



The
**SERGIO
TORRES**
Story

**FROM THE BRICK FACTORY
TO OLD TRAFFORD**
JUAN MANUEL LOPEZ



A Brief Introduction

*“The fear of dreaming should be penalised.
The prohibition of dreaming should
be punished by the strongest sanction
possible.”*

THE INTENTION of this book is to tell a story, but that’s not the main idea behind it. Using the course of a person’s life as our backdrop, we want to talk about dreams and utopia, about sacrifice and suffering, about values and willpower, about ability and hardship, along with the hundreds of other untold tales which we haven’t uncovered yet.

It is a true story, covering a part of Sergio Raúl Torres’s life. While working at a brick factory in his native Mar del Plata (in the province of Buenos Aires in Argentina), he dreamed of becoming a professional footballer. His destiny suggested otherwise, which is why he had to

The Sergio Torres Story

either accept his lot in life, or find the key to fulfil his dreams.

There was no other option but to take a chance and take a break from the monotony of his life. Aged 22, and with just 300 dollars in his pocket, he left behind his comfortable lifestyle, and travelled to England in search of his dream. He set off with much trepidation, without a home to go to, and a non-existent grasp of the English language. He went against the will of many, and with very little support, but he tried his luck, and ended up playing at Stamford Bridge against Chelsea, in front of 42,000 spectators, and then at Old Trafford (fittingly nicknamed the Theatre of Dreams) against Manchester United, a game followed by 75,000 fans in the stands – and millions watching on television.

Not content with flicking the ball over the head of German international Michael Ballack, he did the same thing again to Chelsea striker Didier Drogba, and found himself playing on the same pitch as world-class players such as Andrei Shevchenko, Claude Makelele, Frank Lampard, Ashley Cole, Lassana Diarra, Rio Ferdinand, Patrice Evra, Carlos Tevez and Wayne Rooney.

In between times, he had experienced some of the most unusual things imaginable. He lived wherever he could, and with whoever would take him in. He discovered that life is like a big wheel that turns and turns. He learned that you have to

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

make the most of the time when you're at the top, while remaining aware that – when you get back round to the bottom – you have to keep plugging away and hope that the wheel starts turning once again, mindful that it can't be impossible, as you've already made it to the top once before.

His main virtue was that he dared to dream. He turned his dream into an art form, leaving everyone in no doubt that the word “impossible” should be banned from the dictionary. A regret of this author is that while writing these paragraphs, Sergio has continued to write still more chapters in his career, and continued fulfilling new dreams. For a long while, the ending of the book remained uncertain as a result of the delay.

The process of writing this book took maybe a little longer than expected. That is because the contract – never signed – between the protagonist and author only had one line: Proceed with the project only when you want to. The clause was self-evident, to the point of being elementary. There is no point of doing it without conviction.

Moreover, from here on in, Sergio's future is as uncertain as anyone else's. The one thing we know for sure is that he will continue to dream. Other dreams await him, because – all in all – dreams are what keep most people going. To dream is to live, and – what's more – it's free, in a world where it seems that we are almost at the point of paying just to say “hello”. Dreaming is a

The Sergio Torres Story

way of getting by. It is a way of keeping going. In between the time dedicated to football and to his family, Sergio also dreamed of immortalising his story in print.

This book, it should be noted, does not conform to certain formalities of others. The path of Sergio's life, when all is said and done, doesn't conform to that of most people either. This book is not a biography, nor does it belong to any particular genre of literature. It was written purely to fulfil another dream – nothing more, nothing less. Sorry for the inconvenience.

Juan Manuel López

Chapter 1

“Wretched are those who are afraid of taking risks, because they will never be disappointed, nor be disillusioned, nor suffer like those who pursue their dreams.”

“**A**TTENTION PLEASE. Aerolíneas informs that the flight to London ...” A female voice was announcing the departure. And that announcement, completely normal to everyone else, became an unmistakable one deep down inside him. The message was clear. There was no room for doubt. There was no turning back. Giving up was not an option and it was time to make way for the madness that was about to begin. Was it nonsense? That was how he was made to understand it. Best case scenario, it was a utopic idea. For Sergio Torres, who wasn't capable of measuring utopias or madness, it was only a dream. It was what he had been yearning for since he was very young. This was the beginning of the path to the Theatre of Dreams.

The Sergio Torres Story

The previous day, in Mar del Plata, relatives and friends saw him off without understanding it too well. They wished him good luck because that was what they had to do, but alongside their voices there were also un-trusting gazes. Several questions came to mind, some of them implied, while others were expressed exhaustively with different words: Is he doing the right thing? Isn't it quite risky? Of all people *he* is doing this? He has always been shy. What will he do to cheer himself up? And if it goes wrong? How is he going to make it? What will he eat? Where will he sleep? Doesn't he realise he's a little old for this? Is he conscious of what he is trying to do? Has he gone mad?

He felt that, from this point on, he would be labelled many different ways – “really mad”, “slightly mad”, “adventurer”, “immature”, “dreamer”. He would even be called an idiot by the most sceptical. The decision was already made. He would only focus ahead, like a trained horse, fighting against the headwinds. He would accept the support, pats on the back or the odd prod if necessary. He had passed the point of no return.

For more than two years he had been scraping money together to pay for the flight. It wasn't long until the departure bell would ring. He was minutes from setting his dreams in motion. The plane to England was fuelling up and he was about to get on and try his luck as a professional football player.

Chapter 1

It was his biggest desire: to play professional football. And the United Kingdom seemed to be the place where the dream would come true. Destiny had made its choice. Sergio Torres was already 22 years old and this would mean that it could be the last chance to climb his mountain, to know its heights. It was like deciding between all or nothing. Although his biological clock could still label him as young, his football clock was running down. And football, a business where years are money, wouldn't give him another opportunity. He had to take the risk because there was no other way to cure his disease.

It was a huge task, of course. The surrealistic scale used to measure the outcome was tipped entirely towards NO. He didn't have much cash, he didn't have a place to live, he had no contacts and no club, he hadn't had a notable football career, he had never played professionally, he wasn't receiving any praise from the press, he had no way to support himself, he wasn't considered a "young talent" and he didn't even know how to speak English – in the five years he had studied the language in high school, he copied during the exams because he was not interested in learning another language.

He had been told there was a magic train that only passes once in a lifetime. But in his life, this mysterious machine had not even appeared on the horizon and he wasn't willing to wait for it.

The Sergio Torres Story

He decided to go off alone to look for that long-awaited locomotive. It was time to take the other fork. He was taking the daring initiative and rejecting waiting passively. He was confident he would find that train in another station, even if it was risky.

The goodbye

His mum, Mabel Delfina Suárez de Torres, preferred not to think about the departure of her “little boy”. She wasn’t happy, had problems sleeping and was dominated by fears. Those fears, which were also feelings, blinded her every so often. A mother’s heart tends to react in that way. They have special hearts. And they are understandable hearts, very rarely criticised. “Mum, relax. I’ll be back in three weeks,” Sergio told her, understanding her pain. It was a comment to calm her heart. A lie to save time until it grew accustomed.

His dad, Raúl Oscar Torres, reacted in much the same way. Although he had to admit that his son was going in search of his big dream, it wasn’t easy for him either. He was already missing his son even before arriving at Ezeiza International Airport.

Sergio’s sister, Rosana Mabel Torres, condemned him: “You won’t last more than a month in England.” She justified her words saying that her “little brother”, hardly two years younger

Chapter 1

than her, was very family oriented, didn't know how to do things for himself and didn't even do the washing-up at home. That is why he would be back so soon. Rosana, in spite of her prediction, supported Sergio's project like few others. She was his number three fan, after mum and dad.

His last night in Mar del Plata was strangely divided into two parts: one goodbye with relatives (at home) and another with friends (in a pub). Both were very brief, since he still needed to pack his bags and prepare himself for the "conscious madness". Both meetings shared a similar topic of conversation: this madness. Questions were repeated tirelessly and answers were avoided because they made no sense. He was reminded again and again, as if he didn't know: "You are going to a different country, very far from here, with almost no money, without relatives or friends, without speaking the language, with nothing." Fears were on special offer at the shop, and it seemed like everybody had bought one for him to take to London.

These were not days for thinking. It was better to think about nothing.

Ezeiza: the departure bell

The heart should know things that the mind is unaware of. After all, many of the questions that were occurring to him in those moments had no reasonable answers. In Ezeiza, Sergio's mind was

The Sergio Torres Story

not an oasis of reason and was filling with doubts and fears. Every minute of waiting meant a new question that was basically discouraging.

A nearby calendar indicated his departure date: 7 November 2003. In a popular newspaper (*Clarín*) the headlines of the day reported that Roberto Lavagna, the Minister of Economy, wanted to increase the consumption of goods, and that the countdown had started for the match between River Plate and Boca Juniors, at the Monumental. The paper also mentioned that the Prince of Spain's wedding announcement had become the focus of attention in Europe. None of this interested him in that moment ... He looked at his passport, trying to find things that proved he was heading for his dream, but the cold paper of the passport only told him what he already knew:

First name: Sergio Raúl

Surname: Torres

Date of birth: 11 July 1981

In Ezeiza, Sergio awaited the departure of the flight to London's Heathrow Airport with only a suitcase and scarcely 300 dollars in his pocket. His intense love for football made up for his shortage of both luggage and money. If it would be enough or not didn't matter anymore.

There was another problem, already clearly admitted. He couldn't speak English. The prev-

Chapter 1

ious days, while running back and forth amid confusion, he grabbed a book he had used during his first year in the high school called *The Project One*, and put it into his suitcase. He also found a dictionary to take with him (they always help, he thought). And Gusi, one of his best friends, aware of his linguistic deficiency, wrote down for him the most important expressions. He also loaded a diary into his backpack to record day by day the details of his hopeful adventure.

Utopia management

In Mar del Plata, the city that witnessed his birth, growth, suffering and happiness, Sergio Torres divided his activities between studying, working and playing football. He grew up in El Coyunco, just at the entrance to the Sierra de los Padres. There, in the open country, he was always known as El Patito, son of Pato Torres, and his future seemed obvious: work and maintain the brick factory, the pride of the family, that was about 400 metres from the house.

As a youngster playing for Quilmes de Mar del Plata, he kicked the ball around just for fun. At just six years old he was already seen running around the sports club on Avenida Luro, making it clear what his true ambition was. He also competed in paddle tournaments, listened to rock-and-roll and Cumbia (the first CD he bought was by Leo Mattioli) and he liked cars just like his dad,

The Sergio Torres Story

especially Chevrolets. He was hyperactive, but his only true passion was football. Soon after learning to walk he made, together with his dad, a goal using the bidet and the toilet. For him everything resembled a ball. He discovered TV to watch football matches. He learned to read, to be able to read football magazines.

He always went to the factory. When he was young, just to play, and when he was older, to work. He helped out with whatever: grinding clay, cutting, organising and moving the bricks, picking up wood with the trucks, wetting the ground, etc. It was dirty work and tough, especially in the summer when the ovens made the high temperatures unbearable. In the winter it was also hard because the warehouse was open and you could get the flu in a second because of the cold.

Working with the rest of the employees, most of them relatives, was nice, although the days were long. His father Raúl, part owner with his uncle and his brother, paid Sergio by the hour. 'Borromeo' (what he called Sergio referring to a character from *Calabromas* who never behaved) wasn't favoured. He worked long hours like everyone else and had to work just as hard as all the others, but sometimes you could see him weaving in and out of the bricks with the ball. This was inevitable.

His father's desire was always that his kids would study to be accountants. Nobody listened

Chapter 1

to him, but Sergio at least tried, taking and failing the entrance exam. It was obvious it just wasn't his thing. Not even destiny, which sometimes is harsh, wanted it for him.

He subtracted accounting from his list and the football road, although he hadn't given up, wasn't easy either. The two best known clubs in Mar del Plata, Aldosivi and Alvarado, were interested in him but never asked him to join. It was at this point, already a bit tired of rejection, he signed up to study physical education. Why? He liked kids and he liked sports. The profession seemed to be the perfect combination of his interests, similar to his sister, who was studying to be a master gardener.

The first two years were full of difficulties and in the third year things got more complicated, so he left studying having received a tempting offer – Banfield contacted him to play in Torneo Argentino B, a national amateur league.

They offered him 400 pesos or 400 patacónes per month. A 'patacón' was a pseudo-currency that the State used to pay public workers and suppliers and was like an emergency bond. It was fake money, disguised. Crisis money. But for him an achievement – he played football AND they paid him. His life, for a year, was divided between practice in the morning and work at the factory in the afternoon. In his mind he was already making it happen. The seed had been planted.

The Sergio Torres Story

While he was saving money he also tried to put together some of his best plays with Banfield to make a DVD. With his little technological knowledge he wanted to create an amazing video to show to whoever, some foreign club or even to an Argentinian one, although in the local climate it would be more complicated. He wanted to be a professional football player at all costs, against all odds, without fear of what anybody would say.

His age and his personality weren't too helpful. He was already 22 and was too timid to go head on and too embarrassed to take shots, almost always preferring to pass to a team-mate when he could have triumphed. His insecurity made it difficult for him to make decisions but alone he managed to slowly build a great video. Although he wasn't a stand-out player, his performance in the midfield with Banfield gave him plenty of options to choose from. The idea was simple – giving it all he could lose nothing.

Day after day his obsession grew. Something, some feeling, told him he could go far. He had seen a kind of light that only the mad seem to perceive. Outside voices, however, said it was only a fairy tale – beautiful, but impossible. How, at 22 years of age, out of nowhere, could you think of becoming a professional footballer?

Having finished the DVD and with a bit of cash saved up, he managed to meet up a few

Chapter 1

times with Alejandro Giuntini, former defender for Boca Juniors, who had contacts in Europe. In this way he took another solid step forward but the dissonance sounded even stronger and the question got longer. How, at 22 years of age, out of nowhere, could you think of becoming a professional football player, and in Europe?

During one of these meetings he handed Alejandro the video. He said he was a winger but could be effective in any midfield position, and that he shot better with his right foot. These images, almost monotonous for him at this point, later ended up in London in the hands of Julio Alexaniser, fellow Argentinian and acquaintance of Giuntini, and soon they ended up in the possession of Roland, a British football agent from Cameroon. The situation was as strange and extravagant as it was fantastic and unbelievable; a simple video, edited simply by a nobody, was in England and being passed around.

Roland took charge of getting the video to various teams although, as expected, it was rejected by most. However, Third Division Brighton liked it and they agreed to give Sergio a trial.

Meanwhile, 'Paisa' (the nickname given to Sergio in Quilmes, referring to the fact that he lived in the country instead of the city like the majority of his team-mates) had gone to try his luck with the amateur club Deportivo Madryn

The Sergio Torres Story

(a team located in Patagonia) that was trying to qualify in Torneo Argentino B. However, he was there hardly two months.

Giuntini called him to tell him that somebody had taken the bait. Sergio, happy and scraping together whatever he could from wherever, raised enough money for the trip to the other continent. He had to go for it no matter what, risking what was for him a fortune, trying not to analyse it socially or economically.

His parents were frozen by the news. They weren't expecting something like this since Sergio was really close to his family and because he had never showed much courage in facing various challenges. First they figured he probably wouldn't end up following through, that it was like a childish game, but they soon rejected this possibility. They were extremely frightened. They had already freaked out when he took off for Puerto Madryn and they heard of him sleeping on the ground on discarded mattresses. In that time they were so alarmed that his dad tried to head down every weekend to help him out however he could. His mum also went at times.

“What are you doing here, mum?”

“I've come to clean you up a bit.”

Sergio Torres, beyond his dreams about the ball, wanted to see other worlds and cultures, and demonstrate that he could be worth something. This was another of his fights.

Chapter 1

“Why are you going to England? You’ve got everything here; your house, work, money, your family and friends. There you don’t have anything. Please tell me what more you need here and I will get it for you,” begged his father, attempting to stop him.

“I only need the OK from you guys.”

Once the unconditional support from his family was obtained, Paisa boarded the plane, and on arriving in London he had to get in contact with this Roland guy.

Welcome to London

8 November 2003. The plane landed at Heathrow Airport. “Welcome to England” he said to himself in English, deciding that he had better start trying to understand a bit of the language. He was in the UK, in Great Britain, in Europe, in London, whatever. It didn’t matter. He couldn’t believe it. From Mar del Plata to London. From “hola che, cómo estás?” (hey man, how’s it going?) to “hello, nice to meet you”. The road, which he had travelled so many times in his dreams, had now finally been done while awake.

His feeble knowledge of the language kept him quiet and he had no idea how to behave in this arrival to an unknown land. It wasn’t surprising though. Luckily, a sign bearing his last name saved him: at the exit he saw a man holding up a card that clearly read “TORRES”. Slightly reluctantly,

The Sergio Torres Story

he went over to the man and tried to understand what he was attempting to tell him in his strange accent. There was no hope. His English was horrible.

The only thing I can say are the colours and that my name is Sergio, which doesn't help at all. I'm a disaster. This is what I get for not paying more attention in school. They also told me that before every introduction I should say: 'Hello. Nice to meet you.'

Sergio Torres had an ace in the hole for these circumstances: making use of the universal language of the eyes. They always helped him out in these times. He knew that in our eyes there are dozens of words and dozens of feelings understandable for any human being regardless of nationality, and that looks are tools to build indestructible bridges for concepts to be carried to their destination. He used to believe that there are few things you can hide when looked in the eyes.

“To know somebody, it's not necessary to do more than look him in the eyes,” his father used to say. He also knew that gestures, added to the game, help to form a double blow. Like a great fighter, Sergio put in practice both tactics, and figured out that he had to wait over in the corner for at least ten minutes. Why? Well, he wasn't too sure yet.

Chapter 1

Who's this guy? Is he just a taxi driver who's taking me to meet with Roland? Will it be expensive? How do I pay him? Am I the 'Torres' on the sign? And if it's not me, bad news.

The man, still unfamiliar, tried to explain what they were doing there, but Sergio couldn't decode even a portion of what he was saying. During this ten-minute lapse, Julio Alexaniser arrived, the Argentinian acquaintance of Alejandro Giuntini. He breathed a sigh of relief to hear a familiar language.

“This is the Roland that you have heard about.”

I don't know why we didn't begin with this information. He could have just told me his name. He didn't need to drive me mad wondering who he was.

“This is your agent here in England, from Cameroon. He's going to take you to the trials and help you with whatever you need ... He's going to take you to his house. Don't worry about anything. Only two people fit in his car, so I'm taking the train and we'll see each other later to talk more and get organised. Sound good?” Julio explained. Sergio nodded suspiciously, but he had no choice.

The Sergio Torres Story

Home, not so sweet home

After travelling for an hour and a half, they got to Roland's house. Sergio wasn't able to see the neighbourhood because it was already getting dark. He wanted to catch everything he could, to the last detail. If life is really a collection of moments, he felt that he should take advantage of the present to not have any regrets in the future. Thirty minutes later, Julio Alexaniser got there and started to explain the situation, how he should act and what steps they were taking.

"This is Roland's second house. His two brothers live here. One is married. Two friends also live here. You're going to stay here too ... As you know, the trial starts next week ... I've got to leave you here with them and head home, which is pretty far from here, north of London. Relax and we'll be in contact. Everything will be alright."

Immediately after Julio's explanation, the occupants of the house appeared: all from Cameroon and not one of them knew even a little bit of Spanish. To make matters worse, they communicated together in French.

Thank goodness I don't have to pay for a hostel. This way I'll be able to support myself a bit longer in Europe. I don't know how long I'll stand it here. This house is weird. Six guys from Cameroon and me. I don't understand what they say. I know, everything can't be perfect.

Chapter 1

Sergio introduced himself timidly but courteously (“hello, nice to meet you”), just like his parents had taught him. Since it was getting late, Roland took him up to the first floor to show him his new room. Paisa paid close attention to the details, but sleep was taking him over and he decided to rest.

I thought I was going to be alone in the bed, but about an hour later I started to feel the bed moving. One of the guys came into the room, laid down next to me and, like it was nothing, told me to move over saying something like “scoot over, I sleep here too”. I freaked out and started shaking. I didn’t respond because I was the new guy and because a paralysing fear took over me. He wanted to kill me. I couldn’t believe it but I couldn’t get him out. It was then I realised I had to share the bed with him and that I was always going to have to. To top it all off, he was fat, hairy and snored like a bear.

I laid there looking toward the window, frightened and wondering: ‘How did I end up here? What was I doing sleeping with this guy? I was fine in Argentina. Thank God I had everything I needed: work, family and friends.’

I didn’t catch a wink all night because I was worried ... and for other reasons.

The Sergio Torres Story

England, day two

The problems that he had earlier ignored or put off were now coming to light and he was jotting them down in his diary. The first night, in which he didn't move a muscle, didn't do him any good. His distress began to agitate him. *Who are these Cameroon guys? What if they try something?* His suspicion didn't allow him to think straight: *What if this is all a big lie?* And his fear, not wanting to be excluded, was growing: *What am I doing here if I was fine at home?*

Sergio wasn't exactly satisfied in Mar del Plata. He simply put up with it, which wasn't the same as being happy. His soul wasn't content. He was going the easy route, comfortable with the routine into which he had fallen. He went around knowing he could have a normal life without any big problems and, whatever "they" might say, he wouldn't be affected. He went around thinking he would make a difference; plant a tree, write a book, have kids. He went around with the dull sensation of knowing what was coming and that he was missing what he really loved and was searching for: to be a professional football player.

Paisa, in self-defence, emphasised that there aren't many people who think they should live how they want, instead of conveniently, because life is short. Since he had left home, he had been putting his feelings before reason and logic. He had come to terms with having to conquer adversities and be

Chapter 1

guided by his heart because, sometimes, thinking too much was counterproductive.

Diary. 9 November

Since I got home really late, I still wasn't familiar with the neighbourhood. I'm in a small town, Norbury, about 50 kilometres from the centre of London. I was tired today because I hadn't slept at all. It was impossible with the guy sleeping next to me. But, in spite of my fatigue, I went out for a walk in this new world. This place is really strange. I didn't see a single white person in the whole area and on top of that, with my long blonde hair, it seemed like everyone was staring at me like a fish out of water. I was shocked and I suppose they were pretty surprised to see a guy with long blonde hair.

The different sides of waiting

Everything wasn't going exactly to plan; not necessarily a bad thing since exact plans sometimes get in the way of happiness. His life was a mix of unpredictable experiences so he figured that it would be foolish to expect it to be predictable. Inside, he decided to not get more depressed than he already was. If right now he was suffering, perhaps later he would be glad. He tried to focus only on his objective, his dream, and wait for his chance; always waiting, again and again.

The Sergio Torres Story

This is definitely what he thought it was about. It seemed to him that a big part of life consists of waiting. You have to wait for your dreams, for vacation, you have to wait for love, for a better job or for a raise. It was up to him to make the wait shorter and easier.

“Life is a big waiting room.” (*Diez años después*, Los Rodríguez)

With the passing hours, Sergio Torres was drawing conclusions continually. In these moments of self-reflection, he remembered the words to different songs he had heard in Argentina and jotted them down. In certain places there weren't any red lights. You just had to take the road, just happy to be moving but never attempting to finish.

Sometimes, of course, he had to walk the coals: it started to get dark around 4pm and the cold froze you to death. At the house, he was extremely bored. At night, he read English books to learn a bit more of the language. In the morning, he watched TV for the same reason. He still didn't understand much, almost nothing. He barely spoke with the other inhabitants of the house. Only one of them bothered to talk with him: one of the guys from Cameroon who looked like Fido Dido, the Seven Up mascot with the crazy hair. He was friendly and tried to help him, but the language barrier hindered his good intentions.

Chapter 1

“Food is another thing. They eat white rice with red beans every day. Every once in a while, they might eat pasta, but little more. In the fridge there aren’t many options,” Sergio wrote in his diary, letting out his frustration.

Getting started

Finally the big day arrived: Monday, start of the week, the training and the trial. It was time to demonstrate he was ready to be a professional. It was the moment to spend all his time doing what he liked to do, or rather, time to exhibit his toughness to the max.

Up to this point, his stay in England hadn’t exactly cheered him up, but, if he looked back and saw only the negatives, he also had the option of looking forward.

As the training ground was far, they took Roland’s luxurious Mercedes Coupé.

I'd love to drive this machine. Someday I'll ask him, speaking in my horrible English. But it doesn't matter, even if I pronounce it well, I doubt he'd let me take it out.

An hour and a half later, they arrived at the right place, where Brighton trained; a team fighting to move up to the Second Division, now known as the Championship in England. The weather didn’t help much. It was cold, rainy and windy.

The Sergio Torres Story

It wasn't exactly a fairy tale. When they got out of the car, they went directly to the bar until the manager, Mark McGhee, arrived a few minutes later. He was introduced immediately to Paisa, who only got out "hello, nice to meet you", a phrase he already had incorporated well into his vocabulary and which was his only greeting.

In the locker room, while some of the players came over to give him a simple welcome, others just ignored him. He, however, gave a simple "hello" to all as either a greeting or an answer. The atmosphere seemed friendly, but the looks, universally understood, said something different. This sensation was confirmed when he realised that he was in the part of the locker room where the veterans were.

What an idiot! Starting off on the wrong foot, he thought, and he quickly moved to the section where the younger players, and the others trying out, were changing.

This place is incredible. Brighton's training ground is fantastic. The pitches are beautiful with some amazing grass. There are four excellent fields. I really can't believe it.

During the first day of the trial there was physical and ball work ("I was always at the back of the queue because I didn't understand anything the coaches were saying," he added to his diary) and

Chapter 1

30 minutes of football, which he was looking forward to, although it wouldn't be easy.

Diary. 17 November 2003

They barely passed the ball to me. They looked at me and they went the other way. The few times they passed to me there was immediately someone down my throat. I went flying after my first two touches. A bald guy from the other side was on me the whole time. He had a dirty look like he was going to eat me alive. I don't think I'll ever forget his face.

Not easy at all

English football was tougher than he had thought; very physical and tactical. Sergio Torres was confident in his technical skills, his able right foot and his natural South American style acquired on the pitches of Mar del Plata. He was also sure of his toughness. However, during his first week in England, his team-mates passed him like bullets and he couldn't hide it. They were like jets, he remarked. Their speed was unreal and running into them was like hitting a wall without wearing a seatbelt.

In Argentina he just waited for the ball to come but here he had to go and get it. At times, the people who doubted the success of his adventure began to be right. It was impossible just to arrive

The Sergio Torres Story

in England, with very few resources and many things against him, and become a professional football player. It was a utopia or just plain stupidity.

He did know one thing for sure: dreams shouldn't be criticised. One should be punished for fearing a dream and they can't be forbidden. It would be a crime with a serious punishment. He didn't want to be condemned for such a transgression. Furthermore, you would think that dreams were made to come true and, if they exist, it's because we should be capable and free to fulfil them. We should at least try, without ever being reproached.

Sergio Torres had the instinct from the very first whistle. He wanted to erase the word "impossible" from the dictionary. In spite of the blows (physical on the pitch and psychological away from it), he had to continue the week of training, trying to give it his best; going head on in everything he did so that, at the end, he wouldn't have to ask himself, as many others have to, what would have happened if ... ?

The good and the bad

After the first five training sessions, Roland spoke with the manager, Mark McGhee, in an English still incomprehensible for Sergio. Luckily Julio Alexaniser was around during those days to translate for him.

Chapter 1

“The manager told Roland that he liked how you played and that he wants to see you another week.”

“But wasn’t this what we had agreed on?” asked Sergio, surprised.

“What?”

“Supposedly, it was a two-week trial. This is what we had agreed upon in Argentina. I was coming here to train two weeks for Brighton.”

“No, it ended up being a week.”

“You tricked me.”

“Nobody tricked you. I’m sure it was a misunderstanding. Forget about it for now and be happy because the manager wants to see you another week. This is what’s important and the only thing that matters because he liked your performance.”

Sergio couldn’t hide being upset at feeling a bit betrayed. The emotions of the last few days added to both the positive and negative feelings. The words of Julio Alexaniser, however, comforted him a bit and took away the sting. “The fact that he wants to see me again is good because he could have just said ‘no’ after the first week,” he wrote in his diary, which played the role of counsellor and was where he unloaded his experiences.

The trial: round two

Monday 24 November 2003. He seemed to just be a few yards from his dream. He could see it on

The Sergio Torres Story

the horizon. If everything went well, he would sign a contract with Brighton to be a professional football player, reaching his first peak. He was going step by step up the climb, which was easier than he had imagined. He had a place to stay and free food, and so could survive on the little money he had. He managed to get an agent who was taking care of him. The trial, which hadn't been certain, materialised. His play, which didn't seem too popular, was being praised. His age, which he thought was an obstacle, didn't matter. He was only five or six days away from signing a contract with an important club in a major level. In English football, even the lower division teams are professional and are run like businesses.

His happiness dispelled any need or inconvenience. The stone he was pushing daily was rolling into position and he started to cheer up. Now the optimists were right; doing is believing.

Sergio started to recognise that much of the "I can't" was only in his head, that sometimes reality lies and that everything is not as it seems. Little by little he began to realise that he needed to throw away the book of formalities. At the same time, you could see inside him an invisible power that had the power to dissolve any problem, even to nothing. Willpower? Could be. Who knows?

That Monday, the 24th, began with an obstacle to get around. His only pair of boots had broken during the last training session on Friday. At the

Chapter 1

weekend, he had asked Roland if he could please buy him some new ones, of any brand.

**“Luxury is vulgarity.” (*Un poco de amor francés.*
Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota)**

Luxury was insignificant during his stay in London. It didn't matter which boots, it was only important to have them for the second week of training. Roland, able in these situations, told him that he would go to the club and get a pair from a team-mate which he did. However, they were two sizes too small.

Diary, November 24th, 2003

Roland went to ask somebody for some boots for me. Being shy with these things, I didn't want to take part because I was embarrassed about it. He brought me some boots that are two sizes smaller than I'm used to, but I put them on anyway. I curled up my toes inside and clinched my teeth. I didn't have the guts to tell Roland: 'They don't fit me, can you bring me others?'

During practice I was in pain and looking forward to taking them off. They were killing me! What a relief at the end! They left me with six blisters. Right now I'm soaking my feet and I think I'll stay like this all afternoon.

The Sergio Torres Story

The picture of a poor guy with his feet destroyed moved the African and he decided he could dig into his pockets a bit, so he took Sergio to a shop and bought him a new pair of boots. They were the cheapest, in fact, but this didn't matter.

*I was pleased to be free of pain while playing,
although my feet still bothered me.*

He started to get to know his team-mates, and they began to trust him more. His feet started touching the ball more and these feet treated him better, allowing him to play his style and distribute the ball well. He still couldn't speak English although he had been there for 20 days. His shyness didn't help with words, but since football is not understood through languages and races, the training sessions started to go better. So well, that the managers came over to tell him he would be playing a match as a reserve.

*Unfortunately, the match was postponed and I
was left wanting.*

The decision

Friday was coming and, with the new day, he would know the final decision. How could he sleep? How do you wait for an answer that could be sweet or sour? How do you tell yourself to not get nervous, knowing that you are playing in the

Chapter 1

final? He tried, he sacrificed and he had done his best every day. This was enough for him and it tranquillised him, but again the same idea came to mind: conformity is not happiness, they're not even related.

Various scenarios passed through his head, which was full of a mixture of possible conclusions. He was sweating despite the freezing cold, which proved he was extremely nervous. The official dictionary of Argentina says that “transpiración” [sweating] in the winter means “nervous”, and that “frío” [cold] in the summer means the same conceptually.

The good thing during these moments of sweating and expectations was that he had nothing to regret. He simply had to keep his gaze firm despite what happened.

The manager met with Roland to give him the decision, which he did coldly and methodically. He didn't accept suggestions nor did he try to explain himself. Getting directly to the point, he said:

“He's a good player, but he doesn't have the speed or the strength to play football in England.”

The frustration

His world went to pieces. The manager's face turned into a gun and every one of his words was like a bullet. This answer had always been a possibility, but nobody is ever prepared to

The Sergio Torres Story

suffer. There are no schools where they teach you to fight pain or how to prepare yourself for disappointment: how much can words hurt and how deeply? What is their value? Mark McGhee's painful words to Roland hurt. They impacted him and left him an unforgettable scar.

The disillusion was offensive because everything (or almost everything) had made him think the opposite as the last five practices had gone so well. Sergio wasn't the only one disappointed. So was Roland. Now the Cameroon businessman wasn't smiling. He looked upset.

He's not happy with me. He says I didn't play like in the video he saw. I don't know, it's what I think he's saying. I really don't know what I'm going to do.

It is tough to admit the battle was lost or that the dream wouldn't have a happy ending. How do you surrender when you're not ready to give up? Hours later, the sentence was still stuck in his head: "He's a good player, but he doesn't have the speed or the strength to play football in England."

He wasn't ready for the adventure to stop. He wanted to keep dreaming or at least try to. He could find another way. Why not? There's more than one way to reach a destination. In Mar del Plata you could take a boat, a train, a plane, or even highway 2 or 11. Why not try it?

Chapter 1

Why, why and why?

The pessimist in him said it was because there weren't any reasons to do it. But the optimist responded that maybe there were.

“The heart has reasons that the brain will never understand.” (*El final es en donde partí, La Renga*)

“I'm going to fight and I'm going to triumph in English football.”

“Dad, I don't want to go back and don't want them to tell me: ‘Look. That's the guy that failed in Europe.’ I don't want it to happen.”

“Look son, nobody's going to call you a failure. Nobody. A failure is someone who doesn't even try and you tried. If you want, stay there and we'll support your decision, and we'll help you however we can.”

The conversation between father and son decided it. Sergio Torres couldn't imagine himself going back to Argentina. A specific memory bothered him – in Mar del Plata, while he was watching a game from the stands with his dad, he heard everyone yelling “failure” at a player who had returned from Europe without success. It bothered him what everyone else could think about him coming back. He had a complex – his

The Sergio Torres Story

feelings scared him – but he also had a virtue; his feelings were stronger than his reasoning. Sergio wanted to continue fighting in some way, but how? This was another point he still hadn't analysed. He wanted to battle for the important things in his heart. The problem was though, the little money he had was running out.

I spent a bunch of cash to get here. The trip was extremely expensive. I can't give up so soon. I'm going to fight and win.

His family and friends were convinced he would return. That the trip had ended. They were waiting to give him a big hug and show him their support. They realise that the dream still wasn't dead. Nobody had killed it. It had only gotten shot a few times.

“There is madness, with no name, date or remedy, that is not worth curing.” (Locuras, Silvio Rodríguez)

In his feeble, poorly pronounced English, he managed to ask Roland if he could stay a few more days at his house and, since he was already there, if he could organise another trial with anybody, hoping he could use his contacts (if he really had any). The African unconvincingly agreed.

Chapter 1

Diary. 29 November 2003

It's really strange for me the fact that I'm going to spend my first Christmas far away from home. But, luckily, I know I have the support of my family and friends. They know that I'm following my dream of being a professional, to make a living doing what I like best, which is playing football.

Back to waiting

The days and the weeks passed. Roland didn't get him even one trial. Almost every morning he said he would get him something here or there, but never specified. He was lying. Meanwhile, Sergio Torres tried to stay in shape although he was quite unfit for what English football required. He had prepared himself a training regimen:

I get up every day at nine o'clock. After eating breakfast and watching TV a little while, I go for a workout. I dress warm since it's freezing cold in the morning. The field I run on freezes. The back garden of the house is next to a school with a grassy field which the kids use during break time, and I've already learned at what time it is. So, while they are in the classroom, I know I have two hours to work out.

I do 100-, 200- and 400-metre sprints, going as hard as I can. After running, I put different

The Sergio Torres Story

obstacles, like cans, sticks and branches, in a line to weave through with the ball. Sometimes I spend 30 minutes kicking the ball in the air and trying to control it with each foot. I play motivating games. I have a stopwatch which I use to time every exercise and do it faster the next time. In the afternoon, I run more and do more ball work.

* * * * *

There was some non-football related stimulation to his life in England which helped kill the routine: communicating with his loved ones on the internet. It was an incredibly gratifying way to feel closer to them, even if virtually. He had to walk five blocks to where there were a few internet cafés. This was his lone pastime. It was like a source of energy two times a week. Because of his economic situation, he couldn't connect more often (it cost £2 per hour, which was a lot for him). Sometimes he wouldn't even buy a bottle of water after his workout.

One day, close to one of the doors of the house, he saw a £2 coin on the ground.

When I saw it, I thought 'this would be great to get on the internet for an hour', but I couldn't pick it up. It wasn't mine. I've never even stolen a sweet from the shop and I'm not starting now.

Chapter 1

Furthermore, it belongs to somebody who lives here.

The next day, the coin was in the same place, in clear view, and it kept calling my attention because nobody had grabbed it.

I waited one more day and I thought 'if no one picks it up, I'll take it', so I took it and thought 'nice', because now I didn't have to pay for one hour of internet. I went directly to the internet café and said to the man who worked there 'one hour internet'. I gave him the coin and he started to laugh. After a moment, he said: 'That's two pence!' It was a 2p coin. I had never seen one. I thought it was £2. I got really embarrassed and realised immediately why nobody had picked it up. It was the first and only time that I've stolen in my life.

Peligro – danger

He was getting incredibly bored. With timid but repetitive gestures, he was continually asking Roland to go out and do something like going into the centre of London (Norbury, where he lived, was 30 minutes from the English capital), but it never happened. One afternoon, surprisingly, the African appeared and told him to get dressed because he was going to take him somewhere in the car. He happily put on his best clothes and they left at 6pm. Roland's first stop was at a friend's house, and then he said they were going

The Sergio Torres Story

to stop and say hello to another friend, at a garage. “OK, no problem,” Sergio said.

When we were entering the garage, underneath the train tracks, the darkness caught my attention. We entered through a half-broken chain link door. There were three or four garages next to each other and you could see the train passing over every now and then. We got out of the car and he introduced me to the owner of the garage, dark skinned and friendly. There were two other people there, who were working on the engine of a car.

After being there for ten minutes, a tall black guy arrived. He walked right past me to the office where Roland was. On seeing Roland, they started arguing immediately and then they both came out. I stayed next to the car that was being repaired. They were arguing very heatedly and the big guy (called ‘Panda’, I don’t know if it was his real name or his nickname) pushed Roland, who gave me the keys to his car, and I understood that I needed to hold on to them. They kept arguing and went back into the office.

Five minutes later, the huge black guy came storming out and directly at me, yelling at me to give him the car keys – I really didn’t understand, but imagined it’s what he was saying. Roland yelled “no!”, and since I didn’t

Chapter 1

give them to him, he pushed me against the car they were fixing. I started to get scared. I went to the other side of the garage, leaning up against other half-fixed cars, and he came at me again grabbing an immense wrench on the way, the biggest one I'd ever seen. He yelled, demanding the car keys and raising his right hand as if he was going to rip my head off.

Roland, three yards away, insisted I didn't give him the keys. I didn't know what to do. With his left hand, the guy tried to grab the keys from my right hand. I panicked and managed to throw the keys to Roland. 'Panda' didn't like this and lifted the wrench to hit me. Here I thought 'this is it', because he would kill me if he hit me with that thing. He changed his mind and slugged me in the chest, throwing me against the car behind me. I hurt like crazy. Then he turned around and took off with Roland again.

I couldn't stop shaking. I looked around the place and heard the noise of the train above, and told myself 'it's destiny'. It was like a movie. I really thought I could die there. If they killed me, they could easily make me disappear since I didn't have any family there or anything. Nobody would be asking about me for a while.

I couldn't wait to see the black guy leave. After about ten minutes, Roland appeared and said: 'Let's go home.' I was still shaking. In my bad English, the first thing I said was 'what

The Sergio Torres Story

happened?’ He said he was sorry and explained that ‘Panda’ wanted to take his car in exchange for money he’d loaned him and never got back. At least, this is what I understood.

I immediately felt like going back to Argentina. We got home around 10pm and I went straight to my room. I felt horrible but I couldn’t tell anyone. If my parents found out, they’d ask me to go straight home. Sometimes, the desire to return to my country is immense.

Destinations

Not every situation is comfortable and desirable but you can take something from all of them, even something insignificant from something extremely negative. While he was waiting for news from Roland, suffering from instability and missing his loved ones, Paisa continued training alone, however and wherever he could. During these uncertain days, he also took a day to visit the famous Big Ben, Buckingham Palace and Tower Bridge, doing a bit of sightseeing around London. It was like a story book for him to be among these important landmarks that he had only seen on TV or in magazines.

Curiously, the thing he liked the best about the day was ending up in Julio Alexaniser’s house that night, because he was able to use the computer until three o’clock in the morning. He chatted with family and friends, and felt close to home listening

Chapter 1

to some radio stations, from Mar del Plata, via the internet. It is amazing how sometimes the little, mundane things can be so gratifying.

A week later, Roland told him about a new opportunity. Destiny was giving him another chance. The club was Woking, from the Conference, the fifth division in England. The African took him there the first day to introduce him to the manager and players. For the trial, the next day, Sergio went alone.

He told me he can't always take me because it's a bit far from where he lives, so I have to go by train. He marked on the map where I had to get off and where I had to wait for another train towards Woking. In all, it's about a two-hour trip.

Another opportunity was presenting itself and he couldn't waste it. He simply had to try again and remember the motto "trying is not failing". He needed to attempt it without hesitating. He figured that in some things you have to arrive at the end or die trying, never being satisfied with halfway.

He imagined that the training sessions would be just as tough as with Brighton, even though it was two leagues lower. His suspicions were correct. Making his minimal experience in British football count, he was able to surprise everybody

The Sergio Torres Story

with his play, even sticking out at times and impressing the manager.

His bad fortune began to turn around and his mood along with it – his frown changed to a smile and his sad eyes became happy – causing a notable change in his persona.

The wheel keeps on turning

His family was still worried even after hearing about the new opportunity. They had reasons: their “little boy” was living alone for the first time, at a house in a ‘questionable’ south London neighbourhood, with unfamiliar Africans that speak French together and English with everyone else, and who have different habits from him. “Who knows what he’s eating or where he’s living,” they wondered in El Coyunco.

“Ask the owner of the house if I can come and stay for ten days, nothing more. That way you won’t be so alone and we can spend Christmas together.”

“Are you really coming to England?”

“Yeah, to spend New Year’s Eve together.”

“Are you serious? I can’t believe it. How are you going to do it?”

“Don’t worry about that. I have some money saved and it’s enough to pay for the flight.”

“You’re not pulling my leg, are you?”

“No, son. I’ve been saving. It’s not much but it’s enough. Now, please ask the African if it would

Chapter 1

be OK if I stayed there, because otherwise I won't have enough."

Sergio was extremely pleased about the news from his father. Now the wheel had made a full circle. He had had to really get down to be able to get back up. The positive things happening with Woking and his father's pending visit helped to fight his loneliness, a powerful and unexpected rival.

His loneliness before the visit, something that didn't fit on either side of the scale, weighed heavy on him, although sometimes he needed it and required it, while at other times he fought for it to go away. Often it was like a friend with countless virtues, but sometimes it was like spending time with an enemy.

Soon after, I politely mentioned to Roland that my father wanted to come for just ten days, and if it would be possible if he slept on the couch, since it wasn't being used at the moment, plus anyway he wouldn't be a bother as we would be out and about all day in London or some other place. Smiling he said that he could stay: 'Yes, no problem.'

I can't believe my dad's coming to see me. I feel more alone than ever and his visit will really help me keep fighting.

Ten days later he talked with his father again to finalise the details.

The Sergio Torres Story

“Son, I bought the ticket. Make sure everything is OK at the house.”

“Yeah dad, don’t worry. I talked with Roland and he said it’s no problem that you come. You don’t know how happy I am. When he gets back home, I’ll tell him it’s for sure.”

He was super excited. He waited for the African all afternoon to tell him that his dad had got the ticket, and that he would be coming in five days. He was happy. His mood had made a 180-degree turn.

At nine o’clock that night, Roland showed up in his car. Sergio was so happy that he went to give him the good news before he even entered the house.

“What? What? What?” he surprisingly started yelling; a cruel reaction after hearing the news.

He gave me a look I’ll never forget. I thought he was going to eat me alive. He told me to go inside. I went to the dining room and he came in with his brother, who was in charge of the house. They both started yelling at me, and saying that I was crazy for telling my dad he could come, and that there was no room in the house, etc, etc.

Once again, like so many times during his stay in England, he felt like the world was falling to pieces, but this time the pieces were falling

Chapter 1

harder, more violently. His head began to shake from side to side like it was trying to reject what was happening. Just listening to Roland hurt. He didn't understand the reproaches and ended up exploding: "Go to hell!"

He ran to his room crying and his tears blurred his vision and his thoughts. Roland came up behind him with the phone, speaking to Julio Alexaniser, telling him that "the kid's crazy and wants his dad to come for ten days". The telephone seemed alive, jumping from person to person.

"He told me 'yes' before and now he's saying 'no'! My dad already bought the ticket. He can't do this to me! Now my dad won't be able to come because he doesn't have money to stay in a hotel. Why did he tell me 'yes' before?"

"Relax Sergio, relax," urged Julio Alexaniser.

"I can't relax Julio! Plus they're yelling at me like madmen. This hurts a lot."

"Relax, everything will be alright. If you go mad, it'll just be worse for you."

Roland continued yelling. In the noise, languages and accusations were mixing with the tears. The angry voices only added to his frenzy and he blew up again: "Shut up, you son of a bitch!"

"Bitch? Me a bitch?"

"Yeah you! Go fuck your sister!"

The African raised his tone, getting more violent. His last line had been too much. End of

The Sergio Torres Story

story. There would be no sequel. Although the Spanish that Sergio was speaking wasn't Roland's mother tongue, he understood perfectly, ripped the telephone from his hands and without leaving time for apologies, he threw him out of the house. There would be no argument. He didn't want to see his face again. In less than five minutes, the wheel had spun back around and Sergio Torres was once again down in the depths.

That night Paisa packed his bags, knowing that the next morning he would have to leave for who knows where. Usually, when he was feeling down he couldn't sleep. That night, his last, was no different. All the thoughts in his head made it hurt. His legs hurt, his arms, his back, his soul ... The play was over and the curtain had closed definitively, but there was no clapping or cheering; only worry and anguish.

At seven o'clock in the morning, he grabbed his few belongings and took off to look for another place to land. Before leaving, he found a pen and paper to write a note to Roland and the other occupants of the house. He left it on the table in plain sight, in his simple English, without resentments, thanking them for all their help. Then he left, closing the door behind him and knowing that he was also closing opportunities and possibly his dream.

After walking a few steps away from the house, he turned around to look at the place where he

Chapter 1

had spent the last month of his life and wanted to take a picture to remember. The only person he saw around was a street sweeper about a block away. He called him over.

“Can you take a picture with the front of the house, please?”

The man kindly agreed. After it was done, Sergio Torres started walking. Where? Somewhere. Or nowhere. It was the end. Or was it just AN end? Because they say that every ending is a new beginning.