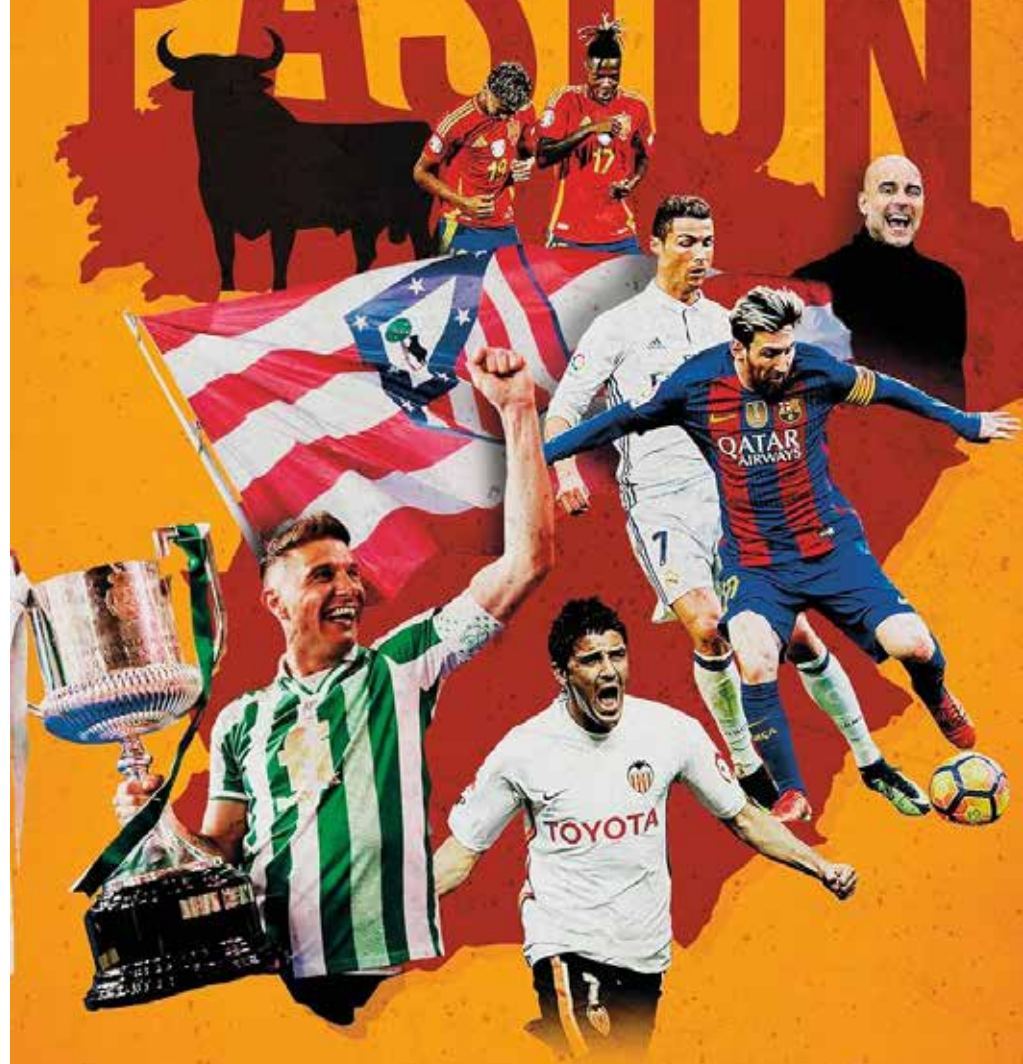


MIGUEL LOURENÇO PEREIRA

PASIÓN



A JOURNEY TO THE SOUL
OF SPANISH FOOTBALL

MIGUEL LOURENÇO PEREIRA

PASIÓN

A JOURNEY TO THE SOUL
OF SPANISH FOOTBALL



CONTENTS

Identities	7
The Pursuit of Happiness	11
Power to the People.	29
Viva La Vida	46
Stop the Clocks.	62
Go Out and Enjoy Yourself	85
The Gates of Time	113
On Air	134
Lady Madrid	152
The Dreamers	174
Rock You Like a Hurricane.	197
Band of Brothers	219
Even More When We Lose	241
Those Lonely Bulls	272
Kings of Europe	288
Acknowledgements	312
Bibliography	315

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

GALICIA IS Spain's hidden paradise. It is also an enigma, even to the locals. They are quite similar to their southern neighbours from Portugal. Some even claim they should have become one nation. They are, however, also profoundly Catholic, lovers of outdoor life and talking loud like any Castilian would be. And yet Galicia is also one of the few remaining places, much like Ireland, where the Celtic tradition is still alive. Despite the extensive forests and the ever-present sense of rain and fog in many parts of the interior, they also have the most extended coastline of all Spanish regions. Between stony cliffs that cut defiantly into the Atlantic and paradise-like beaches in their Rías, Galicia is a land of blueish water as much as it is of greenish mountains. Everything, all at once. It is not too dissimilar to its football, capable of creating magical tales like the old Gaelic traditional songs and stories of whispering ghosts lost in the fog of the early hours of dawn.

* * *

There's a sense of perennial optimism whenever the sun seems to nutmeg the ever-present clouds and shines through the mild drops of rain falling from the sky. It's early Sunday morning and the weather couldn't be more typical of Vigo. One minute it is pouring, the other it is sunny. Doomed to live in this permanent indecision, Galicians were moulded

by the climate like few people in Spain. They are perceived as indecisive, never saying affirmatively yes or no to anything.

Well, that is not exactly true, especially when it comes to football. If there is something that sparks a smile it's their love for the game, in any shape. Take for instance *Futbolín* – the most popular form of table football, still seen in every bar around Spain – patented in Barcelona but created by the Galician-born poet and inventor Alejandro Finisterre, as a distraction for handicapped children, victims of the Spanish Civil War.

By the late 1930s, football had become as popular as any sport in the region, especially around Vigo, where the company that first brought the telegraph to Spain settled in. The Exiles Cable Club de Vigo played exhibition matches against sailors from commercial vessels harboured in the beautiful city of the Rías Baixas. There is still dispute about whether they were the first-ever football club in the history of Spanish football. They are now long gone but the city – the biggest in Galicia, with around 300,000 inhabitants – remains passionate about the game and the local sky-blue colours of Celta de Vigo.

Blue is everywhere you look. In the different tones of the waves or the skyline. In the ever-present traditional flag of Galicia and, of course, in the shirt of Celta de Vigo. Walking in the direction of the Balaídos stadium it's impossible not to see it. In painted murals, in flags proudly placed on balconies. In scarves around people's necks. Every street leads to the place where past and present meet. Balaídos feels like time-travelling. The stadium belongs to the city hall and not to the club – which is an issue for its financial sustainability – and it has been renovated recently. It now boasts three futuristic stands that contrast immensely with the sole survivor of the days of old concrete stands, a recollection of the 1982 World

Cup when it hosted the first three matches of future world champions Italy.

Vigo is also a city with one foot in the past and another in the future. On one hand, it remains a place that encapsulates the spirit of the old fishing and canning industry that shaped the region for so long. The harbour might have been revamped, but Teis and Bouzas's old streets still smell distinctively humble, far from the new aspirational neighbourhoods of Navia or Coia. But Vigo is also vibrant and modern, full of life and with an eye on becoming the north-western capital of tourism in the country. It has much to be thankful for: the astounding beauty of the Cies Islands and its beaches, but also its people. They suffered greatly over the years and the city landscape changes have also reflected that. During the 1980s Vigo was assaulted by an epidemic of drug abuse that almost wiped out a generation. At the same time, the central government in Madrid, inspired by Thatcherite policies, started to dismantle a great part of the local shipyards, raising unemployment to an all-time high. The town suffered but it didn't stay silent. People marched on the streets in protest and reinforced their sense of belonging.

And to belong to Vigo was to belong to Celta. Today, the football club remains the long-standing Galician side in the Spanish first division. They have never won any silverware, losing three cup finals and qualifying only once for the Champions League. But, in Vigo, people have been used to losing so much it didn't matter. They were there for each other. That feeling is still present every time you bump into supporters around Balaídos. You can sense it inside the stadium, a love that crosses generations. But it's not only in the city. Support for Celta stretches from the southern tip of Galicia in A Guarda to the northern limits of the Pontevedra province, on the wild island of Arousa. Their sky-blue kit, inspired by the flag of Galicia that the side took on to the field one afternoon

in 1977, defying the authorities of a country still clinging to old fascist ideals, is also a testimony of that connection. That devotion is reflected powerfully in the anthem created by the popular rap artist C. Tangana for the club's centennial back in 2023. 'Oliveira dos Cen Anos' became an immediate hit track when it was released, mixing the urban sounds of today with the folkloric musical tradition of old. Before each home match, more than 25,000 supporters sing the lyrics written in local Galician by Tangana, himself a Celta supporter despite having been born in Madrid: 'Sempre Celta'. Forever Celta.

Of course, music and Vigo have walked side by side for a long time. In Spain, many remember the *Movida* cultural movement in Madrid in the early 1980s as a symbol of the social period known as *Transición* after decades of fascism. What few know is that, around the same time, Vigo was living its own cultural revolution. The *Movida Vigesua* was a movement that brought the city to life. It all started with a car crash that inspired a group of teenagers to form a band. They called it Siniestro Total – meaning 'total write-off' – and their raunchy, provocative lyrics accompanied by punkish new wave guitar sounds became an instant hit and were quickly followed by other acts like Golpes Bajos and Aerolíneas Federales, who introduced ska, reggae, funk and techno to Spanish audiences.

They also loved football. Regulars at the Balaídos, when the club was permanently moving between the top two tiers of Spanish football, Siniestro Total debuted a night after seeing Celta thrash Real Mallorca. Plus, they usually played Celta's club anthem in their concerts. The movement stretched the cultural and social horizons of the city. It ended abruptly when the mayors of Madrid and Vigo decided to stage an event with some of the most representative artists of both cities. The first trip brought popular Madrid acts to Vigo but ended in a riot. The seed was planted though, and empowered

the city through dark times, with many local bands usually performing in benefit concerts for the striking workers of shipyards and factories that years later started to shut down one by one.

Celta was the first team from Galicia to play in the league, back in 1939. Their name of course comes from the Celtic origins of the region, after a merger of three other clubs in 1923. They were always an up-and-down side, capable of playing the cup final on three occasions but never reaching as high as fourth in the league. However, in the 1990s, everything changed. While the city tried to find its place in a new world, Celta became their guiding light. Around the same time local songwriter Ivan Ferreiro was leading his band, Los Piratas, into indie rock royalty, the arrival of Victor Fernández in 1998 was like hitting number one in the charts. Quickly Balaídos became used to a flashy, entertaining attacking side that played like no other team when the Spanish league was known as 'La Liga de las Estrellas'. And there were stars to behold in Vigo as well. From the Russian local icon Aleksander Mostovoi to Brazilian World Champion Mazinho, alongside players like Claude Makélélé, Haim Revivo, Luboslav Penev and Valeri Karpin.

Those were the glory days of Galician football, with Deportivo la Coruña, Celta's greatest rivals, also boasting one of the best sides in Europe. The rivalry left us with some of the most memorable matches in the league's history, but Celta were always more spectacular than effective. It was in Europe that they lived their most memorable nights. The club had been the first from the region to play in continental cups, back in 1971, beaten in the first round of the UEFA Cup by Aberdeen.

In 1998/99, however, they surprised everyone by beating favourites Aston Villa and Liverpool only to lose a tight quarter-final duel against Marseille. Proving it was no fluke,

they went at it again the following season, hammering Benfica 7-0 at home before beating mighty Juventus 4-0, thanks to goals from Makélélé, Benni McCarthy and an Alessandro Birindelli own goal. That night remains the greatest in living memory for any Celta supporter. Unfortunately, once again a French rival, Lens, beat them in the last eight and it was Barcelona who frustrated the club's continental ambitions the following season.

The 'EuroCelta' tag, however, would not be forgotten. The team led by Fernández was 90 minutes away from touching the sky in that summer of 2001. On 30 June, in the asphyxiating heat of Seville, Celta met Zaragoza in the cup final. Mostovoi opened the score early in the match but three goals from Fernández's former club meant, once again, the prospect of glory faded away. The defeat was painful, not only because it meant the end of a golden era but because Deportivo had celebrated their first league title the year before and would win the cup the following season. They were as ruthless as Celta were enthralling.

But it's not by chance that the club motto is *Afouteza*, the Galician word for courage. Celta rose once again and have since become one of the most noted *Canteras* – the Spanish name for youth academies, literally referencing stone quarries – in the country. Without money to invest, they had to rely on local talent. And they had plenty to call upon: players such as Borja Oubiña, Dennis Suárez, Brais Mendez, Hugo Mallo, Rodrigo Moreno and, above all, Iago Aspas. Because if Celta are still around in the elite, they owe much to the forward born in Moaña, known as the 'Prince of the Bateas', the name of the characteristic platforms positioned alongside the Ría de Vigo. Aspas debuted with the first team in June 2008 when Celta were battling to avoid stepping out of professional football. He scored both goals as a substitute against Alavés, saving the club from bankruptcy.

It would not be the last time. Top scorer for the side a couple of seasons on, Aspas took Celta back to La Liga and scored the decisive goals that kept the club from being relegated once there. He proved to be one of the hottest prospects around and eventually signed for Liverpool in 2013. However, he struggled to adapt to a Brendan Rogers side that would finish second in the Premier League. He was briefly loaned to Sevilla but in 2015 opted to return to Vigo. A few weeks later he scored a brace in a 4-1 home win against Barcelona. Balaídos had its prodigal son back.

And there he remains, ten years on, guiding the club to a Europa League semi-final – lost against Mourinho’s Manchester United – and proving to be an ever-decisive factor that has allowed Celta to stay as the sole representative of Galician football in La Liga. He also entered the goalscorers’ hall of fame, having become one of the 20 top scorers in La Liga’s history. Aspas is part of the club’s crest and identity. An example for future graduates of the *Cantera* to follow. A local homegrown player who embodies the spirit of a club and city. Of a region. Leaving Balaídos under a surprisingly sunny sky, after another fantastic display of the club’s number ten, the final verses of ‘Oliveira dos Cen Anos’ resonate powerfully once again: ‘*Sempre Celta*’.

* * *

Despite Galicia being one of the regions where football was played first, only four of its clubs have featured in La Liga. In 1969/70 Pontevedra Club de Fútbol joined Deportivo and Celta and, for the first time, there were three teams from the region in the elite. It was to be their fifth but also last season at the top. The club hails from a beautiful medieval town sitting over the banks of their own Ría and the river Lérez. Although much smaller than Vigo, which sits 20 miles to the south, Pontevedra is the provincial capital. The local ground,

Pasarón, remains an iconic setting in the mind of Galician supporters, an echo of a time long gone when football was played on muddy pitches and character was as important as talent.

SD Compostela had a shorter stay in La Liga, playing four consecutive seasons there between 1994 and 1998. They are most remembered for conceding an iconic solo goal by Ronaldo Nazário and the ensuing expression of disbelief on the face of Sir Bobby Robson when Barcelona came to town. The club rose only thanks to the patronage of chairman José Maria Caneda and went bankrupt shortly after their relegation but, as Galician writer and historian Sergio Vilariño explains, they are also a symbol of Galicia's football golden age. 'Compostela lived a beautiful story, with faithful supporters still behind the newly reborn club, despite competing in lower leagues nowadays. But back then they could only aspire to be in La Liga thanks to the local canning industry's support, Caneda's vision and money from the television deal. Without TV money, no football club in Galicia would ever be able to compete at the highest level.' Caneda had an eye for managers, first trusting in Fernando Castro Santos and, later on, Fernando Vazquez, who delivered results with a mix of local players and exciting signings like Bulgarian striker Luboslav Penev. That period was also decisive in reviving the spirit of the Road to Santiago.

Compostela is the historical capital of Galicia and became popular in the 10th century when a cathedral was built on the site where some claimed the bones of St James had been found, after being brought by boat from the Holy Land. It ended up as one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Europe, alongside Rome and Jerusalem, but its relevance faded with time. In the 80s, Galicia's regional government sought to revive the route and, in 1985, the city achieved UNESCO World Cultural Heritage status. Still, only a few

hundred were known to take the road, so a huge publicity campaign began during the 90s to revive the tradition, with great success. Football was part of the revival of the *Camino de Santiago* pilgrimage route and Compostela's success in La Liga was seen as essential to spreading the city's name around Europe. Thirty years on, almost half a million pilgrims a year take, on foot, the different routes to arrive at the gates of the Doorway of Glory, the main entrance of the mighty cathedral, and admire its breathtaking beauty when the bells toll.

The *Camino* revival was one of the positive sides of the economic and social changes in 1990s Galicia. But there was a downside as well. Unemployment had been rising since the previous decade mostly because of the closure of many local industries. The award-winning movie *Lunes al Sol*, which includes footage of a real friendly match between Pontevedra and Celta Vigo and stars Oscar-winning actor Javier Bardem, tells the harsh story of how a group of jobless middle-aged workers contemplate the meaninglessness of their lives and serves as the perfect reflection of what was the spirit of the day.

But whenever unemployment rises so usually does organised crime. And Galicia, a poor region, had always been fertile territory for smugglers. So much so that many baptised the early 60s Celta as 'Marlboro Celta' because of the supposed connections between the club chairman Celso Lorenzo and the tobacco smuggling business. Some suggested the team bus was used to smuggle cigars all over Spain. The inclusion of many shady businessmen on the board didn't help either. But if tobacco was socially accepted, narcotics weren't. Unemployment and desperation made Galicia the perfect entrance point for South American drug cartels. Heroin and cocaine had already begun to arrive in Europe in the late 1970s but Galicia's complex coastline, with its coves and

inlets, the craftsmanship of their small speedboat pilots and the closeness to the Americas paved the way for a large-scale drug invasion that took place the following decade. Some of the old-school smugglers stayed out but others embraced the new business. None became as famous as Sito Miñanco.

Born José Ramon Prado, he was a talented speedboat pilot who knew the trade from an early age. He was known to be one of the best pilots in the Ría de Arousa and quickly understood the potential offered by the South American narcos, setting himself aside from other smugglers from the region. He was also a football fanatic, a staunch Real Madrid supporter and an amateur player for his hometown side Juventud Cambados. The club currently plays in the Galician Segunda Autonómica – the seventh tier – and is part of the Celta Academy project. Cambados has changed as well. From a small greyish town in the 1980s, which depended exclusively on its fishing community, it's now a beautiful tourist site, known for its fabulous Albariño wines, the supreme quality of its beaches and popular local dishes like octopus, mussels and shellfish.

While walking along its old streets it's hard to believe this was once a place of suffering. The local ground is full of kids on a Saturday morning, wearing the club's yellow-and-blue colours. Parents watch proudly from the stands. Many probably were kids themselves when Miñanco, by then the most popular smuggler in Galicia, decided to take control of the club. He was named chairman in 1986 and immediately signed the best players available in the region, delegating to Rafa Lino, as sporting director, the responsibility of creating a winning project. Cambados were by then in the sixth tier. His ambition was to take them to La Liga, just like Pablo Escobar had done with Nacional Medellin. He invested heavily and the club started to climb divisions. He reached as high as the third tier – Segunda B – and to celebrate Miñanco took the

players to Panama on tour. Many suspected that the team bus was used on occasions to smuggle drugs past police controls, although that was never proved. When they were on the brink of promotion to the Segunda, Miñanco was forced to leave as a result of the police hunt against Galician drug traffickers, called Operation Nécora. He never saw his team play against Real Madrid but, in the end, he did manage to see Cambados visit both Real and Atlético Madrid B sides. During those troubling years, while teenagers were dropping dead in the streets from overdoses by the dozens, Juventud Cambados' success was seen by locals as a way of Miñanco paying back the community. He did it for social recognition, but the goal celebrations were never loud enough to silence the cries of the mothers of destroyed families who took to the streets to protest against the drug culture fostered by the likes of him.

Many would believe drugs might have been used in a similar way to finance other clubs from Galicia. Nothing was ever proven but, as Sergio Vilariño says, the *farriña* – Galician slang for cocaine – was everywhere. 'We saw people with money that came out of nowhere. People who weren't supposed to have any. So, everyone assumed that money got its way into private companies, political parties, and football clubs as well, but besides Cambados there was never any proven connection.' What is a fact is that drugs killed hundreds, especially teenagers and young adults, and that affected Galician football deeply. 'Even if I am from a younger generation, I still saw how some team-mates of mine, 15- and 16-year-olds, died of an overdose,' Vilariño states. 'It became clear drugs were wiping out an entire generation and among those were certainly kids who were meant to be professional footballers. Probably some would have become very good but never got the chance.'

One of those kids was Luis Gallego, a Celta youth prospect who turned to crime. One day he got the help of

two petty criminals to rob the club's headquarters. But things went wrong. At the premises, preparing for an away match to San Sebastián, was Joaquín Fernández, known as Quinocho, a former club legend who was part of that historical 'Marlboro Celta' side, and was the club's senior director. One of the most beloved figures in Spanish football, Quinocho tried to stop the robbers and was stabbed to death. Vigo mourned his passing, but he was just one of the hundreds who suffered the consequences of the arrival of the narcos culture in Galicia.

In the end, when Miñanco was finally arrested, Juventud Cambados inevitably descended back to where they had been. They have never left the lower leagues since and remain a sad footnote in the history of Galicia's football, even if locals still take pride in what the team achieved, albeit for a short time and in strange circumstances. Football always serves as the perfect excuse to search for better self-reflection in the mirror. Cambados may now be a very much changed city and Miñanco is still paying the price of a life of crime, after spending the last decades in and out of jail, but that darker side of Galicia's recent history contrasts immensely with the ravishing beauty of its shores and the warm-hearted essence of its people.

* * *

Denise Oliveira wasn't happy. And she had every reason not to be. A few weeks before, two men had knocked on the door of her house in the posh neighbourhood of Tijuca, in Rio de Janeiro. They knew her husband was set to sign for Borussia Dortmund and bluntly told her he was making a terrible mistake. The weather in Germany was horrible. In turn, if he accepted their offer to move to Coruña he would be able to enjoy beaches like the ones he had in Rio de Janeiro. To prove it they offered her a book full of colourful postcard images of the beach of Riazor, right next to where the club stadium was.

Denise was convinced. She picked up the phone, called her husband's agent and told him straight away he was not going to Dortmund. He was moving to a club called Deportivo. The two men at her doorstep were Augusto César Lendoiro, the club's chairman, and his right-hand man, Luis Sanchez. That conversation changed the club's history. It was July 1992, they had just miraculously avoided relegation from La Liga, and had now signed one of the best players in the world. When they arrived at A Coruña, Denise understood that Riazor was no Copacabana. The chilly wind of the North Atlantic and the ever-present clouds painted a very different picture from what she imagined. But, thankfully for the local supporters, there was no turning back. In a few weeks, they were already in love with their new star, a classy forward who went by the nickname of Bebeto.

Bebeto was the beginning of everything at A Coruña but, during that trip to Brazil, Lendoiro also managed to snatch a promising midfielder named Mauro Silva. In two years, both would be key players in Brazil's fourth World Cup title. It was another masterstroke by Lendoiro, a man who came to symbolise the most glorious moments of football in Galicia and, especially, in A Coruña. He wasn't even a football man to begin with. Years before he took control of the local roller-hockey club, Liceo, and transformed it into European royalty. By then he had been persuaded to lead Deportivo's revival after turbulent years in the lower divisions.

The club's debut in La Liga had come a year after their rivals Celta. For most of the previous decades, they had been fighting each other to be seen as the best team in the region. Now they were throwing punches in the first division. It was a good period for Galician football and Depor had, in Juan Acuña, one of the most decorated goalkeepers of his time, a decisive player in their ranks who enabled the club to finish runners-up to Atlético Madrid in 1950, using

Argentine Alejandro Scopelli's innovative version of the WM formation, with a team packed of talented South Americans. Around those parts, the Spanish are still known as 'Galicians' because of the mass emigration in the late 19th century, a consequence of the famines and lack of job opportunities that forced thousands to cross the Atlantic searching for a better life. Ironically football paved the way for many descendants of those immigrants to return home and, since then, Galicia has become a preferred entrance point for players from South America to Europe. Even some who triumphed in Argentina or Uruguay, like Independiente stars Manuel Seoane or José Vilarino, were proud of their family origins. Lendoiro was following a long-standing tradition that was halted when Franco's regime closed the borders at a time when Deportivo were already on a low.

The club has also had an important youth set-up over the years. The proof is that they nurtured two of the greatest footballers Spain ever produced, Luis Suárez and Amancio Amaro. Suárez was a cultured midfielder who led the team from a tender age and was finally signed by Helenio Herrera when the manager took control of Barcelona. He became the star figure of a side that included Ladislao Kubala, Sandro Kocsis and Zoltan Czibor, winning two league titles against mighty Real Madrid before moving along with Herrera to Milan. Wearing Inter's colours, he dominated 1960s Serie A like no other, guiding the *Nerazzurri* to their first two European Cups and winning the coveted Balón d'Or. Suárez was also the main figure of the Spanish national side that won the Euros in 1964. Alongside him was Amaro, by then already a Real Madrid player after showing all his goalscoring skills in his teens at Riazor. Amaro was one of the most elegant forwards ever to wear the white shirt. The leader of the so-called Ye-Ye's generation, he won the 1966 European Cup for *Los Blancos* alongside a total of nine league titles.

But Suárez and Amaro's exploits came at a time when Deportivo started to lose relevance. It took them almost two decades to become a contender again, all thanks to Lendoiro's hard work. He signed local manager Arsenio Iglesias and showed patience as the team tried year after year to clinch promotion, to no avail. But something was brewing in the shadows of the mighty Tower of Hercules, one of the wonders of the ancient world and the oldest remaining Roman lighthouse in use. A place where the Romans believed the world ended. In 1990/91 Deportivo finally got themselves back to La Liga, only for the celebrations to be cut short because one of the stands at the Riazor caught fire and a tragedy was on the brink of happening. The following season was a mess, the club forced to a play-off against Betis to avoid relegation. It was a turning point, followed by the arrival of Bebeto and Mauro Silva. The two Brazilians fitted perfectly in Iglesias's system and, against all odds, Deportivo began the following season leading the pack. It was not only the new signings. Paco Liaño in goal, López Rekarte, Aldana, Donato and especially a youth prospect by the name of Fran González all delivered and the club ended the season third, with Bebeto winning the Pichichi award for top scorer. The *SuperDeport* legend was born.

The following season Deportivo played like they never had done before. They were not spectacular, far from it. Iglesias had forged a rocky defensive system that exploited well Fran's speed on the wing and Bebeto's ability to score. They fought week in, and week out against Cruyff's Barcelona team and arrived at the last day of the season only needing to win at home against Valencia to clinch their first-ever league title. A Coruña were having the time of their lives. It was a fairy tale, coming from the dark days of the lower divisions in a city, like Vigo, who suffered deeply the closing of shipyards and saw their youth destroyed by drugs. Only it wasn't to

be. With one minute to go and the scores level, Deportivo were awarded a penalty. Donato, the usual taker, had been taken off and Bebeto didn't step up, so it came to centre-back Miroslav Djukic to take the shot. It never crossed the line. While Barcelona celebrated their fourth consecutive league title, people cried in Riazor.

The following season they finished second again and won the Copa del Rey, their first-ever title, also in dramatic fashion as the match, played in Madrid, had to be suspended due to heavy rain when Depor and Valencia, once again, were level. Three days later a header from Alfredo proved to be decisive. Lendoiro and Iglesias at least had a trophy to show for their efforts but the romantic image of the *SuperDepor* was always linked to that missed opportunity. It was almost the end for the club as well. To compete against the elite, the debt had been increasing fast, and when Iglesias called it a day, Depor were once again at a low. But as Sergio Vilarino explains, the 1997 television rights deal saved the club.

'When Via Digital and Canal Plus started to push for the TV rights of the so-called 'Liga de las Estrellas', Lendoiro got an excellent deal for Depor,' he said, 'and with that inflow of cash, he started to sign top international players that allowed him to create another great team, much superior in quality to the *SuperDepor* days. Without that TV money deal, Depor would have probably gone back to oblivion.' Class players did come to A Coruña, international stars from the Brazilian Djalminha to Dutch striker Roy Makaay, to local Spanish prospects Juan Carlos Valeron and Diego Tristan. In also came a new manager, Javier Irureta, a former international who had a more attacking mindset than Iglesias. 'Arsenio's side was more romantic, Irureta's played much better football,' recalls Vilarino.

In 1999/2000 Deportivo finally won the league. They ended up six points clear of Barcelona, clinching the title

on the last day with a 2-0 win against Espanyol. Donato, alongside Fran and Mauro Silva, one of the sole survivors of the *Super Depor*, opened the scoring to make amends with the past. That season, however, is still remembered well in Galicia because of a match in December, when the *Blanquiazules* beat Celta at Riazor. It was the first time the two teams from Galicia were top of the league. The win rocked Depor to their destiny, sealed in May. The city partied all night long and, for once, Riazor beach did look like Copacabana after all.

Irureta's side proved to be much more than that everlasting memory. Over the following four seasons, they never finished as low as third and won the Copa del Rey in 2002 at the Bernabéu. That day became known as *Centenario* as Real Madrid expected to win to celebrate their centenary anniversary and, in turn, it was Deportivo supporters who ended up singing 'Happy Birthday'. They also enjoyed memorable European nights along the way. During those years Depor won at iconic grounds like Old Trafford, Highbury, San Siro, Delle Alpi and the Olympiastadion. The dream ended when they faced Mourinho's Porto in the 2003/04 Champions League semi-final. They had just beaten AC Milan in a historic 4-0 comeback, and many considered them favourites to win the trophy. They didn't, and the rising debt finished the club off. Deportivo went bankrupt, ended up in the hands of Abanca, Galicia's most important financial institution, and fell to the third tier.

But that became a much-needed catharsis. People felt the need to reconnect with the club, away from all the noise of the glory days. Little by little Riazor came back to life, with a packed stadium filled with younger supporters who had never witnessed the club's golden years. As local singer and club supporter, Xael López, would write in one of his hits, 'Glaciar', they answered the call "Would you love me the same if you saw me down in the ring" with heart. If the previous

generations had been Depor fans because they won, they now are behind it because they feel it. Even local hero and former Arsenal striker Lucas Pérez decided to leave first-division football, paying his release clause from his own pocket to help out his childhood club.

Of course, it had to be him who scored the decisive goal that clinched promotion back to professional football during the 2023/24 season. A son of a local fisherman, Pérez grew up playing in Arteixo, the same place where Arsenio Iglesias came from, a small town next to A Coruña. His childhood was rough, and football was his salvation. Depor was what drove him to become a first-class footballer. In the end, he rescued the club the same way the club had rescued him. Because of love. He put his name up alongside club legends like Lendoiro, Iglesias, Irureta, Bebeto or Djalminha.

By now fans know the good times are not likely to return but they don't care. It was no coincidence there were more people in Riazor when they were promoted in 2024 than when they won the league. Belonging is all that matters. And wherever you are in Galicia, even if you're not from around there, you always get the strange feeling that, somehow, it has already become part of you. Some say it has to do with the *Meigas*, the entities who survive in that magical and mystical world. To others, it's just the undisputed beauty of one of Europe's hidden paradises. Whatever it is, it will never let go.