

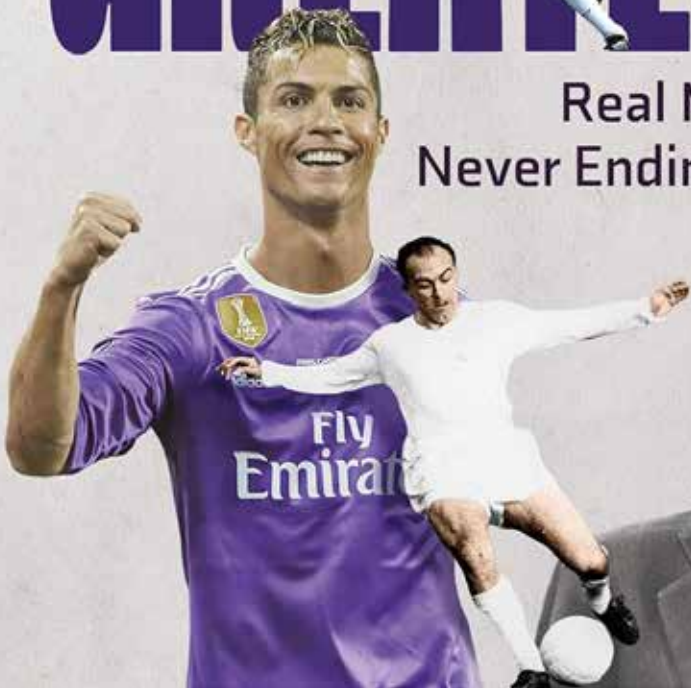
MIGUEL LOURENÇO PEREIRA

*The*

# GREATEST



Real Madrid's  
Never Ending Story



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Real Madrid's  
Never Ending Story

MIGUEL LOURENÇO PEREIRA



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# Inevitable

THERE IS no greater sense of inevitability in the history of modern football than watching Real Madrid triumph. It's not about aesthetics. Winning does not always mean they entertain or mesmerise, even if they do, more often than not. What sets them apart is that they are merciless. Like predatory animals in the savannah, they go for the kill without second thoughts and usually get their way, too. If there was ever a football club that fed on success, that's Real Madrid. Perhaps that eternal hunger for more is also what has made them so detested by many, as they are probably the most loved as well as the most hated club in history. Football is a game of emotions, escapism from day-to-day hardships. The passion around the game is sustained by how it strengthens the community, family and bonds of friendship and how, sometimes, those at the bottom can beat the predator at the top.

Everybody loves a good underdog story, and most football supporters appreciate success, but probably more the sense of frailty that sometimes comes with it. They can take winners, but only if they are seen as capable of failing as they are triumphing. Real Madrid is not that kind of club. Not any more, at least. For the side and many of their supporters and detractors, how they are perceived is rooted in their golden era in the 1950s, but by then they already had half a century of stories behind them that were largely forgotten; until now, that is. What survived in the public eye was an identity born

from two highly competitive men who shaped the club's modern DNA and that has been fuelled since by boards, players, managers and, most of all, by their supporters. For those who don't belong to their ranks, that made them an easy target, a club everyone else could agree about detesting. Despite that, they all seem to fail to understand the reason why Real Madrid are what they are today. Success has been their aim, and nobody has won as much as they have for decades. They aren't just the most successful club of the 20th century. They are the most successful club of the first quarter of this century as well. All that is true. But it was either that or oblivion. Real Madrid, surprising as it may seem, never had a chance to be anything else if they wanted to survive. It was less than a conscious choice but an inevitability.

The often-forgotten Real Madrid of the early years shared some common traits with the club that is now, but it was much more connected with the local community and its identity. They wanted to win, like anyone else, but that need came as a way to survive in a highly competitive environment where everything seemed to be going against them in a nation where football evolved much faster in the coastline regions of Catalonia or the Basque Country than in the capital. In a place where clubs were born and disbanded the moment they stopped winning, when both economic and political powers wanted to have a say in their destinies, the *Merengues* found in winning more than a purpose, an escape route, even if they also aspired to more than just claiming trophies. They wanted to shape the game. And they did.

Football is a worldwide phenomenon that touches different layers within society. It's political, it's philosophical, it's cultural, it's economic. It also reflects the world as it is and anticipates trends of the world that will be. No sporting institution has represented that complexity as conclusively as Real Madrid. They have adapted to and survived different

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political regimes and a change in the economics of the game as they evolved from amateurish idealists to pragmatist professionals, up to becoming standard bearers of member-owned clubs against the biggest financial superpowers that run the show today. They influenced the aesthetics and the blueprint of an entire city and faced the game with one of its most recognisable philosophical debates: how to reconcile showmanship with a serial-winner mindset. Content producers of emotions and nostalgic referents of old-fashioned values that rooted them to the ground for generations.

Their origins are upper-class, a club from the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of Spain's capital, who never forgot where they came from. They took pride in boasting the royal seal and as representatives of the Spanish state, probably like no other. An institution involved not only in the foundation of FIFA, but also in the very first steps of every major competition in Spanish football, as well as in the birthplace of the European Cup. And yes, a club whose commercial take on the modern game began a global trend that leaves no room for romanticism. Real Madrid is all that. But they are not just that. They are also an institution that said 'no' to the very same king who bestowed on them the royal title and his influential business partners. The club which found itself at the core of the working-class population of Madrid and decided to fight along with the Republic against the fascist subversion led by Francisco Franco, and afterwards almost got disbanded because they were believed to be a nest of Reds that needed to be purged. Someone who, unlike what their Catalan rivals claim, was the only one that had a left-wing chairman shot by the dictator's firing squad at the end of the Spanish Civil War, and another who had to flee the country, after spending years in jail, into exile.

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Oh yes, ‘Franco’s club’. Football is full of urban legends and myths. Stories that have been repeated so often that they have somehow become truth to many. There is no bigger lie than the one that transformed Real Madrid’s sporting success from the 1950s onwards into a political tool against the Francoist regime by picturing the club as part of it. The club may not have taken the necessary steps to refute the claims – particularly because they couldn’t be bothered – but when Real Madrid started to win repeatedly in Spain and Europe, Franco had been in power for almost two decades by then, a time when the club flirted more often with relegation than with winning any silverware: one of the many stories this book unravels so that you can get a broader perspective on what the club is all about.

More than just a black and white sporting institution, Real Madrid is an entity full of nuances whose real story distances itself from the myth that was craftily created over time by their own rivals, who made them the symbol of their social and political fights against the Spanish central state. And all because they were always more than just a successful football club. Real Madrid has become a mirror in which Spanish society has looked at itself over the past 125 years. It is also how the world has perceived Spain, as a nation, in all its complexities. Sometimes, depending on how you look at the country, it’s how you look at Real Madrid. It may feel like a distant, proud, and extremely commercial club, or you may find yourself star-struck by its sense of grandeur, its proud heritage, and its long-lasting heroes.

What is inevitable is that Real Madrid will always mean something to football supporters. You simply cannot love the game and not feel anything about them. Love or hate. Admiration or disdain. Full-hearted belonging or cut-throat rivalry. There’s never a middle ground when it comes to *Los Blancos*, a curse as well as a celebration of their success

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story. The image you have seen countless times before, those shiny white shirts, those ecstatic celebrations, that sense of inevitability will linger, but perhaps knowing what made them who they are will have you looking at it with new eyes. Nobody in world football has won as much, and yet few remain so unknown to the world. Pass over the triumphant image that glitters, and there's a story full of characters, events and moments that will surprise even those who believe they think they know it all about the *Merengues*. They might have become the greatest football club in history, but it's how and why they got there that's really worth knowing.