'A meticulously researched work that gets to the heart of some of the lesser-known corners of Spanish football.'

Jonathan Wilson — *The Guardian;* editor *The Blizzard*

'If you love football, you'll NEVER regret buying this book. Packed full of extraordinary stories from Spanish football - uplifting, idiosyncratic, passionate, mad, sad, bad and brilliant - almost all of which you've never read before.'

Graham Hunter — ESPN & *Revista de La Liga*

'These are the stories about the people you haven't heard about or, if you have, not like this.'

Sid Lowe — *The Guardian* & *The Spanish Football Podcast*

'Brendan Madden is such an atmospheric writer who transports you to the heart of these enthralling tales, which are an absolute treat for any fan of Spanish football.'

Tim Lee — commentator and analyst, LaLiga TV

'Extraordinary stories brilliantly told — a fresh, beautiful take on Spanish football's past.'

Phil Kitromilides — presenter, LaLiga TV & *The Spanish Football Podcast*

'Brendan Madden is a gifted writer with a deep knowledge of Spanish football and its culture, and an eye for an untold, absurd story, told with real flair. I love reading his work and I'd recommend it to anyone with even a passing interest in La Liga.'

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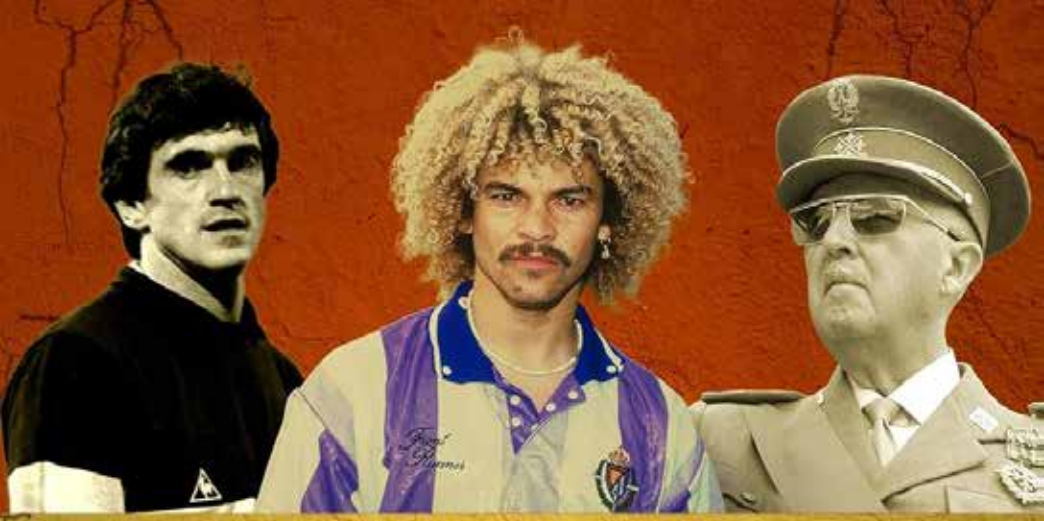
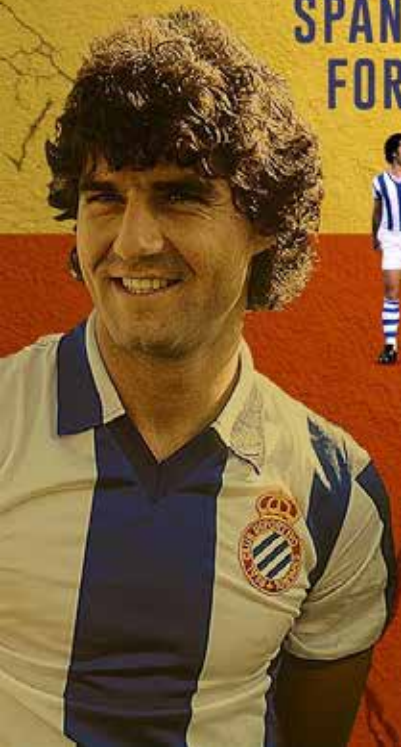
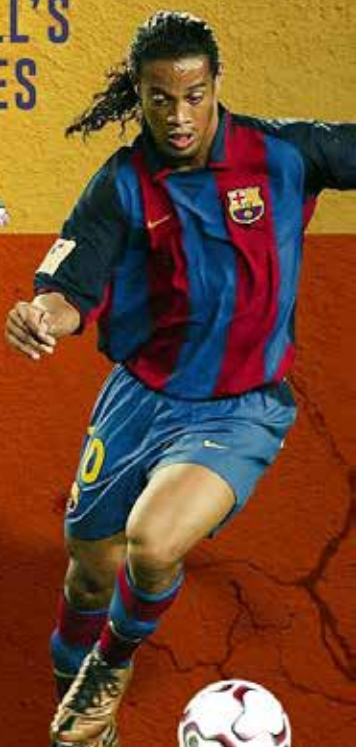


ONCE UPON A TIME IN LA LIGA

SPANISH FOOTBALL'S FORGOTTEN TALES





BRENDAN MADDEN

FOREWORD BY SID LOWE

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ONCE UPON A TIME IN LA LIGA

SPANISH FOOTBALL'S FORGOTTEN TALES

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SID LOWE

pitch

El Vestuario

The Players

1.

Black Armbands

AMID THE clatter of studs and the shouts of encouragement, the players of Racing Santander filed out of the home dressing room and into the tunnel to face their opponents. All of them, that was, except two.

'We said that if we could do something, we should. We were the ones who could do the most damage to this military regime. But it had to be subtle – if they noticed, they wouldn't let us onto the pitch. So, just before we went out, we slipped into the toilets with a pair of bootlaces. I tied one onto Sergio, and he tied one onto me. We wrapped them around our arms a few times, so they'd look like armbands.'

The pair exchanged one last glance before swiftly rejoining their team-mates, leaving an empty changing room behind. A very different scene would greet them on their return at half-time, the narrow corridors stuffed with armed police officers after their humble gesture of defiance had not gone unnoticed by the authorities. Repercussions began.

What followed was swift and severe: judicial proceedings, death threats, public condemnation. Yet the experience would only serve to forge an emerging friendship into a unique, lifelong bond.

* * *

It was 1975, and while Spanish society was nervously sensing that the sands of history were about to shift again, life in

the elegant seaside city of Santander was good. Racing had returned to the first division, powered by the goals of Aitor Aguirre, who, after an itinerant start to life as a professional had finally found a home in Cantabria.

'In Santander, they called me *El Madero*,' smiles Aguirre on the terrace of the traditional *asador* in Getxo, where he manned the grill for decades and now leases it out. Even into his 70s, he carries the broad shoulders of a traditional Basque number nine, and it's easy to see why his nickname was essentially 'The Log'.

'I was tough, strong, tall, and when I entered the penalty area, even if they tried to hit me and stop me, my strength allowed me to push through and take a few players with me.

'The pitches back then were completely different from today. In those days, you could only play on the wings; it was the only place there was grass. You couldn't play through the middle without the ball getting stuck. It was OK at the start of the season but then just mud. So, we had to play with wingers delivering good crosses and then get up for the headers.

'At that time, we had an Argentinian on the right called Zuviría. Then, on the left, we had Ufarte, the one from Atlético Madrid, Armando Ufarte. He was great; his crosses were a joy and we had a really good understanding.'

Brought in to provide more ammunition for Aguirre was winger Sergio Manzanera, who was moving north after five successful seasons with his hometown club, Valencia. His acquisition as a teenager from city rivals Levante had been a specific request from incoming manager Alfredo Di Stéfano, even before he'd taken up his new post.

'He told me that he went to see a game or two and asked them to sign me,' recalls Sergio in a hotel lounge just a leisurely stroll away from the Estadio de Mestalla. 'I signed, but I was very young. I arrived at Valencia when I was 19 years old. He renewed the team a lot. He brought in some youngsters, not many, but some from the youth academy.'

Di Stéfano's refresh proved stunningly effective as Valencia emerged on top of an epic four-way fight to earn their first league title in 24 years. A double was denied to them only by an agonising extra time defeat to Barcelona in the final of the Copa del Generalísimo.

Far from simply adapting to the sudden leap from *Tercera* to *Primera*, Sergio flourished, playing every single game in all competitions and starting in all but one. Remarkably, he managed all that while also studying for a chemistry degree.

'I would train in the mornings, and at times, I'd leave running to go down to a laboratory here in the port to do the practical work. Organic chemistry it was. I was in there with the professor all year.'

That breakthrough season wasn't entirely without its challenges, though. 'We were pretty poor, so my mother couldn't always make me enough food at home. So, I'd eat a little with the family, then I'd go and eat at a bar or eat at another place. Then I was perhaps getting a bit overweight, maybe just a kilo or two, but I didn't feel great. They'd put a detective on me – I didn't know that, but they wanted to see where I was going and what I was doing. So, when I told Di Stéfano I felt tired and so on, he said: "How do you expect to feel if you're eating in those places?"

'So, he sent me to eat in a *pensión* here in Valencia where all the players went when they wanted to eat healthier. It was a lot healthier, a lot of Basque food – meat and fish.'

That episode was typical of the avuncular relationship that developed between Sergio and Di Stéfano in their four seasons together and endured until Di Stéfano's death in 2014. 'One of the times he had a heart attack was here in Valencia, and I went to see him in the main hospital, La Fe. But the same morning I went, they'd taken him to Madrid, so I never got to see him.

'I loved him dearly. The truth is you only realise how much you love someone when they die, right? There's a saying that goes: "The person who loves you the most will make you cry."

His death really shook me because I had become so fond of him. He was so very good to me.'

Becoming the protégé of one of Spanish football's most emblematic figures and delivering a long-awaited league title to your home city would ordinarily be enough to go to a young man's head. But while the newspapers of that season fizzed with headlines such as 'Sergio: The Revelation of Valencia' and 'Sergio: The Lightning Bolt of Valencia', the interviews beneath revealed a player uncommonly circumspect about his own abilities.

Looking back over his achievements years later, his self-appraisal is still strikingly humble. 'I was 100 per cent professional. I looked after myself as well as I could; I didn't like to go out partying or anything like that. I trained very conscientiously. Physically, I was very well prepared, and I had a lot of pace; I was very fast.

'The thing was that I wasn't a technically great player, and I didn't score many goals. If I had scored just 30 per cent of the chances I had, I would have been such a better player. I finished a season and scored four or five goals, but I had 27 chances to score because I was very nervous in front of goal.

'You can't train for that – you either have it or you don't. There are things that you can improve because they tell you when you get to this situation, "do this" or "do that", and you try. But the decision has to be instinctive because you don't have time to think about anything. If you are born like that, you solve it straight away.'

With Di Stéfano departed, Sergio sensed he needed a change. 'I had been there for five years and reached my ceiling. I was stuck at a level. In the first year, I played all the games; in the second year, I played maybe 90 per cent of the games; and in the third year, I played 80 per cent. I was starting less and less, but I was still good.'

A transfer to Racing provided a fresh challenge, and his new colleagues, including the man he was brought in to supply, would prove to be delighted with him. But before a productive

relationship began on the field, Aguirre and Sergio struck up an instant friendship off it.

'Straight away,' remembers Aguirre, 'when Sergio arrived, it was just that thing where you immediately hit it off with someone. And look, when someone arrives in a new city, they need to find a house. So, I gave him a hand with an estate agent I knew, and he got a flat right next to the stadium at El Sardinero.'

'We became very, very close friends,' says Sergio. 'We always roomed together. I met his kids; he had a daughter and a son then, and we went out a lot. I went out with him and his wife; we'd go out to dinner, to lunch, to the cinema and see each other a lot.'

That instant friendship was underpinned by a shared political persuasion. 'Aitor was left-wing. You could classify him as a [Basque] nationalist. I was also left-wing but not a nationalist. He's very much from the Basque Country.'

Those beliefs had been shaped by their respective upbringings in Franco's Spain.

Aguirre was born in Sondika, just outside Bilbao, and raised in a family of strong Basque convictions. 'It was something that came from when I was very young. In my family, Basque nationalism has always been in the air. And, well, as you know, Franco was in power back then, and anyone who breathed that way was dealt with harshly.

'The Basque language has always been important. That was another thing where they would shake you down if they heard you speaking Basque. We spoke it at home, we spoke it among friends, but that was it. In public? No! Nowadays, that's changed, thank God. Now we can speak Basque, but before, it was tough. Really, really tough.

'The political atmosphere here... well, you can imagine during the Franco era. It was like this: we were always running from the police. Any protest, anything at all, would be met with gunfire and beatings. I remember being at a dance in Erandio as a kid. Some *ikurriñas* [the then outlawed Basque

flag] were put up on the mountain, and because of that, the police came in with full force. There were two deaths near the slopes of Arriaga, a mountain just over there. That's where they found two bodies.'

When more *ikurriñas* appeared on the route of the Spanish Cycling Championship when it came through Vizcaya, a teenage Aguirre found himself directly targeted by police.

'That happened at the church in Erandio, but it wasn't me. What happened was that the ones they arrested, they took to the barracks and roughed up, ended up saying that a third person was involved, called Aitor. But obviously, there are plenty of Aitors around here!

'So, when they were told it was Aitor, what did they do? Naturally, they thought to go to my house in Sondika. I was leaving the house to go training with Sestao, and they arrested me. My parents saw as they took me to La Salve, a barracks in Bilbao, and, of course, the lads who said it was Aitor were bruised all over – they had been given a beating.

'Well, from there, my parents came to the barracks, confronted the sergeant, and told him, "My son didn't leave the house all night. So, it would have been impossible for him to be involved."'

Aguirre was released, but the experience only served to deepen his distrust of those in authority.

Although his new room-mate's upbringing was less spectacular, it was, in its own way, indelibly marked by the regime's vindictiveness.

'My father was a Republican, and so was my mother,' says Sergio. 'My mother was a teacher, what, in those days, was called a national teacher, working in villages and educating young children.

'There are things about my father's life that I don't know – probably because, in those times, people were afraid to talk. If someone had been a Republican [during the Civil War], they didn't want their children to face any repercussions from Franco or the regime.'

'As a result, they wouldn't share much. So, there are things I know about my father, but I'm also aware that there are many interesting aspects of his life that he never told me because of those circumstances.'

One thing Sergio did know was that his father had been stripped of a career and well-paid employment because of his beliefs. 'My father was a postal officer. He took his exams in 1916 when he was 16 years old and passed a really competitive exam. He worked as a supervisor on trains, guarding the mail and all that.

'Then, during the war, he was in prison for a short time. Just a few days, until a friend of his who was aligned with Franco's regime helped him. This friend was a well-known doctor, and he went to the prison, spoke with the authorities there, and got my father released. However, they took away his job. He was no longer a postal official and had to make a living however he could. Since he knew how to write, read, and do numbers – he was pretty intelligent – he worked for many years at some company.

'So, we were a very humble family. I used to go with my mother to the villages when I was little – this village, that village, another one. We'd come back to Valencia to reunite with my father at the weekends.

'I never felt I lacked anything because I was able to go to school. Still, we were a poor family. We lived in a very modest ground-floor flat, very basic, until finally, we were able to buy an apartment. That only happened when I signed for Valencia in 1970, when I was 19 years old. Then I began earning a little money, and our economic situation improved slightly.'

So imbued was the pair's mistrust of the regime that they rarely took their news from Spanish-based outlets. Instead on nights when they roomed together, they would switch on the radio, surfing the waves of static until they picked up the ever-changing frequency of *La Pirenaica* – Radio España Independiente, a station founded by Dolores Ibárruri, the

exiled leader of the Spanish Communist Party to broadcast unfiltered news to Spaniards at home and abroad.

What they heard on those evening bulletins began to increasingly disturb them.

* * *

By 1975, Franco's failing health and the regime's deepening vulnerability were encouraging those who hoped for change to escalate activity and challenge the constraints on expression. Franco himself had spent much of the previous decade absorbed in succession planning.

His regime had exerted an iron grip on the country, but its institutions were heavily reliant on Franco's personal power and patronage.

The solution came in two stages. In 1969, Franco anointed Juan Carlos as his successor as head of state, by-passing the prince's exiled father, the moderate Juan de Borbon, as the legitimate heir to the Spanish throne. Still, while Juan Carlos was involved in much Francoist pomp over the proceeding years, there appeared a reluctance to grant him any meaningful power.

The second part of the strategy was unveiled in 1973 when Franco appointed Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco as Prime Minister, an office that had laid in dormant irrelevance since 1937. As Franco's staunchest acolyte, Carrero was deemed of sufficient conviction that the continuation of authoritarianism beyond the Caudillo's death was guaranteed. The partnership with Juan Carlos had the benefit of offering an arrangement agreeable to the regime's jostling factions.

The plan lasted precisely 195 days.

On 20 December 1973, on his way from morning Mass in the Salamanca district of Madrid, Carrero's car was blown 20 metres into the air over San Francisco de Borja church and into the courtyard of a neighbouring Jesuit college.

The assassination was the result of a meticulously planned operation by the Basque separatist group ETA, who

had tunnelled for months to place 80kg of explosives in the optimum spot to target Carrero's government vehicle.

The continuation of Francoism after Franco suddenly seemed doubtful, and the regime was plunged into crisis. A swell of civil unrest that had begun the decade became a tide. With Spain left increasingly isolated after the toppling of Portugal's military dictatorship, authorities became ever more reactive in their attempts to suppress dissent.

In August 1975, Franco signed Decree No. 10/1975 into law. The hastily enshrined anti-terrorist powers compelled military tribunals to automatically impose the death sentence for those convicted of killing police, military or government officials. The decree also extended the definitions of terror offences while ramping up penal tariffs.

The new law was retrospectively applied to existing cases. Over four tribunals, 11 suspects were convicted of the murders of police and civil guards and handed down death sentences – three members of ETA and eight of the Revolutionary Antifascist Patriotic Front (FRAP). Observers noted a procedure so swift that defence lawyers struggled to read the accusations against their clients and were expelled from the room when they protested.

The sentences sparked international demonstrations and protests at countless Spanish embassies. There was also petitioning at the very highest levels. The Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, led a march in Stockholm while Mexico motioned that Spain be dismissed from the UN Security Council. Pope Paul VI publicly called for clemency and privately telephoned *El Pardo* – only to be told that Franco was sleeping and would not be woken.

Nicolás Franco had even appealed to his younger brother in a letter pleading, 'Dear Paco, Don't sign this sentence… You're a good Christian; you'll regret it later. We're old now – listen to my advice.'

It was all to no avail. On Friday, 26 September 1975, a Franco-led cabinet meeting confirmed five of the death

penalties for two members of ETA and three of FRAP. Seemingly the only concession to international pressure was the replacement of the regime's preferred method of execution – the garrotte – with firing squads.

One of the five condemned was José Humberto Baena, a bespectacled 24-year-old who spoke French, Latin and Greek, who was active in anti-regime protests and FRAP activity in his native city of Vigo. He was convicted of murdering policeman Lucio Rodríguez Martínez in Madrid two months earlier; despite presenting passport stamps apparently proving he was in Portugal at the time as part of 194 pieces of evidence submitted by the defence.

Instead, the tribunal ruled on the strength of a confession obtained by police including Juan Antonio González Pacheco – known as 'Billy the Kid' for the notorious interrogation techniques that saw him posthumously stripped of his service medals. That Friday evening, Baena wrote a farewell letter to his parents from his cell in Carabanchel, Madrid.

> *Mamá, Papá,* They will execute me tomorrow morning. I want to encourage you. You know that I will die, but life goes on.
>
> On your last visit, *Papá*, I remember you told me to be brave, like a good Galician. I have been, I assure you. When they shoot me tomorrow, I will ask them not to blindfold me, so I can face death head-on.
>
> Do you remember what I said at the trial? That my death be the last one pronounced by a military court.
>
> That was my wish, but I am sure there will be many more. Bad luck!'
>
> A huge hug, the last one.
>
> *Adiós papá, adiós mamá*.
>
> Your son,
>
> José Humberto.

The following morning, Saturday, 27 September, over the course of an hour and three-quarters, the five men were executed. Àngel Otaegui, in Burgos at 8.30am, followed by fellow ETA member Juan Paredes Manot in Barcelona at 8.35am. In Madrid, Ramón Garcia Sanz faced the firing squad at 9.20am, followed by José Luis Sánchez Bravo at 9.40am.

Finally, Baena was shot dead at 10.15am.

That night, the Racing players gathered to spend the night before the following day's game against Elche at the Hotel Rhin on Santander's seafront promenade. In their room, Aguirre and Sergio listened solemnly as the news of the executions was relayed on the radio. They decided that they needed to do something to mark what they had just heard.

They opted for that most simple gesture of mourning – the black armband.

* * *

'That night, we listened to *La Pirenaica* and heard the details of the executions,' recalls Sergio. 'My heart was pounding, and we said, "Hey, we have to do something."'

Aguirre remembers the conversation, 'That night, Sergio was saying, "This can't be. Everyone was against the death penalty, or at least a large part of Europe. And this backwards country, still with the death penalty, decides to execute whoever. It's unbelievable."'

'I used to read a lot,' says Sergio, 'and I read a lot about the death penalty, and I was very against it. These people were being executed in 1975 – this wasn't 1936, or 1940, or 1945, or even 1950. Democracy was on the verge of arriving. There was a certain social awareness already.

'Executing five people like that... because those on the right will say, "Well, they killed people, so they have to be punished." Nobody is saying they shouldn't be punished, and what they did was very wrong, but you imprison them, and that's it. You don't have to kill them; you don't have to execute them.

'I've never remembered who suggested the armbands because there were three of us in the room.'

Another forward, José María Errandonea, was also in on the plan.

'So, there was Errandonea, Aitor, and me. The thing is, Errandonea wasn't a starter, so he didn't play that Sunday. I don't know which of us said, "We could wear armbands?" Someone did, and we all agreed, "Well, let's do it."

'The next morning, when Aitor and I woke up to go to breakfast, we asked each other, "Hey, that thing we talked about last night, is it still on?" And Aitor told me, "For my part, yes." And I said: "Me too." So that's how it was decided.'

In the dressing room before the game, the plan was put into action – as inconspicuously as possible.

'Nobody knew anything at all,' says Sergio. 'Errandonea ducked into a room for a moment, grabbed some bootlaces and cut them for us.

'Then, when they told us it was time to go out onto the field, I quickly tied one on Aitor, and Aitor tied one on me, and that was it – we went out.

'Almost nobody noticed as everyone was focused on the match, but there was a player who said to me, "What's that?" and I told him, "Nothing, just a thing of ours." He didn't know why we were wearing it or anything, but he said, "I'm not wearing one, so why are you? Take it off." I just told him I wasn't taking it off, and that was that.'

It was business as usual in the first half, with Sergio and Aguirre linking up at what they did best. 'I made a very good play down the left side and Aitor headed it in. Thank goodness, really, because whatever you do in a match, no matter how bad things are, if you win the match, the repercussions are cut in half compared to what they could be.'

As for the armbands, it seemed that no one had noticed. 'We couldn't hear much,' says Sergio. 'At least I didn't. You're playing and hear a *runrún* [a grumble from the crowd], but

you don't know if someone lost the ball or something else.' But when the teams returned to the dressing rooms during the break, it soon became apparent that their gesture had very much been noted.

'Well, they were there,' says Aguirre, 'in the tunnel. There must have been about 20 police officers there or maybe more.'

The distinctive grey uniforms of the *Policia Armada* packed the narrow corridors. *Los Grises,* as they were more colloquially known, were the feared national police force and a key facilitator of the regime's repression.

'So, a bunch of them came in and told us to take the armbands off,' says Sergio. 'Aitor and I didn't know what to do, and then they said, "If you don't take them off, you won't play the second half, and you'll be arrested."'

The pair quickly came to a decision, says Aguirre, 'Sergio and I talked about what we wanted. We had already achieved it. They had fallen into the trap – this would be in all the newspapers tomorrow. The whole world was going to find out, which was exactly what we wanted.'

With the start of the second half delayed, causing rumours to begin circulating in the crowd, Aguirre and Sergio untied the makeshift armbands and prepared to take the field again. The fact that they avoided arrest would prove to be a determining factor in what was to follow, as Sergio, with his keen eye for nuance, explains.

'That was crucial, that detail. The difference between being arrested or not was significant because it determined whether they could apply an article of the anti-terrorism law.

'The law stated that if you disrupted public order, you could go to jail, but you had to be arrested first. If you weren't, it was up to the judge to decide, but if you were arrested, you could be automatically sent to prison.

'Of course, we would've been taken directly to the station, jail, or wherever, but we weren't arrested. Instead, they told us that in the morning, we had to come to the police station in the centre of Santander, in Plaza Porticada.'

Back out on the field, matters also began to get complicated. Having dominated the first half, Racing lost their way in the second, allowing Elche to equalise just after the hour. But with two minutes remaining, when, as *Mundo Deportivo* put it, 'Nobody would give five *centimos* for a Racing win,' Aguirre crashed in a trademark header from a corner to ensure his name would appear in bold in both the sports and news headlines the following morning.

'The last moment was good,' says Aguirre. 'We won the match, and everyone was really happy. And the president started saying: "Don't worry, we'll take care of this." And so, they started pulling strings. The president must have had some contacts with people in the regime. He had quite a bit of influence, you know how club presidents always have connections. In the VIP box, the so-called powers that be would sit together. Even today, they still do.'

The pair went home uncertain whether that night's sleep might be their last in their own beds for some time.

* * *

'So, the next morning, we went,' says Sergio. 'We could've chosen not to go, run away, or stay put and see what happened. But we went, both of us.'

At the police station, the pair were split into different rooms, where they had two distinct experiences. 'For me, I didn't even feel like they wanted to hit me. I just walked in, greeted them with, "Hello, good morning, here I am," and answered their questions. It took a while, but everything was calm.'

In the other room, Aguirre was living in a very different encounter.

'Hostile, very hostile,' grimaces Aguirre. 'You could see how much they wanted to beat us black and blue, but on the other hand, they would have had orders to be careful – not to hit us. If it had come out in the press that they'd given us a beating, that wouldn't have helped them. They were smart individuals.'

Sergio believes the contrasting approach was a function of where the two were from. 'With me, they couldn't work out an explanation. With Aitor, they could say, "Well, you're Basque, so we understand." For me, they were like, "Why did you do it?"

'What was I supposed to say? They could easily throw you in jail if you said the wrong thing. In those moments, your imagination runs at 100 miles per hour. Everything is happening quickly.'

Sergio laughs as he recounts one explanation he gave, plucking the memory of a newspaper obituary to claim it was the anniversary of an old Racing president. His interrogators were unconvinced. 'But it plants a doubt in the minds of the police, and they start to think, "Is this guy just so stupid that he wears an armband every year?"

'After that, they told us we had to go to court in the afternoon. The courts in Santander are up in the higher part of the city. So, Aitor and I arrived, and the police vans were there outside, ready for whatever the judge decided. If the judge had said, "Yes, to jail," then they would've taken us straight to prison.'

Prosecutors asked for a custodial sentence of five years and a day, a term that would have certainly finished their careers.

'We were lucky because the judge could have said it qualified as a public disturbance. In the end, it wasn't because no one did anything – no protests, no objects thrown onto the field, no assaults, nothing. There was still a provision in the law, but for that to apply, you had to have been arrested.

'Aitor and I were sitting outside, waiting to see what would happen. Then the club's lawyer came out and told us that since we hadn't been arrested, the judge had decided to impose a very large fine, but we could go home.'

The fines were reported as 100,000 pesetas, though Aguirre remembers a figure five times that amount. Either way, it was a significant amount of money and almost comically difficult to pay.

'At that time, payments to the state were done through something called *papel del estado* (state paper). Every tobacconist and most post offices had this. So, you'd go and say, "I want to enrol in university, and I need to pay a fee." They would give you a little stamp, maybe worth one peseta, 50 cents, 20 cents, 10, whatever, and you'd stick all those stamps onto the paper and then hand it in.

'So, we'd go to a tobacconist and say, "Give us 100,000 pesetas in *papel del estado*." They'd say, "What are you talking about? I don't have that much." Man, we had to go to so many tobacconists!'

While their judicial issues were abated, an even more malevolent threat was about to emerge.

'About a week later, a newspaper reported that in a meeting of what was the *Guerrilleros de Cristo Rey* (Warriors of Christ the King), which was like *Fuerza Nueva*, the equivalent of today's Vox only worse – because they carried guns and murdered people – they had sentenced us to death; Aitor Aguirre, me… and the president of Racing.'

Sergio laughs at the memory of Racing's usually urbane, unruffled president, José Manuel López-Alonso Polvorinos, absolutely horrified that he'd been included. 'The president was like, "I haven't done anything, I didn't know anything," he was terrified by that!'

While Sergio finds humour in it now, the threat was all too credible at the time. A year later, the group murdered 21-year-old student Carlos González Martínez for attending an anniversary vigil for the very same executions Sergio and Aguirre had protested.

Aguirre, for his part, was livid with the local media. 'The regime controlled the press – there was *El Alerta* and the other one. The issue was, and I told this to one of the newspapers years later when I was in Santander with them, I said, "With Sergio and me, you didn't do anything right, absolutely nothing right." I mean, how can you publish that the *Guerrilleros de Cristo Rey* have decided to execute so-and-so? Why put that

in the press? You essentially painted a target on Sergio and me for so many people.

'After that, we had to live cautiously, leaving the house carefully. We even had someone check under the cars for us just to make sure nothing was placed there. When you're under death threats, you have to see if they've planted a bomb or something. You had to be careful. That lasted for a while.'

Aguirre took the precaution of sending his family home. 'I had two small children, one around two or three and the other just a year old. My wife had to leave and come here to Sestao, to her mother's house, because I didn't want her to stay. We lived apart for that season.'

Sergio recalls many sleepless nights: 'Of course, it left me shaken. I lived alone in an apartment near El Sardinero, in a building with maybe 30 or 40 apartments. In winter, only two or three of us lived there. I lived there on the top floor, and every night after that, when I heard the elevator coming up at 2am, I would think, "What's going on here?" At the time, I liked hunting, so I had a shotgun, and I slept with that gun next to my bed.'

Even going about their daily business became hostile in a city that traditionally leans to the right.

'Some people didn't like what we did. Maybe you'd be walking down the street, and they'd insult you or say something. I remember one person – he wasn't exactly a close friend, but I always went to a workshop in Santander to wash and fix my car. A few days after it happened, I went there, and the guy told me he thought what I had done was very wrong. He said that Aitor and I should go out on the pitch on Sunday, kneel down at the centre with our arms outstretched in a cross, and ask for forgiveness. I never took my car there again.'

Training became complicated, with newspapers reporting that Aguirre was the target of heckling from his own supporters. 'At El Sardinero, people could come to watch the training sessions, but for a while, they had to stop letting

anyone in because some people would come just to cause trouble, disrupting the session.'

Though there was some support, as Aguirre recounts, 'A priest from the fishing neighbourhood sent us a letter. He knew he couldn't send it by post because they confiscated all our letters – any mail for me or Sergio never reached us.

'But this priest passed a letter via a boy named Luis. Poor kid, he had mobility issues – we used to take him to training sessions. One day, he came to me with this letter which said, "You might think the whole world is against you, but that's not true. There are many more of us who are with you." It was a heartfelt letter. It really boosted our spirits.'

The pair continued training and playing and perhaps felt more comfortable away from El Sardinero, where Aguirre was on the scoresheet at Camp Nou and the Vicente Calderón to add to his burgeoning reputation.

More permanent relief was to arrive in the form of four simple words spoken at 10am on 20 November 1975.

* * *

'*Españoles… Franco ha muerto.*'

The trembling voice of Prime Minister Carlos Arias Navarro announced Franco's death to a nation. Arias had taken office after Carrero's assassination but had proven too politically enfeebled to deliver continuity for the regime. Two days later, Juan Carlos was proclaimed King of Spain and though a guarded coronation speech disappointed those impatient for change, he proved adept at unpicking Franco's institutions and steering Spain towards democracy.

Arias's attempts at obstructing reform soon saw him removed by Juan Carlos and replaced by the surprising choice of Adolfo Suárez, a Falangist bureaucrat. Within a year, Suárez helped deliver Spain's first free general election for four decades, setting the country on a fragile road to transition.

An amnesty relieved Aguirre and Sergio of any lingering legal process, and their fines were returned. 'In theory,' says

Sergio, 'But I don't remember if they ever gave it back. Aitor says they did, but I don't remember receiving it!'

Groups from all sides of the political spectrum continued their bloody violence, but the specific threat from the *Guerrilleros de Cristo Rey* faded, and the pair's lives returned to relative normality.

Though the straight-spoken Aguirre maintained a testy relationship with the Santander public, as exemplified by one famous incident.

Trailing at home after Mario Kempes had struck twice for Valencia, Aguirre rescued the situation, levelling the game with two goals in the final ten minutes. Rather than celebrate the goals, Aguirre delivered a message to the hitherto disgruntled home support.

The scene was observed by his injured room-mate, 'I was behind the goal where he scored. Then he gave a *corte de mangas* [a "sleeve-cutter" a kind of all-arm "Up Yours"] – it wasn't just a quick one, and that's it. No, he turned to one stand, then to another, and to everyone – to all four sides.'

'I didn't handle it very well,' laments Aguirre. 'It hurt to score two goals, and instead of cheering for you, they're booing and saying things. Not the whole crowd, not everyone in the stadium, but a part of it.

'That was all a consequence of the armbands. Everything stemmed from that; some people still held grudges. The tension lingered.'

As Spaniards excitedly went to the polls, Aguirre's own future was at stake in the summer of 1977 as Racing's economic situation forced them to sell their most influential players. Barcelona appeared the most likely destination, but Racing's indecisiveness saw their interest fade. Aguirre was left disappointed, but soon, the dream solution arrived.

'The president told me, "Aitor, the next chance you get, you'll leave. Don't worry." That's when I came to Athletic. Of course, coming to Athletic was what I had wanted from the very beginning.'

Aguirre spent two seasons playing out his childhood dreams at San Mamés, rounding off his career with another spell in the south with Recreativo de Huelva, and finally returning to Sestao, where it all began.

With his ally departed, Sergio played on for one more season in Santander before coming to a surprise decision.

'At the end of the third year, when I still had one year left on my contract, I decided to quit football. This was before the season ended. I thought about it a lot, reflected deeply, and realised I didn't want to play anymore. I was tired.

'Mentally, I was tired of football. I loved football, but there's a saying, "Football would be wonderful if Sundays didn't exist." You train in the morning, you're with your mates on the field, you all go out to eat – it's incredible.

'Then Sunday comes, and so does the stress. You lose a match, and the press are all on top of you. The tension… I couldn't handle it anymore and was exhausted. I wanted to study medicine. I had already done my first year, and I thought, "I want to keep studying, I don't want to play anymore."'

Racing reluctantly agreed to rescind his contract, and Sergio retired at just 27 years of age. He moved to Málaga, the home city of his newly married wife, and started a new life.

'It was a leap into the unknown. Back then, you didn't earn as much money as you do now, where you can quit football at 27 and have €10m in the bank, but I ran the numbers, *pum, pum, pum,* and said, "I have enough money to move to Málaga, buy a house, and live there with my wife and my son for six or seven years." I figured that's how long it would take me to finish my medical degree.

'So, I moved there, lived off that money, passed all my courses in June, didn't fail a single assignment throughout the entire degree, and finished in five years.'

Medicine became a specialism in dentistry, and Sergio returned to his native city, where he built up two successful and innovative practices.

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Despite the often-turbulent relationship, Aguirre shared with the Racing fans, looking back now, he holds no ill feeling. In fact, he speaks as excitedly about the club's recent resurgence as he does his beloved Athletic's historic achievements.

'The only problem I had was the one Sergio and I had. Racing are on a roll right now, and they'll call me, "Aitor, are you coming to El Sardinero?" I'm a *socio* of Racing and part of their Association of Former Players. I'm also registered with Athletic's association, so I'm part of both.'

Though many years have passed and hundreds of miles separate them, a special connection remains between the pair.

'Those kinds of things bring you very close together,' explains Sergio. 'It's the same as when people share stories about their adventures in prison. Those bonds you create… when you come out, there's an intimate connection. That's very hard to break – especially if you continue to think the same way.

'Because life can change; it can take you in one direction or another. I could have ended up supporting Vox, for example, and Aitor could have become far-left. In that case, we'd still have a relationship, but it wouldn't be the same.'

'I see his daughter, who was four or five years old back then – now she's in her 50s, and it brings me so much joy to see them. It's the same with Aitor and me. Even though we don't see each other often, that bond is always there.'

As for the decision they came to after listening to the news over those faint radio waves in a seaside hotel room in a very different Spain, there's only pride, as they both explain in their own distinct way.

'It gives me great satisfaction to know that I've contributed my tiny grain of sand, the little I was able to contribute, to democracy, to trying to change something,' Sergio eruditely explains.

'They often say to groups of youngsters that we must leave the world a little better than we found it. That's a phrase everyone knows. I believe I've done that. I've done other things,

too, because, in medicine, you have many opportunities to help people and do things for others that also change the world a little – but that's something personal.'

'But doing something like this – a significant gesture, where you're taking a risk – because if you risk nothing, there's no merit. If all you're doing is signing a petition for democracy, that's easy, but if someone says, "Hey, you need to go there and do this," that's another thing. If it goes well, that's great, but if it had gone badly, I might've been sent to jail, my football career could have ended, or something could have happened to me in jail.

'I'm happy I did it. If we hadn't have done it, I think it would've left a thorn in my side, which would've felt like we didn't have the courage to do it. When you do it, you take a risk, but the satisfaction is infinitely greater than if you hadn't done it.'

As for Aguirre, 'Would I do it again?' he asks himself. 'The same circumstances would have to exist. I was young. At this age, maybe I would've thought about it more, but I'm almost certain I'd do it again.

'It was an important milestone. A significant moment in my life, and I'll carry that with me until they take me to the cemetery.'