

WORKING CLASS HEROES

THE STORY OF
RAYO VALLECANO,
MADRID'S FORGOTTEN TEAM

ROBBIE DUNNE



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Introduction

LET'S get this straight. I am no more qualified to write a book about Rayo Vallecano than most football fans. For starters, at the beginning of this story, my Spanish was sub-par. This was confirmed to me upon signing up for classes in my first couple of weeks in the capital, when I was informed I would have to start at A1 level (the very beginning) as I had 'no foundation' and I would need to get a base before anything else happened.

How would I interview people? How would I interpret all those news reports? How would I know what the Rayo fans were singing during the games? It didn't help that the amount of written data on Rayo is slim at best in Spanish, and practically non-existent in English.

Rosa de la Vega wrote a book that contained over 1,000 pages about Rayo and Vallecas but she admits it was a monumental task given many of the files were lost down the years and said it was a struggle tracking people down and making sense of the history. Midway through the season, however, Juan Jiménez Mancha released his own book about Rayo Vallecano from the very start until 1956, which gave some insight into Rayo's humble beginnings, and he was as helpful as possible in my writing.

I had a chicken-and-egg situation in front of me as to whether I would concentrate on learning Spanish and forget about the book until I knew enough to carry out interviews

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in the language, or use the little bit of Spanish that I did know to write e-mails and organise meetings, put my head down and learn as I went.

I should also mention I didn't even know how to get to Vallecas from the city centre of Madrid. How was I going to cope? Those first few months living in Madrid were a haze of stress, a lot of contemplation about the scenario that lay before me, and truth be told, a lot of fun. So, this book was a journey of discovery as much as anything to do with football.

The fun I refer to is travelling out to Portazgo (when it was finally fixed) on the Metro every second weekend to the Campo de Fútbol de Vallecas, becoming smitten with the club and with every mouldy corner of that stadium. The Santiago Bernabéu, the home of Real Madrid, the wealthiest team in Spain if not in Europe and possibly the world, it was not. It is the same stadium I would spend plenty of time in over the next nine months. I'd meet interviewees outside for coffee and I'd go there during off hours and look around as research for this book, occasionally running into players who had called in to the cafe La Franja before, during or after training sessions. It is the same stadium where I stood and soaked in the atmosphere like a sponge.

I would take pictures of graffiti on the walls; 'No mas cortes de luz' and 'Nacionalizacion de las electrical ya!' were two in an effort to encourage the government to stop turning off street lights, as they had started to do during the crisis in an effort to save money, along with other left-leaning slogans and messages to the establishment.

Over the course of the ten months it took to write this book, I went from considering Madrid, the Estadio Vallecas and its surrounding neighbourhood a foreign city, stadium and barrio, to slowly but surely feeling right at home sitting with the home fans and not feeling out of place singing the songs and chatting to the guys who served me bocadillos and Diet Cokes at half-time while allowing my opinionated views to grow based on evidence.

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My evolution over the course of researching this book took me from being an outsider in a brand new city to being an outsider in a familiar city that I ended up falling in love with, and to feeling as though I had made a genuine and thorough enough investment in Rayo Vallecano to merit being sad when they lost and nervous during games that they were winning as the minutes ticked by. There was self-doubt that crept in over the year and the many nights when I sat wondering what I was doing.

But when the doubts about my suitability to write a book about a team I knew little about and my ability regarding the practical side of actually typing 70,000 coherent words crept in, I stuck to my guns and was able to rest easy when I read quotes like this by Kurt Vonnegut.

‘Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.’

This is the story of my indoctrination as a Rayista and I feel in my heart that the story of Rayo and the pueblo of Vallecas is an important one. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed getting the chance to write it.

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How did we get here?

On 4 June 1924, an advertisement was sent to Madrid-based newspaper, La Libertad, that read: 'The new sports group, El Rayo, wants to say hello to all other sport groups and are accepting challenges any time and any place that is convenient for them, starting next Sunday. Please respond to this newspaper or in writing to our registered office, Carmen 28.'

It was just a week since Rayo had been founded on 29 May and they were ready to play. At the time, there were dozens of teams in Vallecas that have since disappeared. For whatever reason, 93 years later and Rayo are still alive and kicking.

THIS story needs context. I didn't want to go down this route when I decided to write a book about football. I did not figure that I would end up writing about Francisco Franco, Napoleon Bonaparte and the history of Madrid as the capital of Spain. I wanted to write a book about football, about the ups and downs of following a football team

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through thick and thin; getting to know how they operate and see themselves in the face of a changing footballing landscape.

But Rayo Vallecano are not just any football team and writing a book about them is not just an exercise in football fandom. It is absolutely necessary to frame Rayo Vallecano through the lens that is their social setting because that is how they identify themselves; they pride themselves on operating within a working-class neighbourhood, taking umbrage with the status quo, and making a massive effort to effect change at grassroots levels.

And because of their activism, I could not just write a sports book about a football team. Rayo Vallecano is a community; they represent the district in Madrid that is Vallecas – ‘The Independent Republic of Vallecas’. El Rayo’s fans are some of the most politically active in all of Spain, Europe, and, I dare to say, the world. It also helps that they happen to be one of the most controversial teams, for one reason or another, in Europe. If soccer really is a ‘a slum sport played in slum stadiums increasingly watched by slum people’ as declared by the *Sunday Times* in 1985 after the Bradford fire disaster that took 56 lives, then Rayo Vallecano wear their slum affiliation like a badge of honour.

‘Poor but proud’ is how they put it, and they most certainly are proud. They are proud of their team, themselves, their environment, and their struggle. A shared struggle with locals who hold similar beliefs, which is, as I came to understand it, a struggle to be heard and remembered and set apart in a footballing world that is becoming increasingly corporate and driven by financial models at the expense of regular folks.

Rayo Vallecano court more drama than a South American telenovela and always happen to be, or appear to be, on the precipice of a complete breakdown which manifests as tension between owners and fans, between the establishment and the people of Vallecas, between what are considered social norms and working-class norms. There is a natural and inexorable friction between the capitalistic system which seeks to

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profit from selling sports to the elite and the politically left alignment of the fans who treat the team as a public utility.

At the start of the season, before I'd done much research, it looked like I was going to have little or nothing to write about and the book would be 70,000-plus words of match reports and melodrama, but I was assured that there is always theatrical production of varying size in the works at Rayo. And much of the time, there were issues that reach beyond the football stadium at play.

Rayo's greater political context was confirmed to me when the Roman Zozulya transfer debacle made its way to the forefront of world news. I realised then that Rayo Vallecano had a knack for making headlines and generating stories that were easy to tell. My suspicions were confirmed, as I got closer to the kernel, that this was a fascinating club like no other. A team in the Segunda Division making world news after their left-wing fans rejected and protested against an alleged Nazi joining their club; sign me up for all that you've got.

As Rayo are embedded within the political infrastructure that is modern-day Spain, it is important to understand just how bureaucratic the country still is. The wounds of the Civil War and Francisco Franco are not entirely healed yet. The whiff of the Franco regime still lingered in the air in some, but not all, instances of Spanish life. It might not be apparent to Spaniards in the thick of their daily life but it was obvious to me when I first arrived.

Sid Lowe echoes that point when he tells me, 'I think for a significant amount of Spaniards, for the immense majority of Spaniards, they would tell you and probably genuinely believe that 40 years of dictatorship and Franco is irrelevant to their understanding of the world and the Civil War is irrelevant to understanding the world and they would genuinely believe that but of course it's not true.'

Spain has long been a democracy but everything was conditioned by what came before it and people are a product of their environment. He says, 'It does condition what comes

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next, it conditions the mechanisms that are used, it conditions the way the system functions,' because society cannot change overnight. The Rayo fans regularly sing, 'No, no, no pasaran!' and I often saw stickers and badges with the same slogan on them.

The 'no pasaran' or 'they will not pass' chant, was used initially during the First World War but it was adopted during the Spanish Civil War by Dolores Ibarruri Gomez during her speech on 18 July 1936, during the Siege of Madrid as a response to Franco's statement that 'hemos pasado' or 'we have passed'. It has become a rally cry for anti-nationalist, anti-fascists across the world. Today, it's a part of Rayo fans' playlist on matchdays and it is a stark reminder of how the divisions caused by the Civil War continue to split up areas and groups in modern-day Spain.

* * * * *

I am not a historian. Dates don't really interest me unless they happen to coincide with a cup final, a wonderful goal scored, or the closing of the transfer window. As I said, I didn't want this book to turn into a history of Spain, but, the more I read and the more I listened, the more I realised that Franco's regime was still causing hurt, and the blame, the reasons for Franco's rise to power, is still being contested.

When I moved to Spain, I became acutely aware of political leanings. In my first year there I'd never heard or seen the word fascist written and spoken so often in my life; and Rayo's fans pride themselves on being 'anti-fascista'. For a long time, I didn't really know anyone who would categorise themselves as 'anti-fascist'. Giles Tremlett said in his book, *The Ghosts of Spain*, 'There was no roadmap to go from dictatorship to democracy,' and he told me during a chat in the city centre, just beside Madrid's Retiro Park as we ate soggy onion rings that had been served with our Diet Cokes, 'When they did go from dictatorship to democracy, they sort of did it in one massive jump, which probably missed out on a few useful

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phases that would have probably got people used to the idea of what it was.’

As far as I was concerned, Spanish people were so in tune with the ‘left and the right’ that I started being able to tell which newspapers and people and businesses and organisations and football clubs were aligned with which one even though some people find the polarising nature of Spanish a little restrictive.

Carlos Sanchez Blas, a prominent Madrid-based sports journalist, explained to me over coffee one overcast Tuesday morning in the suburbs of the city, ‘I don’t think in left and right because what is left and what is right? It’s something abstract. You have to act, you have to make decisions, and after that, there is life. Actual life is not just a word but I think a lot of people here in Spain say I am from the right, or I am from the left. I am from Real Madrid or I am from Barcelona. It is very polarised.’

The eternal battle between Real Madrid and Barcelona is a snapshot of Spain’s polarising view. It’s everywhere.

* * * * *

I met with Stephen Drake-Jones, who moved to Madrid in 1975 – the same year that Francisco Franco died – and who founded the Wellington Society, which offers walking tours on everything from wine, heroes, villains, and bullfighting. He moved from England without a lick of Spanish, training it from Leeds all the way down through France, the Pyrenees into northern Spain, and finally Madrid. He is a historian, which is something that becomes apparent upon meeting him as he has a head full of facts, anecdotes and dates, and a willingness to share them. We settled in a nice bar just beside the Plaza Mayor in the Spanish capital and I listened in earnest about Spain’s past in an effort to add some context to everything I was seeing and hearing on the streets from Gran Via and Puerta del Sol to Avenida de la Albufera in Vallecas.

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‘Madrid was a very insignificant village at one time,’ he tells me. You would not be able to tell now given the number of people we walked by and among as we went from Puerta del Sol in the centre of Madrid up to the plaza to a cosy little cafe-cum-wine bar on the periphery of the square.

The Habsburgs arrived from Austria in 1521. Charles V, or Charles I as he was known in Spain, ruled from Toledo – a city 70km south of Madrid. In 1561, he told his son that he was going on vacation and told him to look after Spain while he was away.

‘Oh, and do me a favour while I’m gone,’ he said, as Drake-Jones explains, ‘Get out of Toledo.’ The main reason being that the Catholic Church owned a large chunk of the properties in Toledo and instead of paying into the coffers of the Church, King Charles figured he might as well be taking in the rent.

‘In 1561, this little town in Spain became the capital,’ and if it wasn’t for that move, we wouldn’t have Real Madrid, or Atlético Madrid and most certainly, the whole of European football would be entirely turned on its head. We most certainly would not have Rayo Vallecano.

‘So small was Madrid, that it wasn’t on some maps. We get these little villages, Carabanchel, Vallecas – it was half a day’s ride to get there and now we do it on the Metro,’ Drake-Jones says. As Madrid continued to grow, many of the pueblos and villages outside the city remained unkempt and untouched by the sprawling metropolis.

‘There was a bus to Vallecas from Puerta del Sol, and Carabanchel where even dogs walked around in pairs because they were such rough areas,’ he continued. After speaking with Drake-Jones, and over the course of several months, I put together bits and pieces of cultural and historical criticism and assessment from various critics, journalists, commentators and writers to understand Vallecas’s trajectory and how it has remained immune to gentrification.

Talking to people now about how Vallecas has changed, they will tell you how much safer it is even since the 1980s.

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As Carlos Forjanés, a journalist working with *Diario AS*, explained to me, when you tell people you are from Vallecas, at one point, ‘They used to make a joke to keep your wallet inside your jacket because they assumed people from Vallecas were pick-pockets, drug dealers, and things like that,’ and while there might have been some truth to the joke back then given how rough the area was, it is often mentioned, and it is something that I have noticed, that there is never a sense of danger at a Rayo Vallecano game.

Phil Ball, the writer of *Morbo*, a seminal book on Spanish football told me, ‘It might be that my view of it is slightly chequered because I support Grimsby and Real Sociedad and supporting Real Sociedad is quite difficult because they’re Basque and if you go to the Calderon, people are either going to stab you or not like you. When you go to different places in Spain, you get a certain reaction but you go to Rayo and they love you.’

On the same note, Dermot Corrigan, an Irish journalist working in Madrid covering Spanish football, explains the familial atmosphere at a game in Vallecas with kids, mothers, grannies and fathers tucking into sandwiches at half-time. ‘For me, more than the Che Guevara flags or the stuff like that, that is what I most like about going to Vallecas,’ he says. That’s Vallecas now, an oft-forgotten and maligned place outside of Madrid, but back then when the Habsburgs first arrived and long before the Civil War, Madrid itself was just a speck on the map. A very central speck, but a speck nonetheless.

* * * * *

On 14 April 1931, at noon in the community hall, the second republic was proclaimed. ‘Do you know what the king did?’ Drake-Jones asks me as we continue to chat about Spain’s history. ‘He scarpered,’ he says before I get the chance to respond. King Alfonso XIII did not want to be the only king in history to cause a civil war. The army had sworn allegiance to him, and because now he was saying you had to pledge

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allegiance to the republic, the people did not know which end was up. 'So now, we have a republic, because they're established here in Madrid and no monarchy. Five years later, some of the generals, rose. On Saturday, the 18 July 1936, the Spanish Civil War erupts here,' he tells me.

Drake-Jones explained to me how in late October of 1936, four nationalists – 'we call them nationalists, but they were fascists' – marched on Madrid. He tells me that General Muller, who was 'born in Cuba, 6ft 1in, left-handed' told an American journalist, 'I'll be drinking coffee in Gran Via next week'. Muller was getting ready to take the city. But the American journalist was perplexed. 'Which of your four columns will do the job?' he asked. Muller said that the fifth column was the one he would rely on. Fifth column now means surreptitious secret, hidden. He meant all of his supporters hiding in Madrid that were going to rise.

'Do you know why Muller didn't take Madrid?' Drake-Jones asks me again, rhetorically. 'Because, unprecedented in military history, kids from all over the world came to fight fascism. The international brigades and the Abraham Lincolns, and the English and the Irish. Now remember, the English and the Irish were enemies. But not if you were in the international brigades. And if you were a black in America in the 1930s it wasn't good news but one was a leader of one of the battalions. Irish and English who are traditionally against each other are now fighting shoulder to shoulder. It was called the 15th International Brigade,' he says.

The reason this is so interesting to me is that I had listened hundreds of times to Christy Moore's song 'Viva La Quinta Brigada'. Here I sat in a wine bar in Plaza Mayor in the centre of Madrid with a man explaining just how important the international brigades were in the fight against fascism and that it might even mean something to a book I was writing.

'Ten years before I saw the light of morning, a comradeship of heroes was made, from every corner of the world came

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sailing, the 15th international brigade,' Drake-Jones says, who is, as it turns out, a huge Christy Moore fan himself as he starts to reel off the first couple of lines from the song.

'One thing you must remember, for the two and a half years of the Spanish Civil War, Madrid never fell. The reason the fascists didn't take Madrid was the international brigades,' he tells me.

Drake-Jones takes out a magazine he had contributed to and points out that some of the things stated in it are wrong as he cursed journalists and their inability to get facts straight. He points to it and explains that the journalist said, 'Madrid fell on 1 April 1939. No, it did not. There was nobody to oppose them. The war was over and the republic had lost. They just retreated. So, for two and a half years, Madrid held out. From Saturday, July 18, 1936, to April 1, 1939, Madrid held out.'

* * * * *

For all intents and purposes, the international brigades were one of the first and certainly the first modern anti-fascist movement in Spain. I said that I heard the term fascist more in Madrid in a year than I had in the previous three decades I was on this earth, and it was not because it was the same year that Donald Trump was voted to become the president of the United States, or because the alt-right were starting to emerge as some backwards revolution began.

Maybe we are living in a time of political awakening where people are being forced to become more aware of their own beliefs and prejudices and privileges so maybe that did help and it did draw my attention to many books about the working classes, but, here in Spain, there was still, maybe not a fight, but certainly a distinction between the left and the right, or at least a resistance against fascism and the fear, perhaps, of another Francisco Franco taking charge.

Many Spaniards and perhaps especially older people and immigrants had lived through the worst parts of Franco's

reign and this was why they were so acutely aware of their political ideology. And while Franco was gone, the difference between the red of socialism and the black of fascism was still a part of Spanish life.

That fight was evident after Roman Zozulya had signed for Rayo and was subsequently told in no uncertain terms that he was not welcome due to controversy over his right-wing leanings. Real Betis fans, in an act of support for their former striker, sang ‘Franco lives on, the fight continues’ in the game after the Zozulya case exploded into the wider world of sports media.

In many ways, Rayo Vallecano are a continuation of this anti-fascism. There has always been a current of resistance and revolution running through Madrid. In Jules Stewart’s book, *Madrid – The History*, he says, speaking of the failed invasion by Napoleon Bonaparte from France in the 1800s, ‘The Madrid rebellion had collapsed, but the anger it generated soon exploded in a war that was to last five years, culminating in the expulsion of Napoleon’s army and the emperor’s undoing. In exile on the island of St Helena, Napoleon acknowledged that it was not the failed 1812 invasion of Russia, but the Spanish war that had destroyed him.’

Not to oversell that connection but Vallecans and all of its immigrants and left-leaning people along with Rayo Vallecano are that remaining residue of the left-leaning, working-class folks from the international brigades.

Why Rayo?

‘Rayo is not a football team, it’s a sporting religion here. It is class-proud and the voice of the conscience’ –

Former Rayo president Pedro Ruiz

‘Who are Rayo Vallecano?’ is a common, if not reasonable, response I get after telling people that I am writing a book about them. It’s the same question I asked time and time again throughout the year. Everything that was coming out of this club appealed to me.

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'Football was never enough for me and you,' was how Phil Ball put it during a chat. I needed more and that's why I chose Rayo Vallecano. The amount written about Rayo in English is minimal, at best, and even Juan Jiménez Mancha, who wrote a book about the club in Spanish, was complaining about diminishing amounts of historical records; it took him five years to put together his *Los Orígenes del Rayo Vallecano*.

To the questions posed about Rayo, thankfully, I have my elevator pitch ready and I explain to people who are willing to stick around for an answer to the question that they are Madrid's third team. In a working-class neighbourhood, their fanbase is mostly left-wing from the surrounding areas that make up Vallecas – Puerta de Vallecas and Villa de Vallecas – all the way up and down Avenida de la Albufera.

They take stands against the crippling models of modern football and protest against the way they are treated by club owners and La Liga. They hate homophobia, racism, and fascism and are not quiet about it. Their fans often bring banners to the stadium and protest, not just about issues within their own club and neighbourhood, but social issues of importance.

Dermot Corrigan explains in a documentary by travelling football documentary makers, *Sausages and Caviar*, one banner that read 'Take your hands off our bodies' but in much cruder language, as they protested against the Spanish government, who were trying to take away some of the choices women had regarding abortion.

Take the game against Alcorcón, for example, when they held a banner outside the ground that said '*ningun persona es ilegal*' (no person is illegal) as they tried to remind the powers that be of the value of an immigrant's life. They champion women's rights and stand beside any groups of fans willing to stand up to the establishment or anybody who feels marginalised by a world quick to forget the working class.

In a way, they are a branch of that 15th international brigade even though they might not know it. Ramon Spaaij

and Carles Viñas wrote a fascinating paper entitled, ‘Political ideology and activism in football fan culture in Spain: a view from the far left’, in which they interview members of left-wing fan groups.

Guillermo, a member of Cádiz’ Brigada Amarillas (who happen to be one of the left-wing clubs that have a great rapport with Rayo’s fans) explains, ‘The fascists know that their principal strength is their unity. That’s why we established this alliance [with other anti-fascist groups], this campaign that unites us against our grand enemy. We aim to cultivate common attitudes [across these groups] within which we can maintain our tribal sporting differences. We are uniting ourselves to fight this enemy. We are organising ourselves well, on the internet, catching up at away games, concerts, and so on. And we are doing lots of reading and study.’

One of the best nights in Estadio Vallecas was when the Cádiz fans came to town. There was a camaraderie that I did not think possible between different sets of supporters. The Bukaneros, a Rayo peña and ultra group, had welcomed them to Vallecas almost as guests of honour and the two came together like two old high school friends with plenty to catch up on. I managed to be up high and spied a sea of yellow along with ‘the strip’ of Rayo marching towards the stadium before the game, and the spectacle was something to behold. These are some of the reasons I chose Rayo. But there were more. For instance, there was Carmen Martínez Ayuso, of course. She is the woman who was about to be evicted from her house in Vallecas before the players intervened and collected enough money to save her home.

‘A friend of mine called me up to see if we could make a statement to the media but when I saw the pictures I thought we had to do something, simply saying “this is unjust” would have been no use,’ Paco Jémez, Rayo’s divisive manager at the time, said. As the police closed in on Carmen’s apartment, they had to elbow their way through the crowd of people there trying to stop what they were seeing. As Jémez said, ‘Of all

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the things that can happen to a person, the hardest is to end up homeless.’

‘It’s like an armed robbery; they’re just missing the balaclavas,’ club legend and former captain Jesús Diego Cota said. ‘We are a neighbourhood that opens its arms to everyone. We are all living in a bad situation and for some it is critical. Normal, hardworking people are left looking in garbage cans, living on the street,’ he continued.

After hearing that story, I could more fully answer people as to why I took an interest in this club. Empathy, in a world seemingly void of it, or at least void of that kind of thing when the chips are down – that is why I chose Rayo Vallecano. Roberto Trashorras, the club’s captain and spiritual leader in many ways, collected enough money so that a woman who says, according to a report in *The Guardian*, ‘worked all my life, getting up at 6am to work like a slave and then all of a sudden they come to take everything away when all I want is to be left in peace’, could live in the place where she was born and raised. That’s empathy.

‘We couldn’t just stand there; we will help her so that she can live somewhere with dignity and not feel alone,’ Jémez said. This was in 2014, but there were as many as 67,000 evictions in Spain in 2013 while an estimated 3.4 million properties stood empty according to the same *Guardian* report. Rayo and the people who donated to the cause were just doing what they always did. They rallied around someone in need in their neighbourhood. It was also, of course, another chance for Rayo and its fans to dissent against the establishment. A chance they would take with both hands.

A banner was unveiled that read, ‘The evictions of a sick state, the solidarity of a working-class neighbourhood.’ Rayo’s fans demand that their players get involved in these kinds of things.

Carmen was one example that made it into the media’s line of vision but Carlos Sanchez Blas, a journalist working in Madrid, says that joining Rayo means signing not just

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a playing contract, but a social one, too. ‘You are a Rayo Vallecano football player, I want you to help people. To talk with me here in the street. I am your fan.’

This romantic view of an old-school form of football had me head over heels. Sid Lowe tells me, ‘Vallecas is something that feels like a bit of a throwback, something that feels a bit old-fashioned and I know we all fall into the trap of over-romanticising but it’s quite romantic in its own right.’

That is what they call activism. It is seeping out of the barrio and the players feel that. Lowe said in a column after the whole snafu, that Carmen’s grandson was waiting outside the stadium after the next match to thank the players, to which Tito – a full-back who has since departed the club – responded, ‘That’s what we are here for.’

It’s not really though. They are not here to fight the capitalistic system, and while cynicism can often so easily win, Rayo Vallecano, its fans, and the neighbourhood were committed to not letting that happen. Many of them had committed their lives to this cause, so that they could and would effect change. Sanchez Blas explains in a documentary that this was the story that the media picked up on and turned Rayo Vallecano into many people’s third, second, or even first football team they supported, but there were many more stories of this nature that went untold like the players who cook at a social centre and Antonio Amaya, a central defender from Vallecas, who sliced his finger making sandwiches for the disadvantaged.

It’s not the kind of story that is going to make international news but these anecdotes are symptoms of a club who always look to remain involved in their neighbourhood and never forget where they have come from. One of the players said, when the press got hold of the story about Carmen that, ‘We do not seek to take the picture, just to help,’ before saying they did not want to turn a gesture of solidarity into a media circus. This was simply doing the right thing, not a chance to score points.

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So, Carmen certainly helped but another factor was their former manager, Paco Jémez, a heavy-handed defeat and my tendency to root for the underdog, for the idealist, for that romantic side of football that really got me interested in the little club that could, or, at least, the club that tried.

‘If we let in nine, no one gets out of Vallecas alive,’ Jémez said before his side were trounced 10-2 at the hands of Real Madrid on 20 December 2015 – as Christmas gifts go, this has to be one of the worst I’ve ever heard of. It’s not even clear what Jémez meant when he said this but he meant business. They had been reduced to eight men and Real Madrid just weren’t in the mood for stopping that night. He recalled the defeat and said it was humiliating. Don’t have any sympathy for Paco and Rayo though. He has chosen the hill he will die on. He said he would ‘rather they call me suicidal than cowardly’ when asked about his tactics. Jémez causes the mind to wander to an idealistic world of football filled with Marcelo Bielsas, César Luis Menottis and Zdeněk Zeman. A romantic form of football that could, and so often did, go wrong.

‘When God was handing out brains, I got the smallest one but when he was handing out balls I got the biggest!’ he once proudly and infamously announced. Jémez was, and is, a man of principles. He explained that in his first managerial role with Real Sociedad Deportiva Alcalá, ‘My first game was in the Tercera division (the fourth tier of Spanish football), in Villalba-Alcalá, and I arrived dressed in a shirt and tie. People thought I was going to a wedding.’ For Paco, it was either a wedding, a joyous moment in anyone’s life, or they could have guessed, a funeral because with Paco, there was rarely any in between.

He embodies the endearing dysfunction of the club, which went beyond interesting and entertaining and became something more. For whatever warped reason, my mind always found the club utterly captivating. So, the area is one of working class solidarity and social activism, within a dysfunctional club that has to run within a capitalistic system.

And Jémez is emblematic of this negotiation. ‘Beautiful, crazy man,’ as Sanchez Blas tells me regarding Jémez.

The question soon became clear that if I was going to write a book, it would not be ‘Why Rayo?’ It would be, ‘Why would you write about anyone else?’ In an e-mail conversation organising an interview with Phil Ball, he replied to me upon finding out that I would write about Rayo Vallecano that it was, ‘high time there was a book on Rayo’, before he went on to explain to me that they were his third favourite team after Grimsby (where he was born and raised) and Real Sociedad (where he had lived for over two decades).

This was a common trend; it was hard not to, at the very least, feel empathy with Rayo. They were trying their best to buck the trend and fight the system. As Dermot Corrigan says, ‘Rayo didn’t have to do a whole lot to get people on their side.’

For anyone who has read George Orwell and for the thousands of football fans who tend to gravitate towards the left and feel nostalgia for a time before modern football, it is an automatic choice. Mix that with their ability to make headlines and turmoil in the boardroom and you have an excellent story to tell. I was sure, there was certainly enough history and enough controversy to write a series, and then a sequel. All I needed to do was try to make sense of it all.

Willy Agbonavbare

Take a stroll around Estadio Vallecas on a weekday and walk by the entrance to the Fondo, where the Bukaneros – Rayo’s ultra fan group – enter the games. In the same year that I arrived, they would rename the section as the Wilfred Agbonavbare stand. He is another symbol of Rayismo and both a legend of the club and the area.

Football journalist Carlos Forjanés tells me that you would go to the supermarket in Vallecas and see Willy buying 50 pairs of runners for his family back in Nigeria. A strange sight to see a player from the professional football team down the road shopping in the same supermarket and buying in

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bulk. This was Willy all over though, and ‘he didn’t arrive in Vallecas in a Porsche’. On the contrary, actually, he had to really make an effort to splash out on a car and wound up with a second-hand Mercedes. A ‘really shitty car’ from what I’m told. This was the charm of Willy Agbonavbare.

Wilfred Agbonavbare was a goalkeeper who played with Rayo Vallecano for six years in the early 1990s, and would represent Nigeria 15 times during the same period, at a time when the left-wing scene was really taking off within Spanish football grounds and around the same time that the Bukaneros were founded.

In Willy they found the most genial chap and in Willy they found a symbol of Vallecas’s multiculturalism, big-heartedness and wit.

When Willy’s name is brought up, these same things are always mentioned. Former Rayo captain and one of his good friends on the team during their spell together, Jesús Diego Cota, says he was easily cheated by people because he inherently trusted them. He could only see goodness. Agbonavbare was not loved for what he did between the posts although he was a very competent keeper. It was his ‘way of being’ that endeared him to the fans. ‘He was eternally humble and noble,’ Cota says, and he recalls a time when he came out and cut the captain’s eyebrow in a challenge where the two collided. The Nigerian goalkeeper spent the rest of the game apologising so much that Cota says, ‘I had to plead with him to stop.’

When Agbonavbare retired, he suffered a huge loss when his wife passed away. She had suffered for a long time and Agbonavbare spent most of his savings in an effort to save her life. When he could not, and his wife had passed, he returned to work as a baggage handler at Barajas airport in Madrid. Willy would soon be taken too, by cancer, at the youthful age of 48.

One of the Rayo fans’ great slogans is that ‘nobody died if we never forget’ and that is true of Willy. Not only is the stand

where the Bukaneros gather during games named after him but a giant picture of his dark, round face adorns the entrance with a message to their hero, 'For your defence of the Franja [the fringe as Rayo are known] and your fight against racism, El Rayismo will never forget you.'

Cota says that Willy often told him that he was like a father to him. 'Yes, it's true,' Cota says. 'He was always by my side at the dinner table, he was at my bachelor party, he showed me his first car and I was trying to bring him with the veterans to play [after he had retired]. He was one of the best and most noble people I've ever met in the world of football.'

Rayo Vallecano, the club, tried their best to fly Willy's kids from Nigeria to say goodbye to their dad when it became apparent that he did not have long left. They even used some of the money raised for Doña Carmen Ayuso, who said she did not need all of the money that had been collected for her, but he passed away before they landed in Madrid with visa issues holding them up.

Willy would often make it to games on the Metro, getting off at Portazgo and strolling to the stadium. He epitomises the connection between the fans and the club, the fight against racism and the respect everyone deserves. Willy Agbonavbare is Rayo.

Forjanes sums up Willy when he explains to me, 'I went with my father and uncle [to a game in Albacete] and he tried to make a save, but he hit his head on the post. Maybe, at that moment, he thought he was in Lagos in Nigeria but he jumped up and he kept playing. The next play, Albacete scored because he couldn't see the ball. He went around with a bandage on his head but nobody said anything to him because everybody liked Willy. Another player and they would say something, but with Willy he could get away with it.'

How could you scold one of your own when he was just trying to do the right thing? Willy was loyal to Rayo and Rayo have remained loyal to him.

Relegation

This particular footballing story begins at the end of the 2015/16 season; the same year that Rayo Vallecano would end their most successful and longest spell in the Primera Division. They had been at the summit of Spanish football for five years before that relegation at the end of the campaign. Their previous best was a four-year stint from 1999 until 2003 that would subsequently see them drop to Segunda B in 2004. It would take them all of four years to lift themselves out of the third tier back then because it doesn't rain in Vallecas but it pours. It would take them eight years in total to climb back up to the Primera Division.

As far as their most recent relegation goes, it is a controversy that has surrounded football since the first time a ball was kicked in that there were rumours that Rayo did not want to win the game against Real Sociedad that ultimately doomed them to relegation.

The context that it is Real Sociedad is important to understand many of the problems that take place during the 2016/17 season. It revolves around the elusive problem that is match-fixing.

* * * * *

It is 8 May in San Sebastian and Real Sociedad are playing Rayo Vallecano. La Real are fighting for mid-table mediocrity while Rayo are fighting for their lives. It looked like Rayo would escape relegation as, aside from a murky spell around the middle of the season where they spent seven weeks sitting dangerously close to the drop zone, they were actually around 15th and 16th for most of the season, keeping themselves one step ahead of the race to avoid the drop.

A defeat against Atlético Madrid at the Vicente Calderon on the third-to-last day of the season would leave them 17th with the Real Sociedad game to come. Against the Basque side in San Sebastian, the home team were reduced to ten men when Esteban Granero was sent off with just under 15

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minutes to play but still Rayo could not break them down. Rayo would eventually lose 2-1 thanks to goals from Jon Bautista and Mikel Oyarzabal before Javi Guerra came off the bench to nick one back and give them a flicker of hope that was soon extinguished.

The loss would send them to 19th and the result would mean that Rayo's survival was out of their hands entering the last day of the season when they would play, and subsequently beat, already-relegated Levante with a league-low 32 points, 3-1 at the Estadio Vallecas in front of just north of 13,000 fans.

That victory wouldn't matter though because in order to remain out of the bottom three, Sporting Gijón and Getafe would have to lose. Sporting played and beat Villarreal, managed by their former player Marcelino, who was accused of taking his foot off the gas when it came to the game. Las Amarillas had already secured fourth place, which was their highest ever finish, and had nothing to play for. Marcelino's wife would pepper the already suspicious game with further controversy when she posted a message on social media saying, 'I leave Asturias with the job done!!! We leave you in the first division.'

There would be further controversy surrounding the Villarreal game into the 2016/17 season, when Rayo would play in the Segunda Division as a direct result. Rayo's owner, Raul Martin Presa, no stranger to controversy himself, accused Marcelino of going out on the field in what was a kamikaze mission, 'Marcelino is like the crazy pilot who got on to the Lufthansa flight and crashed the plane,' he says in reference to the tragic Lufthansa pilot on a suicide mission on Germanwings Flight 9525 that took everyone's life that boarded the flight.

It is a lamentable comparison in what Presa said was 'a deliberate planning and subsequent execution during the match. Then his wife confessed to it. In this country it seems that anything goes and nothing happens.'

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Marcelino, a man who would eventually be sacked by Villarreal just before the following season started, spoke at a press conference in a Madrid hotel, 'He has insulted me and offended me, and if he does not immediately rectify the situation then I will follow the advice of my lawyer and take legal action.'

But this was Rayo Vallecano, and there was plenty more to the story. Rayo were the best in the business at doubling down on making headlines dripping with juice.

* * * * *

After the match at the Anoeta that doomed Rayo, an irregular betting pattern was confirmed during the Real Sociedad and Rayo game up north in San Sebastian by Javier Tebas, who revealed that money started to come in against Rayo winning and said these things need to be monitored but there might be nothing more to it.

There were reports of an altercation between some of the players at half-time and general unrest within the squad. The controversy would lead to a barrage of abuse by fans and plenty of suspicion aimed at the players. 'It was an ugly situation and in the end it was the trigger of the relegation and the war between the fans and some players, it was a mess,' Forjanés tells me.

The reported fighting in the dressing room at half-time in the game might have been the cause of a moral crisis, but not if you believe Paco Jémez and Roberto Trashorras. The club manager and the club captain, along with the owner, were joined by the entire squad, who stood behind them during a press conference both literally and figuratively, in a sign of solidarity during the week when the captain described the claims as 'frankly... false'. He then continued, 'I would put my hand in the fire for this team.'

The club released a statement shortly after the allegations, 'In relation to an article that appeared yesterday about the opening of an investigation into some of our players'

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performances in the Estadio de Anoeta, the squad, management team and directors would like to clarify the following:

‘At no time are we going to allow anyone to doubt our honour, integrity or the professionalism of each and every member of this squad. Neither will we allow the name, players or supporters of the club to be tarnished. The entire squad regards as alien the supposed reason for the motivations of this investigation, a lowering of the importance of Real Sociedad’s win.

‘We cannot be held responsible for these circumstances.

‘We completely deny that at half-time there was an altercation between members of the squad, as has been reported via some media.

‘The majority of the squad have contracts for next season, with clauses that allow for a reduction of the salaries if we are playing in the Segunda Division, which radically contradicts the idea that we did not want to win that game.

‘The club and the squad want to confirm that we will take full part in any investigation into this, or any other game. These things are necessary for the good of the league and for the sport.

‘In no instance will we allow the honour, integrity and professionalism of all members of our squad to be doubted, nor will we allow these reports to stain the good name of the club, the players or the fans.’

Regardless, Rayo would play the following season in the Segunda. Their fans showed up with a banner that read ‘anyone who wants to go, here’s the door, we want 11 fans on the field’. For Rayo fans, it was not about the relegation, it was an issue of integrity and representation.

This fits into what Sanchez Blas tells me when he explains, ‘Rayo Vallecano don’t demand to be in the Primera Division. Rayo Vallecano fans demand to go to the stadium every week and feel proud of their team. It’s very easy. I think they are one of the few fan groups in the world that don’t demand to be in the Primera. It’s not important.’

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But the Real Sociedad game caused friction. Paco Jémez would leave in the summer and the club would go on a decidedly different path than the one they had been on.

That final press conference and game against Levante would be Paco's last game in charge of Rayo and he would take over Granada to start the new season before being sacked after six games: four losses and two draws.

A move to Mexico to manage Cruz Azul would be met with the same controversy. Just a few games into Mexico's Clausura, he was asked whether he came to the country to help out Cruz Azul or to send them down like he did with Rayo. Jémez refused to answer the question but just weeks later the manager of Club America, Ricardo La Volpe, would say, rather unprofessionally, that some managers come over to Mexico and blow nothing more than hot air.

Jémez responded by saying, 'I'll say to Ricardo La Volpe that if he has anything to say to me on Saturday, before or after the game, then he can accompany me to a quiet secluded spot, where no one can see us, where no one can bother us and then we'll sort out our differences like men!'

Rayo might have been controversial with him in the dugout, but correlation does not always imply causation and, while Jémez left for 'sporting reasons', we were about to find out that controversy would remain at the club as that *siento mal* – bad feeling – continued into the next season, which was my first season in Spain.

Rayo Vallecano 1-0 Mallorca, Sunday, 11 September 2016

The sun is still shining despite the worst of the suffocating heat that Madrid struggles through in summer being over (they say there is nine months of winter and three months of hell in Madrid). It's so bright in the early afternoon that I thought the seat under me was sure to melt and, while I was smart enough to wear sunglasses, I was concerned as to how my Irish complexion would hold up. It was either

my skin or the sun; one was going to prevail and I was not confident.

Mallorca had been purchased by former NBA basketball player Steve Nash, his business partner Robert Sarver and Robert Kohlberg for €20m in January 2016. Speaking to Dermot Corrigan for ESPNFC, Kohlberg said, 'We're aware they are obviously different sports and it's a different approach. But there are many similarities in nutrition, training and injury prevention, also in marketing and other areas. We've invested in the training facility at Son Bibiloni, putting in a new dining area for the players and upgrading the physical equipment. We've a superb training staff in Phoenix and we've learned a lot about what works and what doesn't.'

Mallorca's claim to fame was their 2002/03 Copa del Rey success. In a time that they were more susceptible to cup upsets, Barcelona were knocked out in the round of 64 by a team called Novelda CF from Valencia. They boast a 5,000-seater stadium and, at the time of writing this book, are playing in the Tercera Division. Real Madrid squeezed into the quarter-final and, after holding their own against Mallorca in the first leg, scraping through with a 1-1 draw, they were dismantled 4-0 in the second leg. Mallorca went on to win the competition, beating Huelva in the final.

Rayo were considered favourites based purely on how much they were paying their players. According to Roberto Bayon, they were the biggest spenders on wages in the Segunda Division. They would spend €13.3m with recently-relegated Levante and Getafe just behind them on €12.9m and €10.4m respectively and with Real Oviedo and Girona rounding out the top five.

As always, Rayo had carried out a complete overhaul in the summer with several players leaving the club and just as many arriving. They sold one player, Jozabed Sanchez, to Fulham for a fee in the region of €4m but lost plenty who had been loaned in, including former Manchester United winger Bebe and Real Madrid's Diego Llorente. They did not spend any

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money on incoming players but still had enough to compete at the upper end of the second division table, as plenty of the first-team squad remained.

That false sense of hope that comes in a package deal with a new season did not exist for me. My big move to Madrid came on 7 September and Rayo were winless in three at the time I landed at Barajas Airport.

Leading up to the game, José Ramón Sandoval, the man who took over from Paco Jémez in the dugout, had almost succumbed to the pressure he was feeling having suffered through a poor start to the season. The three losses was one thing, but they had scored just one goal – a Patrick Ebert strike on the opening day against Elche. Sandoval was already showing signs of losing his cool with the circumstances and the attitudes of some of the players. How else to explain his outburst prior to the Mallorca game at a training session down south? The club had played Almería, just 200 kilometres east of Malaga, in the league and lost, before playing them in the Copa Del Rey the following Wednesday – a game they won – and decided to stay there for a few days to recover, train and bond before making the trip back north to Madrid.

‘Stay out of it, cause you’re a shit captain,’ Sandoval said to Roberto Trashorras, who had stepped in to defuse the situation after the coach chided Miku. ‘You’re the reason we are in this situation,’ Sandoval told his captain before telling him to concentrate on playing football and being a better leader as opposed to sticking up for his friends.

Had the players already given up on Sandoval after just three months in charge, I wondered? At the start of the Mallorca game on my first day in Vallecas, I noticed the slumped shoulders of the Rayo players. Where was this passionate bunch of footballers that I had heard about? I had seen their pitch on my television many times and the images were always vibrant and the players proud; pace, movement, passing, chances. I had seen the construction outside that holds up the stand in documentaries and it always looked so

lively. But this. This was a Rayo team in turmoil. The residue of last season's relegation, the bitterness involved in the Real Sociedad fiasco was still hanging in the air.

The only player who seemed to be trying was Razvan Rat, at left-back and 36 years of age – he had a nightmare second half and, upon reflection after the match, Rat had long crossed the line between bravery and stupidity and was now staring down a path that would have taken him into pure self-destruction. He launched himself into one tackle in the first half and appeared to hang in the air for the best part of three seconds. Was he doing his best impression of Air Jordan? Testing the limits of gravity? Practising his genuflection as his bent knee came crashing to the ground with his other outstretched looking for a nibble of the ball, or an opponent's ankle?

Regardless, I began to think maybe Sandoval was right. Trashorras's shoulders were the most slumped. He wanted all of the ball and seemed to know exactly where he wanted it, but his team-mates didn't know where to put it and he wasn't willing to move anywhere except for the place he was standing. They were going through the motions and none of them were on the same page.

Rayo managed to land the breakthrough when Alex Moreno was put through by Trashorras after a delightful dummy, or *La Pausa* as they refer to it in Spain. The left-winger, who would eventually be deployed as a de facto left-back later in the season, poked home a game winner under the summer sun, and that first game, after all the controversy during the build-up, would be Sandoval's first win of the season in the league at his fourth attempt and my first attempt.

Still in a haze of how beautiful this stadium looked, to my fresh eyes, after the game and with the noise from the *fondo* and the Bukaneros still ringing in my ears – 'Vamos RRRRayo' with the exaggerated r's – and with three points in the bag, I stood outside Meson Moreno's, just one of the places where Rayo fans tended to meet before and after matches in

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Vallecas. I purposely stood with my back to the bar as myself and a friend of a friend who happened to be a Rayo season ticket holder too, chatted outside so I could look up at the stadium. The Santiago Bernabéu it most certainly was not, but it was a place I would become increasingly endeared to.