

Aly Mir

TEN BIG EARS



An Alternative Account of FC Barcelona in Europe

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Xi and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

*Saturday, 28 November 2015, Hotel
Avenida Palace, Barcelona*

LOCATED NEAR two of Barcelona's most famous streets, Paseo de Gracia and Las Ramblas, the Hotel Avenida Palace was the perfect venue for a celebratory dinner. One of the 130 guests, Zhenzhong Xi (known as Xi), had travelled all the way from the People's Republic of China by motorcycle. The most direct route overland from China to Barcelona is about 12,000km, but Xi had chosen an even longer journey, which the gauge on his motorbike measured at 39,070km, so that he could meet certain people on the way. Even though the food at the dinner was excellent, Xi hadn't ridden his motorbike the equivalent of the equatorial circumference of Earth just for something to eat. What was it that had encouraged

him to travel such a vast distance, and who were the people that warranted such detours?

With swept-back black hair, spectacles and a goatee beard, Xi looked like a modern-day Chinese philosopher, except for one item of clothing that revealed the purpose of his epic journey – a blue and dark red football shirt. Xi had crossed all of Asia and Europe to see his destination's local football team, FC Barcelona, and some of the people he arranged to meet on his journey were supporters of that club.

Xi was born in 1985, 30 years before the dinner, in Changsha, Hunan province of the People's Republic of China. In 1999 at the age of 14 he became a supporter of FC Barcelona, an interest stimulated by the club's Dutch star Patrick Kluivert who had arrived the previous year. When asked if there was a particular performance from Kluivert which prompted his interest, Xi replied, 'I can't remember. I know it from a newspaper, because we couldn't watch La Liga [Spanish football league] matches on TV before 2003.' In 2015 he finally decided to go to watch Barcelona play at its Camp Nou stadium for real, as opposed to on television, and to travel all the way by motorcycle. Equally surprising was the fact that Xi embarked on such a long journey only ten days after his wedding. Xi departed on 14 May 2015 and during a journey that lasted six months he passed through 21 countries, meeting members of Barcelona *penyes* (supporters' clubs) in many of them.

At Camp Nou, Xi was officially received by Josep Barnils, director of FC Barcelona's Social Commission,

and Antoni Freire representing the international organisation of Barcelona supporters' clubs, before watching a match against Real Sociedad. In the evening Xi attended the dinner, which was organised by *Penya Blaugrana London* (meaning 'Blue and Red Supporters' Club London', or more accurately blue and dark red). The meal was merely one of a whole number of events that weekend, including the match against Real Sociedad in the main stadium, a futsal five-a-side game at the *Palau Blaugrana* and a *Barça B* fixture (the club's second team) in the *Mini Estadi*. The weekend trip was organised by *Penya* president Eduard Manas and the rest of the PBL board to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the London branch's formation. The main event, however, was the dinner where PBL members from the UK were joined by representatives of Barcelona *penyes* from across the world, including Argentina, Cuba, France, Greece, Morocco, Poland and the United States of America.

Speaking to the diners in excellent English, helped by the fact that his wife was a teacher of the language, Xi explained that this was his first trip to Europe and that while he used a bicycle in China it would take too long travelling to Europe with that, so he came by motorbike. I asked Xi what his new wife thought about him leaving only ten days after their wedding and he told me that she was 'a little bit angry', but added that he would be coming back in early December and hoped 'it would all be okay when I got home'. I wished him luck with that. Xi told me that he intended to donate his motorbike to FC Barcelona and fly back to China. He also gave the club a large flag

signed by members of the different *penyes* he had met on the journey. When asked if he had encountered any major problems or unpleasant incidents during his epic motorbike ride, Xi replied, ‘Nothing, everything made my life happier and stronger.’

The vast function room that hosted the dinner in the Hotel Avenida Palace contained a number of round tables, each with places for ten people to sit and eat, with a raised stage at one end. On this stage was a silver object, 62cm tall, weighing 7.5kg. Looking in need of a good polish after all the hands that had touched it, this was the UEFA Champions League trophy, formerly known in English as the European Champion Clubs’ Cup or European Cup for short. A few months before the dinner, Barcelona had won its fifth European Cup, and for one of the guests the trophy was especially meaningful, because, as we shall hear later, he played for the club in its second appearance in the final of this competition, European football’s leading club tournament, 30 years earlier.

The first European Champion Clubs’ Cup trophy was commissioned by French sports newspaper, *L’Équipe*. In 2001 I visited Real Madrid’s Estadio Santiago Bernabéu and explored the club’s museum, which displayed six of these trophies, all looking like tall silver vases with two small handles. In 1967 UEFA, European football’s governing body, decided that Real Madrid should keep the original European Champion Clubs’ Cup in honour of its sixth victory in the tournament, recorded the previous season. UEFA provided a budget of 10,000 Swiss Francs for a new trophy to be produced and commissioned a

Swiss jeweller to manufacture it. Some of the national football associations within UEFA contributed different suggestions and preferences, meaning that the eventual design was a compromise and hybrid¹. One of the main ideas was to make the new trophy more eye-catching, particularly by making its handles much larger, which caused the trophy to become known as ‘the cup with the big ears’. This book tells the story of how I achieved a personal ambition of seeing Barcelona win its first five European Cups by being present at all the finals, in other words ten big ears altogether.

Some *penya* members had to fly back to London the day after the dinner, but a few remained and on the Sunday evening I accompanied a hardcore of five of them, Tony, Caroline, Peter, Katarzyna and Seb, to the George Payne Irish Bar in Plaça d’Urquinaona, just slightly east of the hotel. There they ordered one of the aptly named ‘Barcelona Blackout Trays’, consisting of sangria, a carafe of vodka and Red Bull, Sex on the Beach cocktails, with shots of Jäger, tequila and sambuca, all for the bargain price of €20. They enjoyed it, so ordered a few more! It was a lot of booze, but that day, 29 November, justified a celebration because it was the anniversary of the formation, not of a supporters’ club, but of the whole Football Club Barcelona. On 29 November 1899 the club had been founded at a meeting in the Solé Gymnasium in Barcelona organised by Hans Kamper, a 20-year-old Swiss citizen who had recently moved to the city. He

1 Official programme, UEFA Champions League Final 2017.

become known by the Catalan version of his name, Joan Gamper, and the football club he started would later grow into one of the biggest in the world.

The club's famous nickname first appeared in a publication called *Auca* in 1921 as 'Barsa', before a magazine called *Xut!* changed this to 'Barça' the following year². In this book 'FC Barcelona', 'Barcelona', 'Barça' and 'FCB' will all be used at different times to refer to the club. Although Barça has won a great many domestic honours, the focus of this book is the club's involvement in European competitions. These were slow to develop into continental-wide tournaments. Steps on the way included the Mitropa Cup, which just involved clubs from parts of central Europe, and the Copa Latina (Latin Cup), a tournament only open to clubs from Spain, Italy, Portugal and France. Barça won the inaugural Copa Latina in 1949, then repeated the success three years later. However, the first proper European Cup, open to winners of domestic leagues across the continent, wasn't set up until the 1955/56 season, soon after the formation of UEFA. Unfortunately for Barça, its rival Real Madrid won the first five of these. The fifth of Real Madrid's triumphs was in the 1959/60 tournament, when the club from the capital qualified as holders and met Barcelona in the semi-finals. This was Barça's first season in Europe's elite club competition, having qualified as reigning Spanish champions, but the team was eliminated after Real Madrid won both legs of the tie.

² fcbarcelona.com.

The following season, 1960/61, Barça gained some revenge by becoming the first side to knock Real Madrid out of the European Cup, on the way to reaching the final against the Portuguese team Benfica in the Swiss city of Berne. Barça, featuring star player László Kubala, hit the woodwork several times, and despite managing to score twice still lost because Benfica did so three times. This European Cup Final defeat in May 1961 was to be one of the most disappointing days in the history of FC Barcelona.

Although Barça had not won the European Cup, the club's first two entries into the tournament led to a semi-final and a final. Surely it would not be long before the club went one better and took home the trophy? In fact, Barça couldn't even enter the European Cup again for another 13 years because of a lack of domestic success, caused partly by financial difficulties relating to the cost of building Camp Nou in 1957 and delays in the sale of its old stadium. These money problems forced the club to sell some of its best players, and unfortunately the replacement signings didn't always work out. Barcelona didn't qualify for the European Cup until it won La Liga in 1974, and had to settle in the meantime for victories in a lesser competition, the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup (forerunner of the UEFA Cup/Europa League), claiming victories in 1958, 1960 and 1966. When Barça did re-enter the European Cup, in the 1974/75 season, it met the English champions in the semi-final. This was how I entered the story.

In April 1975, aged 13, I went to Mallorca for my first holiday abroad. Then, as now, the Mediterranean

island was part of Spain. At that time General Franco, the right-wing dictator who had come to power during the Civil War in the 1930s, was still alive and despite failing health would remain head of state until he died in November that year. I remember seeing an elderly woman begging outside a church in Palma, the island's capital. Since the 1980s beggars have been common in the UK, but they were unknown to me in the 1970s, so it was quite a shocking sight. Clad in black, with a weathered face and hooked nose, she looked like a witch from a children's fairy tale. It was one of my two main memories from that holiday. The other recollection was a sign in the port advertising ferry crossings from Palma to mainland Spain. What was so special about the sign? The destination of the boat was Barcelona, and on 23 April during my holiday, Barcelona would play Leeds United in the second leg of the European Cup semi-final.

Like most boys growing up in the 1960s and '70s I was football mad. My team was, and still is, Leeds United. In the mid-1970s live televised coverage of football games was a rarity in England. Usually only major games such as important internationals, FA Cup finals and European Cup finals were broadcast. Finals, not the semi-finals, so before flying to Mallorca I had to be content with watching highlights of the first leg on television. Played on 9 April 1975 at Elland Road, Leeds beat Barça 2-1. Although thrilled that my team had won, I was also fascinated by my first sight of FC Barcelona. The two Johans in the Barça side that night, Cruyff and Neeskens, were already household names in

Britain because of their exploits for Holland in the World Cup finals the previous summer, but that night I also had my first glimpse of the likes of Carles Rexach and Juan Manuel Asensi, who scored Barça's potentially vital away goal. I was also drawn to the Barça kit of blue and red stripes, contrasting with the all-white of Leeds.

It was a case of so near yet so far, because my mother told me I wasn't old enough to make that ferry crossing from Palma to Barcelona to go and see the second leg of the semi-final at Camp Nou. Instead, I had to console myself by buying a pennant from a souvenir street stall in Palma commemorating Barça's triumph in La Liga the previous year. The pennant, in blue and dark red stripes with gold edging, featured the names and faces of Cruyff and his title-winning team-mates. The second leg ended in a 1-1 draw, meaning Barça was eliminated and Leeds progressed to the final in Paris. That match ended with Leeds being beaten by Bayern Munich, after some highly dubious refereeing decisions. More disappointment was to follow when the Barça pennant was lost during a house move several years later.

Many thought that it wouldn't be long before Barcelona would get another chance to win the European Cup, especially having Cruyff, then the world's best player, in the side. In fact, Cruyff left the club in 1978 without further league titles and it would be 11 years until Barça again won La Liga and got a fourth crack at Europe's top club competition. Luckily, I didn't have to wait that long before seeing the team live for the first time.