

SID  
LOWE



# FEAR AND LOATHING IN LA LIGA

BARCELONA, REAL MADRID,  
AND THE WORLD'S GREATEST  
SPORTS RIVALRY

# **FEAR AND LOATHING IN LA LIGA**

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**ALSO BY SID LOWE**

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*Catholicism, War and the Foundation of Francoism:  
The Juventud de Acción Popular in Spain, 1931–1939*

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# FEAR AND LOATHING IN LA LIGA



BARCELONA  
VS  
REAL MADRID

SID LOWE



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*“A book!”*

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*For Claire and for Charlie*

*Españolito que vienes  
al mundo te guarde Dios  
Una de las dos Españas  
Ha de helarte el corazón.*

*Little Spaniard coming into the world  
May God protect you  
One of the two Spains  
Will freeze your heart.*

—Antonio Machado

*Madrid or Barcelona? Oviedo*

—Michu

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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HUNDREDS OF PIECES OF PAPER and thousands of words strewn about. My office floor has become cutting-room floor. This book has evolved and changed since I began writing it. It has also dramatically shortened from first draft to last. It is primarily based on archive material, some of which casts significant new light on the rivalry, and a large series of interviews conducted over the past couple of years with players, coaches, directors, and presidents from Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. In the process, it has become a kind of oral history and I'd like to thank those who have generously given their time to tell their stories, relive experiences, and/or respond to questions and clarify doubts, including Alfredo Di Stéfano, Amancio Amaro, Andoni Zubizarreta, Andrés Iniesta, Ángel Cappa, Ángel Mur, Antoni Ramallets, Carlos Villarrubí, Charly Rexach, Dani García Larrea, Darcy "Canário" Silveira dos Santos, Emilio Butragueño, Evaristo de Macedo, Fernando Argilés, Fernando Hierro, Fernando Sanz, Gerard Piqué, Henrik Larsson, Hristo Stoichkov, Ignacio Zoco, Iván Campo, Joan Gaspart, Joan Laporta, Johan Cruyff, Jordi Cruyff, Jorge Valdano, José Antonio Camacho, José Emilio Amavisca, José Luis San Martín, José "Pirri" Martínez, Josep Fusté, Josep María Minguella, Josep Seguer, Juan Manuel Asensi, Juan Santisteban, Louis Van Gaal, Luis Figo, Luis Milla, Luis Suárez, Marcos Alonso, Michael Laudrup, Michel, Michel Salgado, Miguel-Ángel Portugal, Pedja Mijatovic, Pichi Alonso, Radi Antić, Rafa García Cortés, Ramón Calderón, Sanja Solari, Silvio Elías, Steve Archibald, Steve McManaman, Txiki Beguiristain, Vicente del Bosque, Víctor Muñoz, Xavi Hernández, and Zinedine Zidane.

Sadly, Antoni Ramallets and Josep Seguer passed away soon after this book was first published.

Thanks are also due to the protagonists who spoke to me for this book but preferred not to be named and the many others who have enriched the story. Other interviews conducted over the years with players like Oleguer Presas, Raúl, Paco Pavón, Paco Gento, and David Beckham have also been drawn upon. As well as material from state archives, private papers, and the clubs, I've naturally leaned on the expertise and the work of reporters, writers, broadcasters, and historians and drawn on the accounts of protagonists. Part of me wanted to include footnotes throughout. That was impractical but a select bibliography has been included. My debt to those authors is evident.

This book does not claim to be the definitive history of the two clubs—the definitive history of just one of them would require countless volumes and, despite substantial editing, this is a long book already. Some of the chapters I most enjoyed writing have been cut because they weren't truly central to the narrative, while others have been shortened significantly. Diego Maradona, for example, may be the best player of all time, but in this story he appears only fleetingly, while Laurie Cunningham's spell at Madrid and Quini's kidnap also failed to make the cut and the pre-civil war origins have been substantially reduced and restructured. Instead, this book is about the episodes that have shaped the rivalry and made Real Madrid and FC Barcelona what they are and about the human stories behind them. This is *their* story.

Sid Low  
Cantabria, June 2013

Neymar arrived a minute late to his first *clásico*. The chants for Independence that went round the Camp Nou had just died down when he scored against Real Madrid in October 2013. Alexis Sánchez scored the second before Jesé Rodríguez got a late goal as Barcelona won 2–1 in the opening Barça

Madrid of what felt like a new era. With Jose Mourinho gone and Tito Vilanova forced to step down on medical advice, a new season began with both teams under new management for the first time in a decade. A new chapter had begun but it has not yet ended. Nor, then, has it been written here but the text has been revised and some updates and corrections have been made since this book was first published in the UK.

At the half way stage of the 2013–2014 season, as this book went to press, a third force had emerged: Barcelona were top of the table, on course for another points record, but it was the Copa del Rey champions Atlético Madrid who were level with them while Real Madrid stood three points below. Atlético's own manager Diego Simeone was amongst those taken by surprise: it is, he has announced, impossible for anyone other than the big two to win the league. As 2014 began increasingly people wondered if he was wrong. For once, it might not be all about Real Madrid and Barcelona, except that, somehow, it is always about Real Madrid and Barcelona.

*Sid Lowe  
Spain, January 2014*

## A NOTE ON CURRENCY AND LANGUAGE

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MONEY APPEARS IN ITS ORIGINAL CURRENCY, usually pesetas or euros. Although in a handful of cases some sterling or dollar alternatives have been included for clarity, that has not been done as a matter of course. Fluctuating exchange rates, changes to standards of living, and inflation volatility make an accurate modern-day sterling equivalent difficult to calculate and occasionally meaningless. However, as a rough guide, between 1948 and 1999 the Spanish currency ranged between 40 and 170 pesetas to the dollar with a mean exchange rate for the period of 81.96 pesetas to the dollar. In 1999 the euro was introduced to Spain at an exchange rate of .86 euros to the dollar.

Place names are given in Spanish except where there is a clearly accepted English equivalent, such as Castile or Catalonia. The names of buildings, streets, etc., in Catalonia are written in Catalan; elsewhere in Spain, they are given in Castilian Spanish.

People's names are given, wherever possible, in the local language. Some Catalans' names were Castilianized in the media and official correspondence during the Franco dictatorship but are left in Catalan.

Under the Franco regime, club names were forcibly changed. For instance, Athletic Bilbao became Atlético Bilbao and that is reflected in the text. In 1998 Español changed their name to Espanyol. Their name appears throughout as it would have done at the time.



## THE MORNING AFTER

LIFE AND DEATH. And between the two, soccer.

On one side, the maternity hospital; on the other, the cemetery. In the middle, the Camp Nou, Europe's largest stadium. In the cemetery of Les Corts, there are rows upon rows of crypts, blocks of them stacked seven-high like lockers. A ladder leans against a wall of them as if waiting for a librarian to reach a book from the top shelf. There are 28,399 graves in all, spread across 34,400 square meters and among them lie some of Football Club Barcelona's greatest players. Paulino Alcántara, the club's all-time top scorer who retired to become a doctor in the rough streets of the *barri xino* off the Ramblas. César Rodríguez, the man who follows Alcántara and Lionel Messi in the goal-scoring charts. Josep Samitier, the Magician, player and technical secretary at Barcelona—and Real Madrid. And Javier Urruticoechea, the goalkeeper whose save clinched the league title for Terrence Venables's side after an eleven-year drought, Barcelona's first under a democracy, prompting the famous line, screamed out on the radio: "Urruti, I love you!"

From the grave of László Kubala, the player they say built the Camp Nou and whose statue stands at its entrance, all rippling muscles and bulging thighs, you can see the north end of the stadium poking up above the cemetery wall. Julio César Benítez is here too. He died of food poisoning in 1968, just three days before Barcelona faced Madrid. Today is the morning after Barcelona faced Madrid forty-four years later. It is quiet now, empty, and the sun is shining.

"You should have seen it yesterday," says the woman who works here, helping to guide people through the labyrinth, past the roses on the Kubala family plot and the pennants, pictures, and ribbons in Catalan red and yellow and Barcelona blue and claret dotted around the cemetery.

Why, what happened yesterday?

"What happens every time they play Real Madrid," she replies, nodding in the direction of the stadium. "It was packed with people visiting family and friends, visiting players' graves too. Asking for help in the game, asking for a victory."



## THE NIGHT BEFORE

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2012. Football Club Barcelona versus Real Madrid, week seven in the Spanish league. It is the first meeting of the season between the two greatest rivals in the sport, in any sport, and it is huge—for what it symbolizes off the field as well as what it means on it. On the morning of the game, the headline in the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* asks: “Only football?” They know the answer: Barcelona versus Real Madrid is never just football and today less than ever. This clash is billed as the most political match of them all, certainly since the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975.

The game comes against a backdrop of economic crisis, failed fiscal negotiations between Barcelona and Madrid, the calling of Catalan elections, and talk of a referendum on independence. It is three weeks since Catalonia’s “national” day, the September 11 *diada*, brought the city to a standstill, with some estimates putting numbers on the streets at 1.5 million. Among them was Barcelona president Sandro Rosell. He insists that he was there in a personal capacity, but today the club’s traditional pre-match mosaic will be a *senyera*, the Catalan flag, and it seems to hold greater meaning than normal. Almost 100,000 people will hold up yellow and red cards, covering the entire stadium. Some call for fans to carry the Catalan independence flag, adorned with a star, and those who say they will include Joan Laporta, the former Barcelona president.

It has been building in the media for weeks, months, and the divide is a familiar one. The right-wing newspaper *La Razón*, a vociferous campaigner in defense of Spanish unity, dedicates twenty-seven pages to politics to decry the fact that the match has been politicized. *El Mundo*, also opposed to secession, solves a two millennia–old mystery to reveal that Jesus Christ was in fact killed by Catalans.

Before the game, Barcelona’s hymn is sung a cappella. Two gigantic red and yellow striped Catalan flags are unfurled at either end, independence flags are dotted around the stadium, and there is a banner written in English that declares Catalonia Europe’s next state. But the Catalan “national” anthem, “Els Segadors,” which marks the beginning of the Reapers’ War in 1640 when Catalonia defeated Philip IV and declared independence under French protection for twelve years, isn’t sung as expected. And the protest is not unanimous, or as hostile, as many anticipated.

Everyone is waiting for the moment that Toni Strubell describes as a prophecy. Strubell is a member of the Catalan parliament whose father, an exile in England during the Franco dictatorship, always told him that the day the Camp Nou chanted for independence would be the day independence arrived. Barcelona fans had started the chant during a league game against Granada, but today it is bigger; today they play Real Madrid. And when the stadium clock ticks up to seventeen minutes and fourteen seconds, the chant begins: “Independence! Independence!”

September 11, 1714, marked the end of the siege of Barcelona, when the city fell to Philip V. The Catalans had chosen the wrong side in a war of royal succession, but the battle has since become projected as a central moment for the “nation,” the point at which “independence” was lost. The *diada*

“celebrates” defeat—a fact that is not lost on many both inside and outside Catalonia, seen somehow symbolic of the Catalan mindset—and reinforces the idea of Madrid as the natural enemy. Philip V abolished Catalonia’s political institutions and banned Catalan in schools, virtually ending Catalan aspirations until the *Renaixença*, or cultural renaissance, of the mid-1800s. A Catalan parliament, the *mancomunitat*, was set up in 1914 but abolished by the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1925. With Primo de Rivera’s fall and the arrival of the Second Republic, Spain’s first real democracy, Catalonia was granted autonomous government but the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and dictatorship under General Francisco Franco brought those ambitions to an end. Following his death, Catalonia now has significant autonomous powers, but polls suggest that over 50 percent of Catalans want independence.

Today some at the Camp Nou certainly do and, in many minds, that political battle is played out on the soccer field. Only this morning, Barcelona defender Gerard Piqué has been forced to distance himself from a statement in which he said that Barcelona versus Madrid is Catalonia versus Spain. Barça president Joan Laporta has no doubts: “At one level, that’s true,” he says. “It’s a sporting confrontation with political connotations. Madrid has always represented Spain and we have always represented Catalonia.”

Yet the chant is not the only thing that sticks in the mind from the first *clásico* of the 2012–2013 season. This game is Barça versus Madrid in a nutshell: symbolism, identity, politics, rivalry . . . and the best soccer on the planet. The homage to Catalonia turns into a homage to Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. The match finishes level: ten shots each, one post each, and two goals each. As the final whistle goes, there is satisfaction. Just as important, the promise of more hangs in the air. With a real rivalry it always does; it is self-perpetuating. As one Barcelona player puts it: “It is the *game of the century* every time, even though there are eight of them a year.” “We’re here and they’re not here,” says Madrid coach Jose Mourinho afterward, stretching his arms and holding his hands roughly the same height.

It is some height.

Above all, the homage to Catalonia becomes a homage to Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Ronaldo scores, then Messi scores; Messi scores, then Ronaldo scores. If Madrid versus Barcelona is the greatest sporting rivalry on earth, it has come to be personified in two of the finest soccer players there have been, men who dominate the game and define their clubs—in personality and play, style and substance. You cannot mention one without the other. Type “Ronaldo has scored a hat trick” into Twitter and watch the responses. A rubbish hat trick, says the *culé*, or Barcelona fan; better than Messi, says the *Madridista*. Rival fans have discovered the best possible way of winding Ronaldo up—to chant “Messi” at him.

With Messi and Ronaldo, records seem to fall weekly. Their four goals mean that they move on to exactly one hundred club goals between them in 2012. “Talking about who is the best player in the world should be banned because these two are just so good,” says Mourinho. When Ronaldo strikes after twenty-two minutes, it marks the sixth successive *clásico* in which he has scored, the first play in history to do so. Messi moves to within one goal of Alfredo Di Stéfano’s all-time record for *clásico* goals, at the age of just twenty-five. “From another planet,” says the cover of the country’s best-selling newspaper.

Three months after the *clásico*, Messi won the Ballon d’Or. Ronaldo was second. Natural, said the Barcelona fans; a scandal, said the Madrid ones. What the ceremony in Zurich really showed was just how brilliant they both are; how dominant Madrid and Barcelona had become in terms of the sport and the spotlight. Messi has won it four times in a row, taking him past anyone else in history; Ronaldo was runner-up for the fourth time and has won it once.\* Between them, Madrid and Barcelona bo

the past eight winners of the Ballon d'Or and when the 2012 FIFPro team of the year was announced ten of the eleven players were from Madrid or Barcelona. There was something convenient about the fact that they had five each, parity restored. No two teams had dominated like this before, still let two rivals.

These are the men, the teams, who eclipse all else, and, when the *clásico* clock ticks up to 17:14 the second half, time for another burst of “Independence!” some Barcelona fans almost miss. They're busy celebrating Messi's goal.

THERE HAVE BEEN 225 CLÁSICOS IN ALL, with Real Madrid winning ninety and Barcelona eighty-seven. The numbers rack up quickly: October 2012 was the thirteenth *clásico* in less than two years, such is the dominance of these two sides, and by the end of the season there would be three more of them. It all began at the Madrid Hippodrome on May 13, 1902, just a few hundred yards south of the Santiago Bernabéu. Soccer was far from the mass sport it is now. Barcelona began with a sixty-three-word classified ad in *Los Deportes* inviting those who wanted to arrange games to turn up at the newspaper's offices. Twelve people did so. Madrid began with informal games in the Retiro park that were fortunate to attract six or seven a side. “We wasted a lot of time smoking and drinking,” one participant recalled. Some saw the sport as immoral, played by “shameless youths daring to run through the streets in their underwear and probably mentally diseased.”

Around 2,000 people attended that first game between Madrid and Barcelona, sitting on chairs rented from a trader in the Rastro market; 98,000 spectators attended the match at the Camp Nou in the autumn of 2012. Two million watched on subscription television in Spain, a number dwarfed by the last free-to-air *clásico* in December 2011, which had been watched by 12 million. TV companies claimed a global audience of 400 million and, although that was an exaggeration, it was shown live over thirty countries. Deloitte's latest figures showed that in 2012 Madrid and Barcelona generated more money than any other clubs on the planet for the fourth consecutive year.

Former Barcelona coach Bobby Robson described the *clásico* as the biggest game in the world and it is hard to argue. FIFA named Madrid the best team of the twentieth century; the International Federation of Football History and Statistics ranks Barcelona the best of the twenty-first. Although 2013 ended with semifinal exits for both teams for the second successive year, since 1998 only two clubs have won the Champions League three times: Madrid and Barcelona. Madrid have won nine European Cups, more than any other club; Barcelona have won four, three in seven years, and more international trophies than anyone else.

They are two of only three Spanish teams to have spent their entire history in the top flight—the other is Athletic Club de Bilbao—and between them they have won fifty-four league titles, thirty-two for Madrid, twenty-two for Barcelona. The nearest challenger is Atlético Madrid, with nine. And just look at those who have played for them: Kubala, Di Stéfano, Maradona, Cruyff, Stoichkov, Cizic, Puskás, Sánchez, Butragueño, Netzer, Schuster, Iniesta, Romário, Ronaldo, Raúl, Guardiola, Laudrup, Luis Suárez, Kopa, Figo, Rivaldo, Zidane, Ronaldinho, Casillas, Xavi, Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo. Every single winner of the FIFA World Player Award for eighteen years has played for Madrid or Barcelona at some stage of his career.

They are two soccer behemoths, eponymous representatives of the two biggest cities in Spain—different cities with different identities, seemingly locked in permanent confrontation, cities whose political and cultural contexts are different. Barcelona stands on the Mediterranean, looking out toward France and Italy, the city where the maxim has it that fashions and political-isms hit Spain first. Madrid sits on the central plateau of Castile, the *meseta*, over six hundred meters above sea

level. Freezing in winter and boiling in summer, Madrid is located on a river along which no boat can pass. Philip II made it the capital in 1561 simply because it stood in the geographical center of Spain. A plaque in the Puerta del Sol marks kilometer zero, the theoretical starting point of every road in the country, a mark of centralism that most *Madrileños* barely notice.

Spain is a two-team country. “Everyone supports Madrid or Barcelona,” says Spain manager Vicente del Bosque. According to statistics from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Madrid have 13.2 million fans while Barcelona have 10.4 million. An Opinea study in May 2013 showed that 28 percent of those match-going supporters questioned considered themselves Madrid fans, 26 percent Barcelona fans, but the national tallies are even higher, with over 60 percent of Spaniards supporting one of the big two. On top of that, one of the most striking features of Spanish soccer is that virtually every fan, from Almería to Zaragoza, has a built-in, permanent preference and really cares who wins the *clásico*; these two matter even when they don’t matter. “Half of Spain is Madrid, half is Barcelona even if they support Oviedo or Ponferradina,” says Luis Milla, who spent six years at Barcelona and seven at Madrid. When Opinea asked “Madrid or Barcelona?” only 11 percent said “neither.”

More than just soccer clubs, these are powerful and democratic institutions. Two of only four Spanish clubs owned by their members, they carry a colossal social weight that is often brought to bear on the protagonists. Four national newspapers a day are essentially dedicated to them, two in Madrid, two in Barcelona, and the pressure can be as brutal as the power is seductive. Radi Antón coached both clubs, one of only two men to do so. “Being a director of Barcelona or Madrid is more important than being a minister in any country,” he says. When former Madrid president Ramón Mendoza expressed a similar sentiment, he got a letter from the US ambassador telling him he was absolutely right. Ramón Calderón was forced out of the Madrid presidency in January 2009. “I should have stayed,” Calderón admits, “but I would have paid for it with my life. The strain is so great that I would have had a heart attack in the directors’ box one day. If I hadn’t left then, I’d have left in the box.”

Madrid and Barcelona can’t be taken in isolation from society, or from Spain’s history. You won’t catch many in Catalonia insisting, as others in Spain do, that sports and politics should not mix. Like it or not, sports and politics *do* mix, especially here. The symbolism is inescapable and no match is so infused with politics as the *clásico*, even if that can feel one-sided at times.

Marcos Alonso’s father played in Real Madrid’s European Cup-winning team in the 1950s, and his son played for them too. As a child he played in the garden with Alfredo Di Stéfano and Ferenc Puskás, two of the club’s greatest ever players, but as a professional he played for Barcelona. “They are the two biggest teams in the world,” Alonso says. “But Barcelona have a social significance I didn’t see at Madrid; in Barcelona, you have a sense of *complete* identification with the club. It means a massive amount for Catalan society.” Madrid’s meaning is, from their own point of view, simpler. “Madrid represented an identification with success,” says Ramón Calderón. Jorge Valdano, a former player, coach, and director at Madrid, defines the *clásico* as “a club versus more than a club.”

“Every time Madrid and Barcelona meet, it becomes a rebellion against the Establishment,” says former Barcelona striker Hristo Stoichkov. When Barcelona face Madrid it is, according to many *culés*, the nation against the state, freedom fighters against General Franco’s fascists, the Spanish Civil War’s vanquished against its victors—a confrontation represented by the assassination of Barcelona’s president at the start of the war. Bobby Robson once claimed: “Catalonia is a country and Barcelona is its army.” The message is delivered early: A children’s history of Barcelona, complete with a prologue from president Rosell, has an explicitly political narrative. Cartoon illustrations depict armed Spanish civil guards closing the club’s stadium, scenes from the civil war, and Franco



police running on to the Camp Nou pitch, truncheons in hand.

Asked the central question at the heart of the *clásico*—can the rivalry be understood in pure soccer terms, without a social or political element?—Joan Gaspart responds simply: “Impossible. The former Barcelona president continues: “History has transformed us into something more than just a football club: Barcelona is the defence of a country, a language, a culture. Barcelona feels persecuted.” Joan Laporta followed Gaspart into the presidency. Another direct question, another eloquently short answer. Is Barcelona the unofficial Catalan national team? He smiles: “Yes, exactly. The slogan *mès que un club* is famous now and it is everywhere: *more than a club*. “It is not just a slogan, it is a declaration of principles,” says Laporta. Barcelona’s identity is explicitly about something other than the soccer alone and in their version of history, so is Madrid’s—Barcelona fans project on to their rivals an identity that Madrid fans largely dismiss.

And this is where the familiar accusation comes in: Real Madrid as Franco’s team.

Former Barcelona coach Louis Van Gaal tells the story the way it was told to him: “The people of Catalonia are a proud people and they want to be better than Madrid. Franco was the boss and he was in Madrid; central government was always in favor of Madrid, European champions because of Franco. One of the big aspects of society there is the desire to show that Catalonia can compete with Madrid.” This allegation lies at the heart of narratives of the *clásico*—on one side of the divide at least. It has become widely held: even Alex Ferguson famously referred to Madrid as Franco’s club. “*Mès que un club* starts because of that: the phrase would have no *raison d’être* but for the dictatorship,” says Pichi Alonso, a Barcelona player who later became the Catalan “national” team coach. “People identified being a Barcelona fan with fighting the regime.” Francoism was transposed on to Madrid, the Catalan sociologist Luis Flaquer noting: “You couldn’t shout ‘Franco you murderer’ on the streets, so people shouted at Real Madrid’s players instead. It’s a psychological phenomenon.”

“It was almost impossible to beat Madrid because they were Franco’s team,” said Salvador Sadurní, a Barcelona player between 1961 and 1976, while former Catalan minister of culture Jordi Vilajoana claimed: “The regime used sport to assert its power: that’s why Real Madrid won.” Eighty-five percent of Barcelona fans, according to a poll conducted during the club’s centenary, believe that the Franco regime systematically handicapped them. Never more so, they say, than when Barcelona lost out on the signing of Alfredo Di Stéfano and he joined Madrid instead, the turning point in the history of the game.

Even now, almost forty years after Franco’s death, with Catalonia enjoying significant autonomy, there’s deep mistrust. Some of it is conscious, some subliminal, but it is there. A political rift runs through the soccer feud, and the hatred can be genuinely shocking. Two politicians who helped usher in democracy after Franco’s death, Felipe González and Miquel Roca, wrote a book together about the relationship between Catalonia and the rest of Spain. Its title translates as *Can We Still Understand Each Other?* It is tempting to answer: Could you ever?

“All that comes together in the football,” says Michel, who played for Madrid for over a decade having come through the club’s youth system. It comes together in a kind of Spain versus Catalonia and all that supposedly entails, reduced to a simple narrative and a basic dichotomy: *Barça democrats; Madrid fascists; Barça civil war losers, Madrid civil war victors and repressors; Barça left, Madrid right; Barça good, Madrid bad*.

That at least is the theory. The reality, of course, is rather different and there are countless questions. Like: Where do those identities become forged and how have they survived? Is an identity founded on opposition still valid in a democratic regime when Catalonia is one of the wealthiest, most vibrant parts of Spain? Where do the soccer teams fit into all this? And, anyway, *who*, or *what*, are the

clubs?

~~Things are not always as they seem. Symbolism is central, the construction of a narrative plays a key role and myths matter, but there are caveats everywhere, important flaws in the popularly held identities of the two clubs. Like the *other* presidential victim of the civil war, *Barcelona's* success during the darkest days of the regime, or the fact that Madrid's and Barcelona's great figures are Argentinian and Dutch, respectively. It is Barcelona, not Madrid, who have provided more players for the *Spanish* national team than anyone else, including seven of the men who started the World Cup final in 2010. It runs right to the very foundation of the two clubs, the day it all began. Barcelona, the Catalan national flagship, was founded by a foreigner who was only supposed to be passing through while Real Madrid, the greatest embassy Spain ever had, was founded by two brothers who were Catalan.~~

WITH BARÇA AND MADRID, it is so often about each other; they are defined by what they are and by what they are *not*. Being a Barcelona fan *necessarily* means being an *anti-Madridista* and vice versa—even if those identities, like any identity, are built at least partly on myths. In a recent poll carried out by *AS* newspaper, 97 percent of Madrid fans considered Barcelona the team they hated the most; the only surprise was that there were 3 percent who did not. There is a mutual dependency that is a mutual fear and loathing. It wasn't only a pig's head thrown at Luis Figo when he crossed the divide from Barcelona to Madrid in 2000—there were bike chains, golf balls, bottles, mobile phones, rocks, and screws too.

“It has become a dialogue of the deaf and we have reached a ridiculous point where you're obliged to talk badly of the opposition,” Valdano says. “That latent violence is always there and if we are not careful it will overflow with great ease. Sometimes the spark is called Gaspart, Figo, or Mourinho, but any flammable element sets it off again.”

The clubs are embarked on a constant search for supremacy and have a burning need to outdo each other—and the rest of the world. Witness their centenaries: Barça visited the pope, making him a son or member; Madrid visited the king, the UN, *and* the pope. The very fact that they *can* is significant. Barça celebrated by playing Brazil; three years later Madrid celebrated by playing the whole world. They requested that all soccer everywhere on the planet be halted that day so that the Bernabéu was the focus of everyone's attention. Joan Gaspart, Barcelona president at the time, having spent two decades as vice president, feigned an apology: “Oh,” he said mischievously, “I think San Andreu must have a game that day.” San Andreu is a Catalan side that play in the regional Third Division, of whom Gaspart just happened to be president.

A poll in 1999 showed over half of Barcelona fans preferred Madrid losing to Barça winning. It's all about them, even when it is not about them. Barcelona won the 1997 Copa del Rey against Real Betis, a victory that remains special to them as much because of *where* it was as because of *what* it was: the Santiago Bernabéu was packed with Barcelona fans and the players did a lap of honor while supporters sang: “Madrid is burning down!” Sergi Barjuan, a Catalan brought through the club's youth system, was beaming: “To win at the Bernabéu and see the ground full of Catalan flags is as good as it gets.” “That was a double victory,” recalls Gaspart, grinning. “And after the game, I did something they wouldn't have done if the final had been at any other ground: I made them play the Barcelona hymn over the loudspeakers . . .

“Five times.”

Even as Barcelona celebrated the greatest season in their history, winning the treble in 2009, there were digs at Madrid; the Madrid press feigned offence when Gerard Piqué got the Camp Nou rocking

by chanting “whoever doesn’t bounce is a *Madridista*.” “¡Madrid, cabrón, saluda al campeón!” is staple chant when Barcelona win. *Madrid, you bastards, salute the champions!* Madrid like to insist they couldn’t care less about Barcelona, that they’re above that, but it is a lie. “They are very much focused on each other,” says Milla. “If Madrid are third that’s fine, so long as Barcelona are fourth. They have built a story based, in part, on each other and that mirrors Spanish society.” Barcelona hymn is sung at Madrid’s stadium, the final line adapted to “¡Barça, Barça, mierda!” *Mierda* means shit.

For years, Madrid fans laughed that Barcelona were obsessed with them: they said they suffered *madriditis*, a chronic persecution complex, an inability to live their own lives, always focused instead on their rivals. José “Pirri” Martínez played for Real Madrid for sixteen years. His remark sums it up: “They hung on our every move; we didn’t care about them. Why would we?” That may have been partly true then; it is not now. There has been an outbreak of *barcelonitis*. Pichi Alonso played for Barcelona during a period when he says that the club was “quite clearly” obsessed with Madrid, to the point of “trying to copy them.” “Now the roles have been inverted,” he claims.

Success lies at its heart, shifting the parameters of a rivalry that is cyclical. Identities are not always permanent, even when they appear utterly entrenched—and trenches often seem the natural habit of Madrid and Barcelona fans. Apparently irreconcilable soccer models have been inverted while some of their experiences have been shared, right down to both clubs suffering kidnappings—Alfredo Di Stéfano was abducted in Venezuela in 1963, Enrique “Quini” Castro was dragged off in a van in 1981. These days, Barcelona are proud of their academy but it was Madrid who reached a Copa del Rey final against their own youth team that same season and who soon after swept all before them with a side defined by a generation of homegrown players. The year 1981 was also when Madrid lost a traumatic European Cup final; five years later, Barcelona did the same.

Some of their attitudes and characteristics are shared too. “Both clubs were born in the same place with the same ideas. They are different in terms of the outward symbols but, in their souls, I don’t know if they are so different really,” says Michel. To fans of other teams in Spain, they feel much the same: two superpowers obliterating all opposition. They are, the stats show, not only the best-loved clubs in Spain but also the most hated: Madrid are singled out as the team most despised by 51 percent of match-going fans across the country, Barcelona by 41 percent. And that is despite the fact that Madrid make much of their *señorío* and Barcelona do the same with their *valors*—gentlemanliness and values, respectively. Both seek a moral dimension that differentiates them and, in both cases, such talk can appear flawed. Perhaps inevitably, those most obsessed with talking about Madrid’s *señorío* or the lack of it, are Barcelona fans while those quickest to highlight Barcelona’s *valors*, or the lack of them, are Madrid fans.

Ultimately, their complaints are similar too. Barcelona fans remember the name of Emilio Guruceta, the referee who gave the most famous penalty ever against them, and that of José María Ortiz de Mendibil—the official who added eight minutes of stoppage time to a *derbi* in 1966, allowing Madrid to win 1–0 and afterward shrugged: “My watch stopped.” That has not gone unnoticed by Madrid fans. A banner in the Bernabéu early this century pointed the finger at Barcelona, declaring refereeing conspiracies to be the refuge of losers and cry-babies. Yet now it is they who claim they are robbed and it is the Madrid media that invented the “Villarato”—the theory that the president of the federation, Ángel María Villar, is out to get them and the country’s referees are his executioners.

If the rivalry is partly explained by their success, their success is partly explained by the rivalry. *Anything you can do I can do better*. The relationship is symbiotic: They are necessary enemies feeding off each other, trying to outdo each other. “Like cathedrals in the Middle Ages,” as Valdano

puts it. “If Barcelona didn’t exist, we’d have to invent them,” Madrid president Florentino Pérez once claimed. “I think he’s right,” Laporta says with a smile. Ignacio Zoco captained Madrid and played for the club for twelve years: “Real Madrid wouldn’t be so great if Barcelona didn’t exist and vice versa. It is competition that makes you,” he insists. Victory over a weakened rival leaves doubts. “The rivalry lost a bit of edge, a touch of magic, with Barcelona struggling so badly,” admitted Raúl of the Catalans’ crisis in 2002.

“Madrid and Barcelona are like two sides of a scale,” says Catalan midfielder Xavi Hernández. It is impossible for both to be up at the same time, even when they’re both successful. Few recall that while Madrid won the first five European Cups, Barcelona won two league titles and the Copad Generalísimo, a better domestic record than their rivals over the same period. Madrid’s triumph was Barça’s failure and, for all their disputes at home, European competition has marked them and continues to do so, acting as the ultimate arbiter.

When Florentino Pérez returned to the Real Madrid presidency in 2009, he had to respond to Madrid’s institutional crisis but also to Barcelona’s unique league, cup, and European Cup treble. Miguel Pardeza, the new sporting director, insisted: “We must put Madrid back where they belong; we have to try to remove Barcelona from their dominant position.” Ronaldo, Kaká, and Karim Benzema all arrived for a fraction short of €200 million. There was a historic precedence: When Madrid completed the signing of Di Stéfano in 1953, Barcelona had just won successive doubles. The signing decisively shifted the balance of power. Michael Laudrup and Luis Figo crossed the divide and tipped the scales too. And the arrival of Jose Mourinho in 2010 was even more clearly driven by the desire—the *need*—to overhaul Barcelona. The parallels with *Barcelona’s* signing of Helenio Herrera as manager in 1958 are startling.

Laporta claimed in 2009 that Madrid’s spending did not worry him, insisting, “I’m treble and tranquil.” But still he complained that Madrid’s signings policy was “imperialist” and “arrogant.” The Catalan media splashed the words “scandal,” “disgrace,” and “shameful” across their front covers and even the Catalan Church expressed its distaste. How dare they throw away such colossal quantities of money in times of crisis? The key word was “they.” Madrid. Few in Catalonia complained when Barcelona made Diego Maradona the most expensive player in history, signing him for \$5.2 million in 1982. Or when they made Johan Cruyff the first million-dollar player nine years earlier. Or when they signed Romário, Ronaldo, and Ronaldinho. When that had happened, it had been the national press—and for “national” read “Madrid”—that complained.

CONFRONTATION CAN BE TRACED right back to 1916, when Madrid and Barcelona faced each other in the cup and a first replay finished 6–6. The second replay ended with Barcelona walking off when Madrid were winning 4–2, the Catalans’ star player Paulino Alcántara later writing: “That defeat produced in me tremendous sadness. . . . It was the first time that I cried like a child, such was the terrible and unexpected humiliation, that atrocious conviction that the tournament legitimately belonged to us. Real Madrid’s official history instead maintained that everything was entirely fair. Well, almost everything. “The [Catalan press] campaign was tremendous, implacable, and clumsy,” it recalled “they even claimed that Barcelona could beat Madrid any time they wanted—in the middle of the Puerta del Sol.” Some things never change.

Some things do, though. The rivalry has not been a constant and nor has its intensity—even calling it the *clásico* is a relatively new phenomenon, borrowed from the name given to River versus Boca clashes in Argentina. For years it was the *derbi*. Some of the ingredients have always been in place, some have not. It is mostly a rivalry forged after the civil war and just how good the two teams are is

key factor, of course. Madrid and Barcelona have not always been the best two teams in Spain: The current domination is unprecedented. Only once before could they have laid claim to being the finest two teams in the world at the same time: That was in the mid- and late-1950s and even then they were not so powerful as now. When Madrid were finally knocked out of the European Cup for the very first time, having won the opening five editions of the tournament, it was inevitably Barcelona that defeated them. The previous month, England had met Spain at Wembley and the official match-day program told its British readership: “Since [1955] the entire domestic scene has changed in the Peninsula. Up to that time, League or Cup honours could go to six or seven clubs—now two colossal clubs dominate all, Royal Madrid and Barcelona.” Yet speak to Madrid players of a certain generation and some will tell you that Atlético Madrid are the club’s real adversaries, even if the *Real Madrid Book of Football*, published in 1961, describes Barcelona as “the eternal rival.”

During the 1960s and early 1970s, hit by financial crisis, forced to sell their best players, Barcelona slipped well behind—but that too contributes to the rivalry. Cup success salvaged the seasons and so did victory in the *derbi*. Barcelona came out of a fourteen-year period without winning the league upon the arrival of Johan Cruyff. At the start of the 1980s, meanwhile, Barcelona and Madrid went four years without winning the league, the longest run since the 1950s, when the Basque sides Real Sociedad and Athletic Bilbao won it twice each. For a brief period, crystallizing in the 1982 cup final, Barcelona’s most intense and aggressive rivalry was with Athletic. Diego Maradona even went so far as to publicly declare that he wanted Madrid to win when playing the Basques.

“There are those who use football to create an enmity that doesn’t really exist in sport,” says Michel. “I see an opponent, not an enemy. Rivalry is also admiration.” That may be a bit optimistic but it is true that this is also not a story built purely on conflict. During the 1950s, players appeared in exhibition games for their opponents. Barcelona’s star László Kubala never forgot the fact that it was Real Madrid president Santiago Bernabéu who intervened with Hungary’s Communist government to allow him to see his estranged mother. Juan Manuel Asensi and José “Pirri” Martínez recall how players from both sides used to go out for drinks together after matches in the late 1970s. On the night that Barcelona played the Cup Winners’ Cup final in Basel in May 1979—one of the most emotive and emblematic games in the club’s history, their first final after Franco’s death, and a match attended by thousands of fans carrying Catalan flags—a visitor came to the dressing room to wish them luck. The visitor was Madrid’s president, Luis de Carlos. When Roberto Carlos was pelted by missiles during a *derbi* in 1997 it was Pep Guardiola who escorted him to take corners, acting as a human shield. And in 2010 Barcelona and Real Madrid’s players won the World Cup together, even if the media in each city tried to make it more *their* success than *theirs*.

Some of the moments that helped to create the current rivalry can be located exactly, staging positions en route to their current domination and the relationship as it stands. Others are less tangible, less obvious, even with hindsight. And some of those that are assumed to exist do not, or at least not as they are often presented. The rivalry appeared to reach a zenith—at least until they meet in a European Cup final—when Barcelona and Madrid faced each other four times in eighteen days in 2011, in the league, the Copa del Rey final, and the Champions League semifinal, a kind of World Series of *clásicos* that reinforced the dominance of the big two, the utter eclipse of the rest of Spain. At times, it was nasty and suffocating; there appeared to be no escape.

There also appears to be no way now for the rivalry to return to a time when it was anything other than the driving force behind Spanish soccer—to the cost of the rest of the country, rich in history and sentiment. There is little chance of the other clubs closing the gap: The big two have won the last nine league titles, twenty-five of the past twenty-nine, twelve for Madrid, thirteen for Barcelona. “The

duopoly is a historic fact now,” says Fernando Hierro, former Real Madrid captain and, more recently, sporting director of the Spanish Football Federation. “They are two clubs used to success so when they do not win it has a real impact.”

Madrid and Barcelona are powerful and their strength self-perpetuating. Their television deals dwarf others clubs’: They take over €140 million a year in TV rights, plus the money they make from the Champions League; the next highest, Valencia, take €42 million, less than the relegated teams in the English Premier League. Multiply that over five years and Valencia make over €415 million less than Barcelona or Madrid. Real Madrid’s operating budget in 2012–2013 was €517 million; Barcelona’s €470 million; Atlético and Valencia were the only other clubs over €100 million and next year they will dip below three figures. Valencia finished third for three consecutive years from 2009–2010: each time they were closer in points to relegation than they were to winning the league. In 2012–2013, third-placed Atlético finished twenty-four points behind Barcelona. It is not that the rest of the league is necessarily bad, although the trend is to their debilitation, but that Madrid and Barcelona are just too good.

That economic muscle reflects a social reality seen in those supporter statistics. Television companies pay Madrid and Barcelona what they pay them because they have to. The editor of one newspaper admits that every Madrid win is 10,000 more in sales, and the director of a TV channel insists it would be a “disaster” if anyone else won the league. Officially, statistics for pay-per-view hits remained unknown but industry insiders reveal figures from four years ago in which Madrid and Barcelona generated twice as much as anyone else. According to a source at the Spanish Football Federation, a First Division game not involving either of the big two was bought by forty-seven viewers. Yes, *forty-seven*. When a new soccer channel launched in PPV’s place in 2010, it was proud to offer the league but prouder to offer Madrid and/or Barcelona every week. In 2011–2012, fifteen league games involving Madrid or Barcelona were shown free-to-air in Spain; they were the fifteen most watched of the year.

Barcelona–Madrid in October 2012 boasted an audience six times the size of Málaga–Atlético on the same day. Many teams fill their stadiums only twice a season, when the big two come to town. Internationally, only two Spanish clubs count—another shift in the rivalry. Fans want to see the best players in the world and they are at the big two: when new talents emerge at other Spanish clubs, their career paths now inexorably lead to Madrid, Barcelona, or abroad. “The rivalry has grown because of television, radio, social media, and so on. Now people talk about it abroad even more than in Spain. You see Madrid and Barcelona shirts in England,” says Marcos Alonso. “Go to the moon . . . Madrid or Barcelona,” Hristo Stoichkov laughs.

Within Spain, the media are cause and consequence, digging the trenches deeper. The sports newspapers claim varying degrees of objectivity when none should claim any at all. *El Mundo Deportivo* and *Sport* are openly pro-Barcelona; *Marca* and *AS* are pro-Madrid. Sometimes as much propaganda outlets as papers, they tend to see themselves as an arm of their clubs, increasing the pressure at institutions where winning is no longer an objective but an obligation. The director of a Catalan radio station publicly applauded the decision to cheer Madrid’s European opponents as a “ingenious” way of getting closer to supporters. Never mind getting closer to the truth. Together the two clubs, their fans, and the media have created, or tapped into, a kind of soccer fundamentalism. Those who do not side entirely with them, occupying the same trenches, are dismissed as *obvious* anti-Madrid or anti-Barcelona. Bias, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder.

Andoni Zubizarreta is the Barcelona sporting director and former goalkeeper. He was also a columnist with the broadsheet *El País*. Few have expressed this kind of fundamentalism better than

him: “We demand accuracy, precision and objectivity,” he wrote, “but with one condition: that it is in our favour.” The phrase could be directed at much of the milieu—media, fans, and presidents—but was in fact about the inevitable protagonist of the rivalry, the support role elevated to the status of lead actor: the referee. Men whose mistakes are rarely judged simply as mistakes but are manipulated to fit a partisan agenda.

There may be years when other clubs challenge, but unless there are significant changes they will probably be isolated outbreaks. It is hard to see another team winning the league again, still less return to the period between 1980 and 1984 when neither team won the title in four years, or a decade like the 1970s during which Barcelona claimed a solitary championship. In 2008, Real Madrid broke La Liga points record; the following year, Barcelona broke it back and then bettered that total the year after, racking up ninety-nine points. Madrid reached one hundred points in 2011–2012; Barcelona matched that total the following season. No one had reached ninety points before: Between 2009 and 2012, Barcelona and Madrid *both* achieved that feat three seasons running. The ten highest point totals of all time have come in the past six years. The figures, to use Pep Guardiola’s words, are “fucking barbaric.”

Barcelona reached the halfway point of the 2012–2013 season with eighteen victories and a draw in their first nineteen games. The solitary draw was the 2–2 with Madrid in October 2012, that homage to soccer. The following morning the sports newspaper *AS* splashed a huge “Memorable!” across its cover. “It is a pity to get into the controversy when the football is so good,” Valdano says. But it is never about just the soccer, there is always more. Barcelona versus Madrid, Madrid versus Barcelona. It is a political story, a social one, a cultural one. Above all, it is a human story.

They say that Barcelona is more than a club. They’re right; it is.

So is Real Madrid.

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\* In January 2014 Cristiano Ronaldo won his second Ballon d’Or, with Leo Messi second. Madrid and Barcelona now boast the last nine winners and had six of the 2013 FIFPro team (four Barcelona, two Madrid).



## THE MARTYR PRESIDENT

WARNING SHOTS WERE FIRED but the driver took no notice. The black Ford, license plate ARM 292 sped past and up the mountain, a Catalan flag on its wing. Sitting in the back were a militia lieutenant, the journalist Pere Ventura i Virgili, and Josep Sunyol i Garriga, the president of Football Club Barcelona. A kilometer farther up the road was another armed checkpoint. This time the car did stop. And there, at kilometer 52 of the NVI road to the northwest of Madrid, Barcelona's president and his companions were assassinated by fascist troops. Shot in the back of the head and left, their bodies were never recovered. The date was August 6, 1936.

Today the La Coruña motorway heads out of the Spanish capital toward the Guadarrama mountain range, past the Valley of the Fallen, General Francisco Franco's giant mausoleum with its five hundred-foot cross. The NVI, the old road, breaks off from the motorway and snakes up the mountain climbing steeply through the forest. At the top, four kilometers farther on, is the Alto del León, the pass that controls much of the sierra. A point of huge strategic significance, 1,511 meters above sea level, it was to here that troops raced when an unsuccessful military coup d'état became the Spanish Civil War in July 1936. And it was here that some of the bitterest, most insistent fighting took place in the early stages of a conflict that cost almost half a million lives.

On a clear afternoon the views are stunning but in winter this point lies above the clouds, gray and gloomy. There is little here: a car park, a roadside restaurant, a military pillbox, and a solitary stone cross, shrouded in an eerie cold mist. Back down at what is now kilometer 51.3, below the cloud, is a bend in the road. Madrid spreads out in the distance below: Far away on the horizon, four giant skyscrapers now tower over the city, built on Real Madrid's former training ground. At the side of the road is a sanatorium. Constructed soon after the civil war and named, like so much else, after the *Generalísimo*, it was not there in August 1936. What was there, directly opposite, was a small stone house-turned-staging-post known as the *Casilla de la Muerte*. The house of death. Now there is no sign of it, just an overgrown bank of weeds and moss at the side of the road.

The Spanish Civil War lasted three years between 1936 and 1939. The conflict was caused by a variety of political tensions between Right and Left, religion and secularism, center and the periphery, rich and poor. It started with a military coup launched on July 17 and 18, 1936, by army officers and right-wing civilian collaborators seeking to overthrow the Republic's left-wing Popular Front government, which had been in power since the February general elections. The build-up became known as the Ominous Spring; political tension increased and plotting accelerated. General Franco, who had been posted to Gran Canaria, prevaricated at first, his coyness earning him the nickname *El Indio* of the Miss Canary Islands 1936. But he eventually joined the conspiracy, became the *Caudillo*, a Spanish equivalent of *Duce* or *Führer*, led fascist forces and established a military dictatorship that ruled Spain until 1975.

The coup was successful in the Right's heartlands of Galicia and Castile and unsuccessful in the strongholds of the Left. The city of Madrid, like Barcelona, stayed loyal to the Republic. In Barcelona



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