervión Shipyard's Athletic Club), a local multi-sports club that mainly consisted of British workers, wrote to the local authority and mayor of Leioa to ask for permission to use the grounds of the nearby Lamiako Hippodrome as a football and rugby pitch. With the request duly accepted, the Campo de Lamiako would replace the Campa de los Ingleses as the home of football in the Basque Country.

Football was becoming more organised and increasingly popular with spectators. It's thought that the first match to take place in Lamiako was in November 1892 between Club Atleta and Bilbao FC. The Basques themselves were also becoming more accomplished and self-assured in the game brought by the British. On Monday, 9 April 1894, a report in local newspaper *El Nervión* stated that 'several young people from Bilbao's good society, according to what they tell us, would have no objection to playing a game of *foot-ball* against English residents (in Bilbao/Bizkaia)'.

It was this increasing confidence that led to a match on 3 May 1894 that's etched into Basque and *Bilbaíno* folklore. A confident group of *Bilbaíno* students had published an advert in the local newspaper *Noticiero Bilbaíno* challenging *los Ingleses* ('the English' often included Welsh, Scottish and Irish players) to a football match at Lamiako. It was the ultimate *bilbainada*, a bravado or brag that's associated with the residents of Bilbao. It proved to be a *bilbainada* without merit. With a morning kick-off of 10.30am, by half-time and before lunch the boys from the Basque Country were already trailing 3-0 to the better prepared and far superior British working men. Reports suggest that

some spectators, many of whom didn't yet understand the rules of the game, were aggrieved at the perceived overly aggressive and physical approach by *los Ingleses*, with angered onlookers even walking on to the pitch to reprimand them. They were soon pacified by the local players, who explained and insisted this was part and parcel of the game.

The story goes that at half-time the British team presented their opponents with 11 roasted chickens (some reports suggest they were given as a gift after the match). Whether or not this was an act of kindness or amiable ridicule (a roasting or fowl play perhaps?) is unknown. Either way, the match was delayed as the *Bilbaíno* students scoffed their *pollos*. When play resumed later that afternoon, the full-bellied Basques shipped a further three goals to make it 6-0 (again, some reports suggest 5-0) to the foreigners as the final whistle blew. A report in *El Nervión* the following day said: 'Yesterday at ten o'clock in the morning the football match took place in Lamiako between the English and the Spaniards, with the former winning the game by five points. A large crowd attended the match. We are told that on the 25th the game between the two will be repeated.' The match marked a turning point in the history of sport in the Basque County. It would be football that would become even more prominent than their traditional game of *pelota*.

The renowned Basque writer and poet Kirmen Uribe wrote the evocative poem 'Athletic zelairik zelai' that begins this section. The verses are inscribed on a commemorative plaque that was unveiled on 29 April 2011 on what was once the Campa de los Ingleses. The 'campa' (field), where a football was first introduced to intrigued *Bilbaínos* is no more.

The industrial powerhouse that was Bilbao suffered a sharp decline by the 1980s. Amplified by the oil shock in

1973 and devastating floods of 1983, the industry sector in the city never recovered and subsequently collapsed. The docks and riverside became disused, abandoned, grimy and an unwanted eyesore in the city. Massive urban regeneration followed, led by the construction of the Guggenheim Museum, designed by the lauded architect Frank Gehry. The area now represents the epitome of a modern city, boasting a riverside promenade, sculptures, shops and bars. Joggers and walkers pass each other by, many unaware of the history surrounding them.

Never a club to miss an anniversary, the unveiling of the plaque was also 27 years to the day since Iñigo ‘Rocky’ Liceranzu scored a brace against Real Sociedad to crown Athletic as league champions, the last time that they won the title. The inauguration was led by the then president of Athletic Club, Fernando García Macua, along with the mayor of Bilbao, Iñaki Azkuna, and Derek Doyle, the British consul in Bilbao. Located on the Abandoibarra promenade, between the Guggenheim Museum and the Pedro Arrupe footbridge in Bilbao, the plaque immortalises those British workers who once kicked a ball around on the banks of the Nervión, blissfully unaware of the everlasting influence that they were having on *Bilbaínos* and the origins of football in Bilbao, the Basque Country and beyond.

***La Formación* (‘The Formation’)**

The origin of Athletic has been a much debated and contentious issue for both historians and *Athleticzales*, but it’s widely accepted that the club was founded in 1898 (although the writer and Athletic historian Josu Turuzeta heavily disputes this in his book *El Athletic Club: origen de una leyenda o cuando el león era aún cachorro*, saying that the club was in fact founded in 1891). The first step towards

the establishment of the club had initially begun four years earlier in 1894 with the creation of Gimnasio Zamacois (Zamacois Gymnasium) in Bilbao. Soon after the infamous roast chicken match at Lamiako, young locals, many of them affluent students, the sons of the Bilbao elite who had returned from Britain, began to play matches more frequently, again at Lamiako. In 1898, these students, who frequented Café García that was originally located on Bilbao's Gran Vía, informally established Athletic Club. It's thought that the name derived from Club Atleta de los Astilleros del Nervión. As the waves of love for the game proliferated, 1899 saw the first unofficial members, or *socios*, of Athletic Club. These were Juan Astorquia, Alejandro Acha, Enrique Goiri, Luis Márquez, Eduardo Montejo, and brothers Pedro and Marcelino Iraolagoitia. According to *Únicos en el Mundo*, it was Alejandro Acha, from a wealthy wine business-owning family, who was the pioneer in the early development of the club.

In November of 1900, a second *foot-ball* club was created in nearby Algorta, named Bilbao FC. Members were again prominently upper class and bourgeoisie *Bilbaínos*, including brothers Carlos and Manuel Castellanos, Manuel Ansoleaga, Luis Arana, Antonio Guinea, Perico Larrañaga and Ricardo Ugalde. Santiago Martínez de las Rivas, the son of the Nervión shipyard owner José Martínez Rivas, was also instrumental in its official establishment the following year.

A friendly rivalry soon began between the two clubs, with regular matches taking place, the more organised Bilbao FC adorned in their adopted white kit with black socks. It was Bilbao FC's officiality that allegedly hastened a meeting at Café García in February 1901 between José María Barquin, Juan Astorquia and Enrique Goiri to thrash out the details of making Athletic an official entity. Four

months later, on 11 June 1901, 33 Athletic Club *socios* (including engineer and Englishman Alfred Mills) met at their favourite haunt, Café García, to officially establish Athletic Club. They agreed to pay a membership fee of ten pesetas and a monthly fee of two pesetas and 50 centimes, while Luis Márquez was appointed as the club's first president. The board of directors, which included Francisco Íñiguez (vice-president), José María Barquin (treasurer) and Enrique Goiri (secretary), began running and officiating the club from an apartment in La Ribera Street, located near the Nervión. Athletic initially played their matches in white, with blue shorts or trousers.

Another friendly match at Lamiako on 19 January 1902 between Athletic Club and Bilbao FC is believed to have been the first time that Athletic Club wore their original blue and white kit in homage to the English club Blackburn Rovers. In *Únicos en el Mundo*, Tomás Ondarra and Iñigo Crespo state that the blue and white strip was a donation from *socio* Juan Moser, an Irishman living in Bilbao. It's a kit that has often been the inspiration of many of Athletic's away kits in more modern times. The match also saw the first time a fee (30 centimes) was charged for entry. Athletic Club ran out 3-2 winners, and the bond between the two fledgling clubs continued to develop.

According to a report in *El Nervión* on 10 March 1902, football was 'growing and expanding prodigiously' and had 'established itself and taken root in our soil'. This report proved to be unerringly prophetic as Athletic Club and Bilbao FC came to an agreement to form a provincial team known as Bizcaya. A two-legged friendly was soon organised against Burdigala de Bordeaux. Bizcaya won 2-0 in the first leg in France on 9 March, with goals from Silva and Evans. In the return leg at Lamiako on 31 March, an incredible 3,000 spectators witnessed Bizcaya blitz

Burdigala 7-0, thus comprehensively winning the tie 9-0 on aggregate.

Bizcaya's incredible success led to an invitation to play in the Copa de la Coronación, a tournament organised in May 1902 to commemorate the coronation of King Alfonso XIII. Arranged by Madrid FC (now Real Madrid), the matches were played at the Hipódromo de la Castellana in the Spanish capital. Pitted against Club Español (now Espanyol), New Foot-Ball Club (another team created by British students) and FC Barcelona, it was the team from Bilbao that would lift the inaugural trophy. Bizcaya thrashed Club Español 5-1 in the quarter-final on 13 May, with Englishman Walter Evans scoring what's now recognised as Athletic's first official hat-trick (coincidentally, Walter Evans was also the name of this author's grandfather, who sadly never scored a hat-trick for *Los Leones!*). An 8-1 trouncing of New Foot-Ball Club in the semi-final meant that Bizcaya would meet FC Barcelona in the final on 15 May 1902. In a somewhat tighter match, captain Juan Astorquia and Armand Cazeaux netted for Bizcaya in a 2-1 win, meaning that the team from Bilbao would get their hands on their first title. The trophy sits proudly today in the museum at the San Mamés stadium. The Copa de la Coronación success in 1902 sowed the seed of what was to become an historic period of success for the soon-to-be Athletic Club Bilbao.

Athletic Club Bilbao – *Los Primeros Años* ('The Early Years'): 1903–1911

Following Bizcaya's success at the Copa de la Coronación, rumblings about the possibility of a permanent merger between Athletic Club and Bilbao FC began to emerge. Following internal issues, Bilbao FC collapsed on 29 March 1903, with many of its members deciding to join

Athletic Club. This swelled both the financial assets and membership of Athletic, who continued to play their matches at Lamiako. In April, Athletic Club participated in the inaugural Copa del Rey, a competition that would become so special to the club. Goals from Armand Cazeaux, Eduardo Montejo and Alejandro de la Sota saw Athletic Club come from behind to beat Madrid FC 3-2 in front of over 5,000 spectators. The incredible victory is said to have influenced three Basque students studying in Madrid, as just a month later, on 26 April, a new branch of the club known as Athletic Club Sucursal de Madrid was also created. This branch would slowly splinter and evolve to become Spanish giants Atlético de Madrid.

Despite this success, the club ran into some administrative and financial difficulties, with its creditors seizing their headquarters on Calle Nueva, but not before the enigmatic Alejandro de la Sota had saved important club documents, as well as the Coronación Cup trophy that had been won in 1902. Athletic Club would once again win the Copa del Rey in 1904, but in rather farcical circumstances. Athletic found themselves champions by default following the disorganisation of the competition and a lack of opposition. In what had been a barren year playing-wise (Athletic Club had struggled to arrange matches with other teams), their opponents in the final, Español de Madrid, failed to show up. The following years saw a fluctuation in matches, with Athletic Club often struggling to find players to travel to away fixtures due to work and family responsibilities. They would, however, welcome San Sebastián Recreation, the first time a team from the seaside Basque city had visited Bilbao.

Athletic Club lost the 1905 Copa del Rey Final to a controversial 'offside' goal by Madrid FC's Manuel Prast. He would also prove to be Athletic Club's nemesis in the 1906

final, scoring two goals as Madrid FC routed the Basques 4-1. The loss wasn't taken graciously by Athletic Club, who claimed that the opposing captain, José Berraondo, who was from Donostia-San Sebastián, was registered to more than one club. However, Athletic's protests fell on deaf ears. Just five days later, the frustration and rage was taken out on an unsuspecting Barcelona, who were destroyed 11-1 during their first visit to Bilbao for a friendly match at Lamiako. (Some books and newspaper articles have the score as 10-1. Either way, it's a monumental drubbing.)

Lamiako, which had been the home ground of Athletic Club for so long, was devastated by severe flooding before the start of the 1907 season. With the pitch unusable, matches were again few and far between that season. However, it was during this time that Athletic Club merged with Unión FC and revived the Bizcaya moniker to participate in the Copa del Rey. With luck seemingly and perpetually deserting them against Madrid FC, Athletic once again lost in the final. It was their old adversary Manuel Prast who scored the only goal ten minutes from time. Following the loss, local team Unión FC would merge with and unify Athletic Club. The club decided not to enter the Copa del Rey in 1908, citing the controversies of the previous finals in Madrid, as well as financial and logistical factors.

José María de Belausteguigoitia Landaluce, arguably Athletic's first iconic player and surely the player with the longest name in their history, would make his debut in April of 1909. Known as Belauste, the imposing midfielder became synonymous with the term *La Furia Española* ('Spanish Fury'), following his aggressive and physical approach to the game, something that was associated with the Basques. The expression was coined during the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium. Belauste, representing Spain, scored an infamous goal in a 2-1 win against Sweden. Following the

victory, the football journalist Manolo de Castro claimed that Belauste screamed to his team-mate Sabino Bilbao to 'give me the ball and I'll wipe them out!' By all accounts, he was true to his word, powering a header past the Swedish keeper, while simultaneously flattening several Swedish defenders in the process. The Italian press described the Spanish team as '*Furia Rossa*' ('Red Fury'), linking the colour of their kits to the rage and physicality of the Iberian team. This soon morphed into '*La Furia Española*', a nickname that would stick with the national team.

The term would be hijacked by General Franco for propaganda purposes following his victory in the Spanish Civil War in 1939. In *La Roja: A Journey Through Spanish Football*, Jimmy Burns quotes the Falangist (fascist) newspaper *Arriba* that wrote: 'The furia española is present in all aspects of Spanish life, to a greater extent than ever ... In sport, the furia best manifests itself in soccer, a game in which the virility of the Spanish race can find full expression, usually imposing itself, in international contests, over the more technical but less aggressive foreign teams.'

Franco used football in a brazen and shameless attempt to help unify Spain, and to try to avert the political discontent and chasms that existed in the country. Personifying and glorifying a physical and aggressive football philosophy appealed to Franco. It was a metaphor for his politics, dogmas and ideology. It's ironic that the term is of Basque origin, considering Franco's renowned hatred of Basque nationalism, this being one of the reasons for him encouraging Hitler's Condor Legion to relentlessly 'terror bomb' the sacred Basque town of Gernika on market day in 1937. The destruction of Gernika led to hundreds of innocent civilians perishing. Furthermore, Belauste, the embodiment of *la furia*, was a staunch nationalist

with strong ties to the PNV, allegedly exclaiming 'Death to Spain!' during a meeting in 1922, not long after his retirement.

Athletic Club returned to winning ways in 1910, beating Vasconia SC de San Sebastián on their home turf in the Copa del Rey Final at the Ondarreta Stadium. In what was a unique situation, that year's Copa del Rey was comprised of two separate competitions due to disputes between several clubs. Barcelona were victorious in the coinciding tournament. However, 1910 is perhaps most remembered for the first time that Athletic Club wore their iconic red and white shirts. The story goes that Athletic Club player Juan Elorduy was going to study in England, and before leaving, the club asked him to purchase more of the blue and white shirts that they played in. However, despite Elorduy's best efforts, he was unable to source any of the shirts, which were inspired by Blackburn Rovers, while in Britain. Before boarding his boat for his return to Bilbao, he decided to buy the red and white striped shirts of Southampton FC, the football club of the English port city from where he was departing. On his return, he presented the Athletic Club board with the shirts. Luckily for Elorduy, the shirts also matched the colours of the official flag of Bilbao.

However, in 2023, football historian Borja Valle Sarasketa published an article in Basque newspaper *Naiz* disputing this story, claiming that there was new evidence that suggested the shirts were actually influenced by the northern English club Sunderland. He stated that it was in fact former Athletic player and manager Juan Sandalio Arzuaga Anitua who introduced the red and white shirts of Sunderland to Athletic. It's said it was also partly due to Athletic's kit clashing with the blue and white of Basque rivals Real Sociedad. The new claims brought about much

debate among *Athleticzales*, although legendary Basque journalist Jon Rivas was dubious about the new assertion. Talking to me from Bilbao, Rivas insists that the different theories are simply conjecture and another part of Athletic folklore:

The new theory adds nothing. There is no documentary evidence to support it. It is something that has come out suddenly without any basis whatsoever. I suppose that if they have any proof then they will provide it, but they haven't done so far. It seems very strange to me that, 110 years later, such a story should appear. In fact, I don't believe any of the theories that exist about the origin of the shirts, not even the official one, because none of them provide any proof. I think, rather, that someone saw the shirts on a trip, thought they were cheap and bought them. When Athletic released them, no newspaper of the time even commented on it. In Bilbao there were seven newspapers and not one of them had a review of the new colours. In those days it was an unimportant issue.

Either way, Athletic wore their new kit for the first time on 9 January 1910 in a friendly match against Sporting de Irún. It was at that moment that Athletic Club would become renowned for their famous red and white or *zurrigorri* (*rojiblanca* in Spanish) shirts.

Athletic Club showed their unwavering Anglophilia again in 1911 with the appointment of Mr Shepherd as the first official manager in the club's history. The Englishman, whose Christian name was never documented, would lead Athletic Club to yet another Copa del Rey Final win in April of that year, the team in red and white easing to a 3-1

victory against Espanyol. However, Mr Shepherd would only last a few months, and soon returned to his homeland citing homesickness. It wouldn't affect Athletic Club too much; the subsequent years would be some of the most exciting and successful in the club's illustrious history.