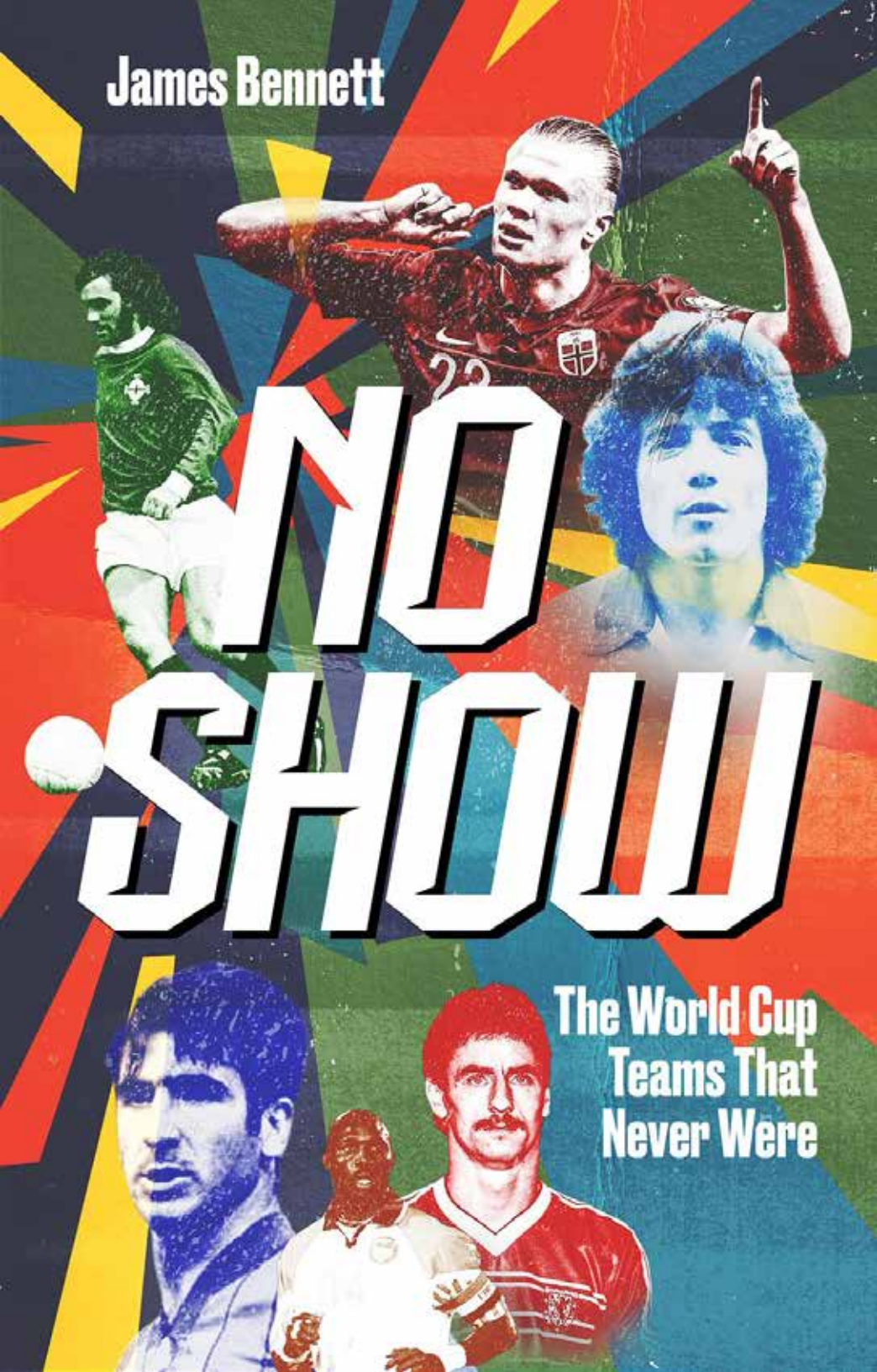


James Bennett



# NO SHOW

The World Cup  
Teams That  
Never Were

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**The World Cup Teams  
That Never Were**



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## Chapter One

# Spain, 1958

THE 1950s was Spain's decade in European football and, in particular, Real Madrid's. Between 1956 and 1960, Los Blancos won five consecutive European Cups, with the only challenge to their supremacy coming on home soil from their great rivals Barcelona, who won three league titles in the decade, a fourth in 1959/60 and finished as runners-up a further three times.

The faces of these great teams were two foreign-born players. Real were led by Alfredo Di Stéfano, the Argentine-born forward who terrorised defences throughout Europe, finishing as La Liga's top scorer on five occasions. The supporting cast at the Estadio Santiago Bernabéu was deep and powerful, including Francisco 'Paco' Gento, Héctor Rial and Raymond Kopa, and was further strengthened in 1958 by the arrival of the Hungarian superstar Ferenc Puskás. However, Di Stéfano was the man they all looked to. His counterpart at Camp Nou was the Hungarian-born striker László Kubala, one of Barcelona's most iconic players and an adopted son of Catalonia, who scored 281 goals in 357 appearances for the club before leaving in 1961. He was supported by the young inside-forward Luis Suárez, one of the great creative players of his generation, who would

later be rewarded with enormous success with Inter Milan's European Cup-winning 'Grande Inter' team of the 1960s.

With the exception of Frenchman Kopa, Spain could call upon all of these players at international level, including the naturalised Di Stéfano, Rial and Kubala. The 1950s Spain team was packed with some of the greatest attacking talent of the age and it should have come together to create one of the most explosive and successful international teams of all-time. However, it never materialised: in reality, the team never even made it as far as the finals in Sweden. Di Stéfano and Kubala, two of the most gifted players of all-time, would barely make an impact in international football in their long and meritorious careers and today they can be found at the top of the list of the greatest players who never played in a World Cup match.

Spain had started the 1950s impressively. Despite an enforced absence from the world stage due to the Civil War and the Second World War, they qualified for the 1950 World Cup in Brazil, topped a group that also included Chile, the USA and England and went on to finish fourth in the final group stage. However, despite all the talent to grace the team in the years ahead, this would be their best finish in the World Cup until their victory in South Africa 60 years later.

Qualifying for the 1954 tournament shows the bizarre nature of qualification in the early years of the World Cup. Their qualifying 'group' was effectively a two-legged match-up with Turkey, except without aggregate scores: they needed a win and a draw from the matches in early 1954 to qualify for the finals in Switzerland. At home, in Madrid, they won 4-1 but they slumped to a 1-0 defeat in Istanbul, meaning a third and final match, played three days later in Rome, was required to separate them. After 120 minutes, it finished 2-2. Qualifying was settled by the drawing of lots. A 14-year-old

local boy called Franco Gemma reputedly made the draw. He picked out Turkey. Spain were staying at home.

Despite previously making appearances for Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the immediate post-war years, Kubala had been a part of this team, starting the away tie in Istanbul but standing down from his place in the team for the play-off after the team received accusations that he was ineligible; his absence proved to be decisive. But it wasn't until later in the decade that the team around him started to gain its prestigious firepower. Rial (who wouldn't play any part in the 1958 qualifying campaign) and Gento made their debuts in 1955 but Spain would have to wait for Di Stéfano.

The dispute over Alfredo's nationality was not the first source of controversy in his career. In 1949, he had controversially moved from River Plate to Colombian club Millonarios, part of a money-spinning breakaway league that sat outside FIFA jurisdiction. As a result, FIFA banned Di Stéfano from playing international football and he didn't add to the six Argentine caps he picked up in 1947.

Fast forward four years and the 'El Dorado' era of Colombian football was coming to an end. After the league's organisers, DIMAYOR, reached a deal with FIFA in 1950, it was agreed that all the international players signed would have to return by 1954 to the clubs that previously held their rights. Di Stéfano would, therefore, be forced to return to River Plate. However, by 1952, the Buenos Aires club began negotiations with Barcelona and Real Madrid over the player's transfer.

It would become one of the most contentious transfer sagas in the history of football, finally being resolved in Real's favour when, in 1953, Barca sold a 50 per cent share in the player that they had been awarded in a highly unusual split-ownership deal. It would come to be one of the Catalan club's greatest regrets, missing out on the opportunity to pair

Di Stéfano and Kubala in an explosive attack. Allegations that Spanish dictator Franco's regime interfered to ensure Di Stéfano ended up in Madrid have never fully gone away. For Real Madrid, it would prove to be a decisive moment in their history.

By the end of 1956, Di Stéfano had won two league titles, the first European Cup and the first Ballon d'Or, becoming established as the best player in the world: an all-round attacker blessed with technical and creative ability, with physical attributes to match. In the European Cup Final against Stade de Reims, he scored Madrid's opening goal to get them back into the game after the French team had taken an early 2-0 lead and he played a key role in inspiring a late rally to clinch the title with a 4-3 win.

As far as international football was concerned, he was still on the outside looking in. But Spain were always keen to get as many Spanish-based players eligible to play for them, as possible regardless of background. Players switching nationalities was all the rage, with FIFA not making it illegal until the 1960s, and Spain were one of the countries that took full advantage during this period. With his ongoing exclusion from the Argentina team, Di Stéfano was clearly the star prize.

Despite him gaining Spanish citizenship in 1956, FIFA initially refused to allow him to switch eligibility. However, it soon relented and, on 30 January 1957, Di Stéfano strode on to the Bernabéu pitch as a Spain player for a friendly against the Netherlands. He made an immediate impact, scoring a hat-trick in a 5-1 win.

The friendly was the last warm-up game ahead of the start of World Cup qualifying. Since the 'defeat' to Turkey, Spain had played just six times, winning only once: a 3-0 victory over Switzerland in Geneva in June 1955. They had played England twice, drawing 1-1 at home in May 1955



before losing 4-1 at Wembley in November. It was the biggest disappointment of a frustrating year: they had also lost 2-1 at home to France and drawn 2-2 with the Republic of Ireland at Dalymount Park. In their only match of 1956, they had lost 3-1 in Portugal.

Despite the talent they had available to them, it's easy to see why they were so desperate to add Di Stéfano to their attack. While the list of names in the team was impressive, having all of those players available wasn't always guaranteed and it was clearly a top-heavy team with a defence that didn't match the stature of the attack. Nonetheless, the draw had seemingly been kind to Spain, matching them with Switzerland, quarter-finalists on home soil in 1954, and Scotland, who had also qualified for those finals but were eliminated at the group stage. While by no means an easy group, they had avoided Europe's leading teams and, now boasting the best player in the world in their attack, who could stop them?

In March, they lined up in front of 120,000 at the Bernabéu for their first match of the campaign against Switzerland, with one of the most explosive attacks in the history of football. It was the team of the *cuatro leyendas*: Kubala and Luis Suárez of Barcelona, Di Stéfano and Gento of Real Madrid. But it was the Swiss who took a shock lead after six minutes when their prolific striker, Josef Hügi, beat Antoni Ramallets at his near post. They led for around 23 minutes until Suárez found space on the edge of the box and rolled the ball into the far corner to equalise. Just after half-time, Suárez created a second goal with a defence-splitting pass to set up Atlético forward Miguel and it looked as if Spain were heading for a winning start. But the lead wouldn't last: in the 67th minute, Ramallets tipped a shot which was flashing across his goal into the path of Hügi, who tapped into the empty net. It finished 2-2.

With so few games in qualifying, a home draw was a hugely disappointing and costly result. Spain would now need a positive result in May at one of world football's most fearsome venues: Hampden Park in Glasgow, where Scotland boasted a formidable record.

The 89,000-strong crowd saw a lot to be pleased with early on. Only fine saves from Ramallets kept the match level until the 23rd minute, when Blackpool's Jackie Mudie headed against the bar and then nodded in the rebound from close range. Hampden roared but the Scots' joy would only last five minutes, as Suárez played in club colleague Kubala, whose shot squirmed through the arms of Liverpool goalkeeper Tommy Younger.

It was a fast-paced game and Scotland were edging it. Barca's Ferran Olivella brought down Clyde's Tommy Ring to concede a penalty just before half-time. Charlton's John Hewie struck the ball low to Ramallets's right and, although the goalkeeper guessed correctly, the ball bounced over his body in the uneven goalmouth, giving the Scots a deserved lead.

However, there was more drama to come. Just after the break, Spain's attackers finally showed the Glasgow crowd the skills they had become renowned for. Joan Segarra's through ball sent Miguel bursting forward and when he let the ball run to Di Stéfano, the great man soon handed it back to him with a deft backheel that fooled the entire Scottish defence. Miguel fired a shot towards goal and Younger could only parry it into the path of Suárez, who smashed it high into the net.

But if this was the sign that Spain were about to discover their magic touch, it soon vanished again. Mudie placed a beautiful strike from outside the box into the top corner, leaving Ramallets rooted to the spot, and he slid in again with 12 minutes to go to complete a famous hat-trick and send Hampden into raptures.

Much has been made in the years since of how Spain couldn't handle playing in cold weather but regardless of whether that is true, Mudie and Celtic's Bobby Collins had torn apart one of the most talented teams in Europe and put themselves in pole position to qualify from the group. Much to Spain's dismay, the Scots then built on this in Basel, where Collins snatched a late win. There was now no room for error: Spain needed to win both their remaining games and hope the Swiss could at least draw against Scotland to force a Spain-Scotland play-off or, even better, secure a win to send the Spaniards through outright.

To their credit, Spain held up their end of the bargain. Just over two weeks after their humiliation in Glasgow, they struck back against the Scots in Madrid. Enrique Mateos, in for Suárez, opened the scoring with a magnificent half-volley from the edge of the box. Another spectacular close-range volley from Kubala made it 2-0, while Estanislau Basora scored twice in the second half as they sealed an emphatic 4-1 win. But the star of the show was Di Stéfano, settled in the team and orchestrating the attack. The Scots, like many other teams at the time, just couldn't live with him at the Bernabéu.

There was now a six-month gap until the final two qualifiers. Spain would have to wait to discover their fate. In November, Scotland faced Switzerland, knowing a win would take them to Sweden. Officially, only 58,000 were in attendance but the video footage suggests the crowd was far larger, with fans packed in tight. Almost everyone at Hampden would go home happy: despite Ferdinando Riva cancelling out the opener from Clyde's Archie Robertson, second-half goals from Mudie and Rangers winger Alex Scott helped Scotland to a famous 3-2 win to seal qualification.

Just over two weeks later, Spain took out their frustration on Switzerland with a 4-1 rout in Lausanne, with two goals

each from Kubala and Di Stéfano. Officially, they finished a point behind Scotland, the critical result proving to be the opening draw against the Swiss in Madrid: if they had held on to win, they would have forced a play-off, which, by the end of the year, they had the momentum to win. Such were the fine margins in early qualifying groups.

It seemed the world would have to wait to see Spain's stars at a major tournament. Two years later, during the first edition of the European Nations' Cup – later the European Championship – they dispatched Poland comfortably to reach the quarter-finals, where they were drawn with the Soviet Union. However, Franco refused to allow the team to travel to Moscow and they were excluded from the competition, denying them the chance to make the last four and possibly even the final.

Qualifying for the 1962 World Cup was more successful. They were initially drawn against Denmark but when they withdrew, Spain were drawn with Wales and Austria. When the Austrians also withdrew, it effectively became a straight play-off with the Welsh, who had impressed at the 1958 World Cup. Di Stéfano snatched a late 2-1 win in Cardiff and a 1-1 draw in Madrid sealed Spain's place in a two-legged play-off against Africa's leading team, Morocco. A 1-0 win in Casablanca and a 3-2 win in Madrid finally gave them a spot in the finals.

Spain travelled to Chile with a formidable squad, even if it was without Kubala, who had made his last appearances for the team in 1961. Not only were Di Stéfano, Gento and Suárez present but Spain could also call upon the legendary Puskás, who had switched allegiance from Hungary after joining Real Madrid in 1958. This star-studded team was now being marshalled by the Argentine Helenio Herrera, who had coached Atlético and Barcelona to league titles in the 1950s and had now transformed Spain into a team who

were difficult to beat. They arrived at the World Cup on a seven-match unbeaten run and were one of the favourites.

But life and football doesn't always work out the way you expect. Di Stéfano and Puskás were now 35 and their bodies were starting to creak; time was catching up with even the grand masters of football. For Di Stéfano, 1962 would prove particularly heart-breaking, as he picked up an injury just before the tournament started and didn't play a single minute. For those that he left behind, things were little better: Puskás, Suárez and Gento failed to prevent Czechoslovakia snatching a late 1-0 win in the opener and, despite Spain grabbing a last-minute win of their own against Mexico, a late defeat to eventual winners Brazil left them bottom of their group.

Spain's ultimate failure to make the best of the extraordinary talent available to them would set the tone for much of the next four decades. They again failed to make it out of their group at the 1966 finals before failing to qualify in 1970 and 1974. At the 1978 finals, with Kubala now the coach, they again fell at the first hurdle and in 1982, even as hosts, they suffered the indignity of losing to Northern Ireland in the first group stage and then failed to progress beyond the second group phase.

While Spain have qualified for every finals since, they still struggled to shrug off the 'losers' tag throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until they finally broke through with success in Euro 2008. It came 44 years after their previous title, when former Real Madrid coach José Villalonga led a team captained by Olivella and headlined by Suárez to the 1964 European Nations Cup title. But, by then, the greats of the 1950s had long since left the stage.

Today, Di Stéfano is rightly remembered as one of the greatest players to have graced the game, playing a pivotal role in establishing Real Madrid as Europe's leading club in the early years of continental tournament football. By the time

his career came to an end in 1966, he had won eight Spanish league titles, five European Cups, five Pichichi Trophies and two Ballons d'Or. His status at the Bernabéu was unmatched, being only rivalled in recent times by Cristiano Ronaldo.

And, yet, without World Cup appearances to his name, it feels as if he isn't remembered and admired as widely as he should be. While his Madrid and Spain team-mate, Puskás, could at least be remembered for his role in the awe-inspiring Hungary team that came up just short in 1954, Di Stéfano is more remembered for not having played in the finals.

The 1958 World Cup saw the arrival of a new young star who would change the way footballers are seen historically by making the World Cup his own; first as a teenager and then, 12 years later, as a veteran. The World Cup made Pelé, and Pelé made the World Cup. However, that just leaves the inevitable question: could Di Stéfano have done the same if he had been there himself?