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THE
FRYING PAN
OF
SPAIN



Sevilla v Real Betis:

Spain's Hottest Football Rivalry

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C O L I N M I L L A R



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Chapter One

Spain

“Football is an excuse to make us feel happy”
– Jorge Valdano

MY love of football began from such an early age, it feels increasingly impossible to imagine a parallel universe whereby it had no influence on my life. From those endless hours spent kicking a ball about in the garden, watching my local team in Belfast, collecting sticker albums and other fads; it was to prove a passion from which I could not escape, not that I had any desire to.

Football is the only true global sport; encompassing many complex layers within a concept engrained in remarkable simplicity, it encapsulates you from childhood and never relinquishes its grip. No other game is so embedded with politics and identity, nor does any other lend such significance to history or generate such a profound sense of belonging. Football matches can exacerbate wars or grind them to a halt. It is often said that without firstly comprehending politics and history, it is impossible to fully understand the intricacies of many rivalries within the sport but conversely, those subjects cannot be fully grasped without football.

Nowhere does this ring truer than in Spain, where the significance of your football team forms a fundamental part of your identity. It often goes hand in hand with your political outlook, your socioeconomic status and your views on fundamental issues. You aren't a Real Madrid fan or supporter of Barcelona, but a *Madridista* or a *Culé*. In Seville, there are *Béticos* and *Sevillistas* (not to be confused with the term *Sevillanos*, applied to citizens of the city). All are badges of honour. Spaniards often view their association with a club not only in terms of support on the pitch, but also the significance it carries.

The ‘beautiful game’ does not always live up to its name, of course, but its very existence often brings hope and belief to those whose lives are deprived of such optimism. The resulting off-field tribalism which sometimes manifests itself in the form of violence – as true in Spain as in any other nation – is simply a reflection of society, warts and all, and should football become obsolete, another concept would surely fill the void.

Long before my school days were over – and shortly after I realised my limited playing ability would restrict me from reaching any loftier heights within the sport – my heart was set upon covering football professionally. Yet, my venture into Spanish football came about more by chance than any carefully laid plans. Without any meaningful knowledge of the language or culture, I jetted out to spend three months living in the medieval Spanish city of Cáceres. So remote and isolated was the setting, the experience often felt like being transported back in time.

There was little option but to immerse myself in watching football, with the local bar – as is true with many throughout Spain – showing nothing but La Liga. It was eye opening in part due to the supremely high level of play and technical ability on show, but mainly for the swift realisation that my knowledge was shamefully limited.

It rapidly became apparent that understanding Spanish football and the culture which surrounds it is impossible without a knowledge of the nation’s history, geography, socioeconomics and politics. Spain has many guises and faces; the packaged coastal experience frequented by many British holidaymakers is far removed from the reality of daily life within the nation.

There can be a feeling of isolation – particularly acute when on long, tedious bus journeys, travelling through a vast chasm of nothingness – which is often transmitted through the population. Newspapers focus on their locality but little else, simply because there is no great desire, particularly among older generations, to be aware of the goings-on further afield. Fewer than one in ten Spaniards buy a newspaper, a lower rate than 27 other European nations and one of the lowest sales per capita in the developed world.

However, the prominence and significance of Spanish sports newspapers cannot be overestimated. *Marca*, the Madrid-based sports daily, is comfortably the most-read paper in all of Spain. A survey in 2016 found it had over two million readers per day, almost double that of second-placed *El País*, the left-leaning national paper.

Diario AS, the other main sports newspaper based in the capital, ranks third with over a million daily readers while between them, Barcelona-based *El Mundo Deportivo* and *Diario Sport* have just shy of that tally. In total, there are six daily sports papers in the nation with Valencia's *Super Deporte* and *Estadio Deportivo*, based in Seville and focusing on Real Betis and Sevilla, completing the list.

The Madrid-based sports dailies prove so successful in part due to their regional variation and widespread availability, but their existence is down to the fervent interest in football throughout the nation. In many ways, the sport represents everything Spaniards hold dear. A mix of passion, artistry, entertainment, politics, belonging and, of course, controversy and conspiracy theories. The media coverage is often so intense and overwhelming that it becomes incredibly mundane and repetitive. The four main sports dailies devote pages in double figures to Real Madrid and Barcelona. To fill them, not only are matches, press conferences, interviews, analysis, transfer rumours and comment pieces covered, these papers are also bloated with irrelevant details such as players' routines and diets.

Both Madrid and Barça can lay claim to being the biggest club not just within Spain, but also in world football, and for outsiders it is easy to underestimate just how much power and influence they yield. The dynamic of Spanish football culture also stands alone in that it is perfectly common for fans to support multiple clubs within the country.

When I made the city of Seville my home, the first three questions its natives posed were my name, my home city and which football club I supported. If the third answer was neither Real Betis nor Sevilla, I would be quizzed on whether I was a *Bético* or a *Sevillista*. Green or red. Us or them. The concept of uncertainty or disassociation did not exist, nor would it be tolerated. You had to be one or the other.

"We are fiercely proud of our heritage," said Sevilla fan Victor Perea. "In our city you will hardly ever see anyone supporting Real Madrid or Barcelona, this doesn't happen in other parts of Spain. Seville is for Sevilla FC or Real Betis."

Yet small sections of fans from both shades are also fond of either Madrid or Barça – or, in the case of many Betis fans, Atlético de Madrid. It is not uncommon to see tracksuits of one of the Spanish giants at home games of either Seville club, even though both are accustomed to competing against them in Spain's top flight. Many also claim to support local or regional sides, sometimes due to family connections but more relevantly related to a sense of regional pride.

'*Soy Andaluz*' ('I am Andalusian') is a common self-description in the south of Spain. For many it is a way of life and a shared common bond.

This interpretation of fandom is unique to Spanish football. In other major European nations, if you do not support the most successful club then you actively wish to see them struggle. Manchester United, Juventus, Bayern Munich, Benfica and Paris Saint-Germain are widely and actively disliked by others. Success breeds contempt and jealousy but the dynamic of fandom ensures that it creates new pockets of support across the nation, often at the expense of local clubs. In Spain, affinity for one club does not rule out similar leanings to several others, often in the same division.

The concept of friendships between sets of Spanish fans is also a running theme. The links are often formed historically and commonly come about as a result of similar ideologies among groups of ultras – many of whom have political leanings, which are not always reflective of the club or its wider fanbase – or of sharing a common enemy. Betis and Atlético fans tend to share a strong friendship while Recreativo de Huelva and Sporting Gijón are other clubs with close links. Sevilla share common ground with Deportivo de La Coruña and Real Oviedo.

Spain is split between 17 proudly autonomous regions, separately ruled under a loose concept of federal self-governance. Each region is distinct with three – the northern Basque Country, Galicia and Catalonia – even speaking their own unique languages. A cultural nuance exists with Spaniards, who usually speak directly, much more than natives of Britain or Latin American nations, and they waste few words.

The football rivalries within each region are marked by pride and local identity, either between cities or within them, with each having its own idiosyncrasies that can, to outsiders at least, seem rather peculiar.

They also have different themes; in Barcelona the rivalry between Barça and Espanyol is generally split along the lines of Catalan independence or retaining loyalty to the Spanish state. In Madrid, distinctions are less clear. Atlético – the club formed by Basque students which would become the club of the Spanish Air Force in subsequent years – have traditionally drawn support from working-class areas of the capital in comparison to Real, who became synonymous with both power and wealth in Spanish football. Rayo Vallecano are based in the Vallecas neighbourhood, an area renowned for its resistance to the Francoist State and belief in social justice, making Rayo the true left-leaning club of the capital. In recent years,

Getafe and Leganés – both based to the south of Madrid but within its metropolitan area – have adapted their long-standing rivalry in the lower divisions to Spain’s top flight.

Socioeconomics is the dominant factor in Asturias: Sporting hail from the blue-collar city of Gijón – the most populous settlement in the northern region – while Oviedo, the region’s capital, prides itself on architecture and a distinguished, cultured heritage.

Identity is a key theme in Galicia: Deportivo mock Celta de Vigo as ‘Portuguese’ (some Spaniards look down upon their neighbour’s historic economic struggles) while Celta fans respond with jibes of ‘Turks’, the origins of which are rather less clear. To combat such ‘insults’, flags of both nations are often flown in each section in an apparent show of defiance.

The Basque derby embodies the inter-city rivalry between Bilbao and San Sebastián (referred to in Basque as Donostia), capitals of the neighbouring Gipuzkoa and Biscay (in Basque: Bizkaia) provinces. This particular rivalry is distinctive in that the clubs share similar ideals of Basque nationalism, with both sets of fans generally mixing amicably and often taking part in shared events surrounding their encounters. The fixture also produced one of Spanish football’s most iconic moments in 1976, following the death of General Francisco Franco – the Nationalistic leader who ruled Spain between 1938 and 1973. Captains Inaxio Kortabarria and José Ángel Iribar led their sides on to the pitch carrying the Ikurriña (Basque: Ikurrina) – the flag of the Basque country – which was, at the time, still outlawed in Spain and punishable by a prison sentence.

All of these derbies are fascinating in their own ways and each carries its fair share of baggage in cultural and historical terms. Yet none of these long-standing and enduring rivalries rank as the best local rivalry in Spain. That resides in the heart of Seville itself. No other is contested between two clubs on an equal footing, with the possible exception of Asturias, whose teams have traditionally underperformed and suffered prolonged spells outside the top flight for much of their history.

“The Seville derby is a rarity in Spain,” European football writer Andy Mitten explained. “It’s a proper two club rivalry in a city between two similar sized clubs. You don’t really get that anywhere. Elsewhere, Barcelona are miles bigger than Espanyol, and the same is true with Valencia compared to Levante.”

In Andalusia, fans of both Seville clubs are often jibed with ‘*Vamos a la playa*’ by supporters of Málaga, the club of the area’s second-most

populous city. This references the region's capital not containing a beach. Inter-city matches within Andalusia are generally played against a backdrop of good spirit and cordiality between fans, with light-humoured taunts and ridicule in place of genuine malice or hatred.

Spain's southernmost region is often referred to in unpleasant terms by those based north of its boundaries, with unfounded and stereotypical accusations of its population being workshy and lazy.

Spanish football writer Phil Ball, a long-term resident in the Basque city of San Sebastián, told me there was an element of haughtiness in how Andalusia is viewed in other parts of the country.

"In the north, they kind of look down at it with a slight condescension, as if they're sort of undereducated down there and can't even speak Spanish 'proper'. Then you have the stereotype of gypsy culture, dancing *Sevillanas*, the heat, passion, flamenco ..."

This manifested itself in unsavoury fashion in the 1998/99 season, when Basque Javier Clemente took the reins at Real Betis. His appointment, two months into the season, was greeted with a large deal of scepticism, coming just months after he had led Spain to a disastrous group exit at that year's World Cup. The former midfielder became renowned in coaching circles for implementing a conservative brand of football, one with which fans of *Los Verdiblanco*s were unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

However, having won multiple titles at Athletic Club in his native Bilbao, he was a tactician who had an impressive pedigree and more often than not, identity came to the fore as Clemente was an advocate of Basque nationalism. Betis spent most of that season languishing in lower mid-table, having finished two of the previous four seasons in the top four and never below eighth. Fans booed the team off and waved white handkerchiefs, as is customary for underperformance and dissatisfaction. In the midst of this, one rogue home fan near the tunnel spat at the unpopular boss who laid bare his feelings in the aftermath.

"That kind of behaviour is normal down here," fumed Clemente. "I do not want to say it, but this is not the country that I come from." The remarks made national headlines and were met, predictably and understandably, furiously not only by Betis, but the population of Spain's south. They were being called out as second-class citizens; they were unworthy. The comments made Clemente's position untenable and the unhappy marriage of convenience came to a

swift conclusion thereafter, but the incident itself is an indicator of fractured underlying feelings held throughout the nation.

In Spain, the idea of localised identity often prevails above all else. Outside of some northern regions seeking greater autonomy, the majority of Spaniards are comfortable with their national tag, yet many would associate first and foremost with their hometown. Each *pueblo* carries a significance and sometimes a stereotype, but such is the variation between each area, generalised assertions are unsatisfactory. These ideas run into football terminology too, with a club's youth system referred to as the *cantera* – 'the quarry', taken from the earth.

When exploring these themes in his book *Morbo*, Phil Ball outlines the significance of a Spaniard's birthplace in the eyes of their compatriots, saying it is not possible for them to be "totally satisfied in their judgement of someone" unless they can find "proof of their hunches". Many natives are fiercely proud of their hometown and region but will freely apply mistruths and generalisations elsewhere.

Speak of Andalusia to the residents of other Spanish territories and it is not uncommon to hear references to its population being *gandules* (a layabout workforce, slackers), comments fuelled by the south's struggling economy but with little basis in fact or reality. A report from Randstad Research in 2018 showed work absenteeism in Andalusia was the lowest in mainland Spain, with northern regions leading the charts.

Andalusia and its provinces are riddled with monetary issues, but its workforce is the victim, rather than the cause, of depressed wages and a general sparsity of jobs. The three poorest neighbourhoods in Spain are all located in Seville, according to a study from the National Institute of Statistics. They are Los Pajaritos-Amate (average household annual income €13,616), Polígono Sur (€14,653) and Torreblanca (€16,433), despite each barrio undergoing a minor improvement from the nadir of Spain's economic hardships.

The Spanish economy is an unbalanced one which relies heavily on tourism, particularly in locations along the Costa del Sol, such as Málaga and Marbella. This in itself leads to internal issues, with Spain's tourist board being the main source of resistance to the concept of bringing the country's clocks back by an hour. In the early part of his premiership, Franco decided Spain should adhere to Central European Time, in a move to bring itself closer to Hitler's Germany. This move was in spite of Madrid being almost directly south of London, with Spain being the westernmost country using CET. In

the north-western Galician cities of Vigo, Santiago and A Coruña, the sun does not rise until almost 9am in the depths of winter.

Many Europeans view Spaniards in the same way as those in Spain look at Andalusia – the stereotype of a low work ethic and a tendency towards greater sleep and leisure. Again, the reality is very different. In 2013, a Spanish national commission revealed that Spaniards slept 53 minutes less than the European average. As a result, the study concluded that levels of stress, absenteeism and work-related accidents all increased, with productivity damaged.

There are plenty more myths surrounding Spanish culture which need to be busted. Foreigners may possess a sanitised image of a nation based on relaxation and leisure, but the truth is, the 11-hour working day – typically lasting from 9am to 8pm – is three hours longer than the standard in other Western nations. Whilst long lunches tend to be taken, these do not come close to evening out the disparity, and besides, not arriving home for dinner until 9pm greatly offsets the true sense of a healthy work-life balance.

In late 2016, then Minister for Labour Fátima Báñez introduced proposals to end the working day at 6pm and bring the nation back in line with Greenwich Mean Time – currently only enjoyed by Spain's seven Canary Islands, including Tenerife and Gran Canaria. Ironically, it was tourism boards on the Spanish mainland who offered the main resistance to such plans, arguing – rather flimsily – that a one-hour reduction of evening daylight would deter tourists from visiting. In the time that has elapsed since, Spain has yet to make a decisive stride towards a change in its clocks and thus remains a nation stuck in the wrong time zone.

The fears and uncertainty surrounding Catalonia, the beating heart of the Spanish economy, differ in subtlety but have their roots in similar ideas. Gaining independence would further endanger a precarious national economic situation, which is a key factor – alongside the political and nationalistic ideas of centralism and unity – behind resistance to the north-eastern region's attempts to gain autonomy. Catalan nationalists present an economic argument that their region has the potential to be self-sustaining and is being restrained by Spain. Other Spaniards, many of whom reside in Andalusia, counter with the perfectly reasonable grievance that a break in the Spanish union will disproportionately damage their own living standards. Whilst it is tempting to label such arguments as either politically 'right' or 'left', the situation contains far greater complexity.

The distinct issues which engulf Spain are unavoidable and their waves often engulf the sporting landscape, but when the tide is in, it adds an extra layer of complexity and fascination to matches. Football for many is the ultimate form of escapism. The great Italian manager Arrigo Sacchi once referred to the sport as “the most important of the unimportant things in life”. Yet, football equally encompasses and amplifies everything in life in a remarkably simple format. It is for pleasure, incomparable moments of joy and for living. This in part explains why so many are hooked from childhood, locking in nostalgia and a sense of the good old days. There are various complexities behind the popularity of football but at its core, there is a childlike sense of optimism and hope.