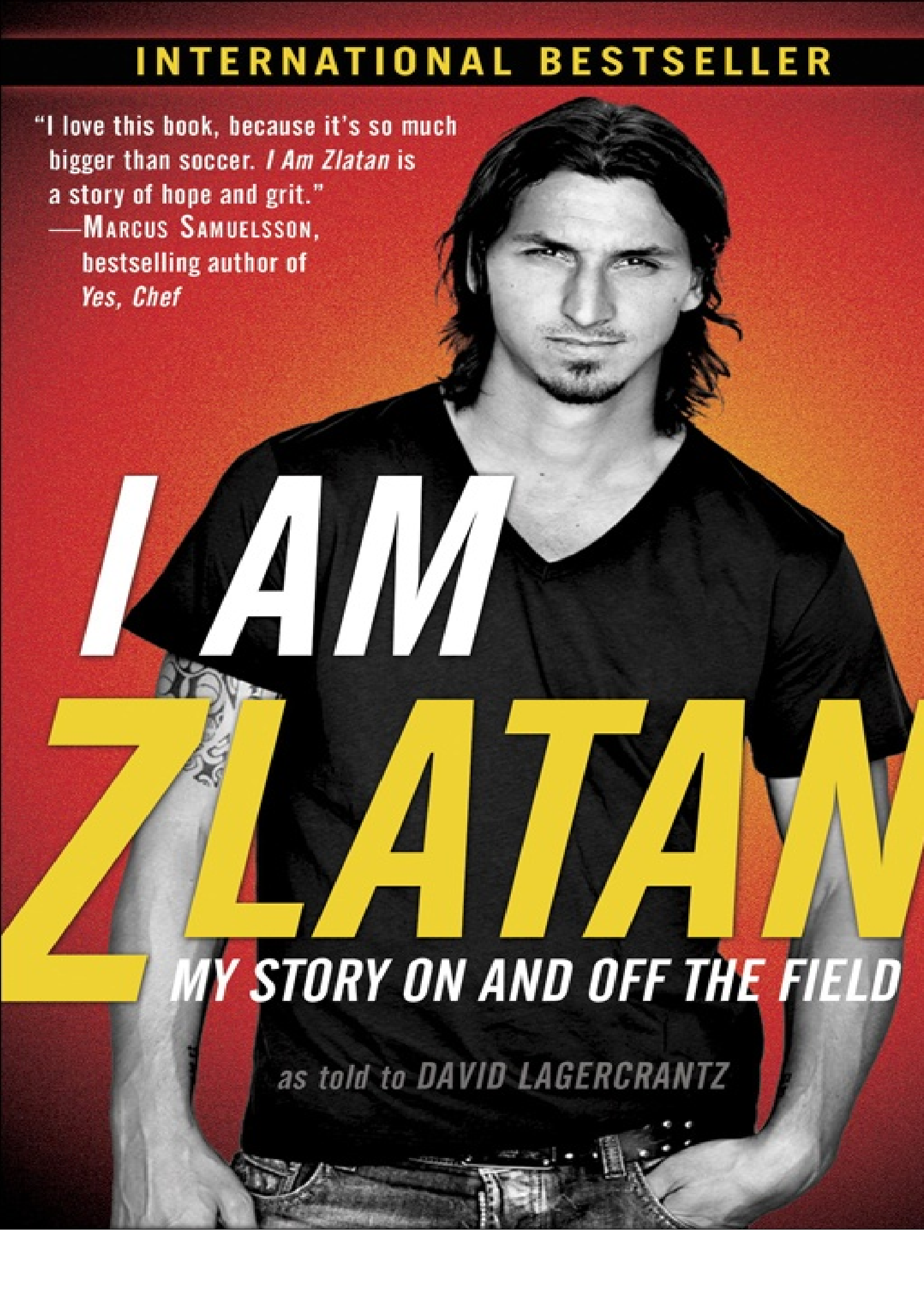


INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

"I love this book, because it's so much bigger than soccer. *I Am Zlatan* is a story of hope and grit."

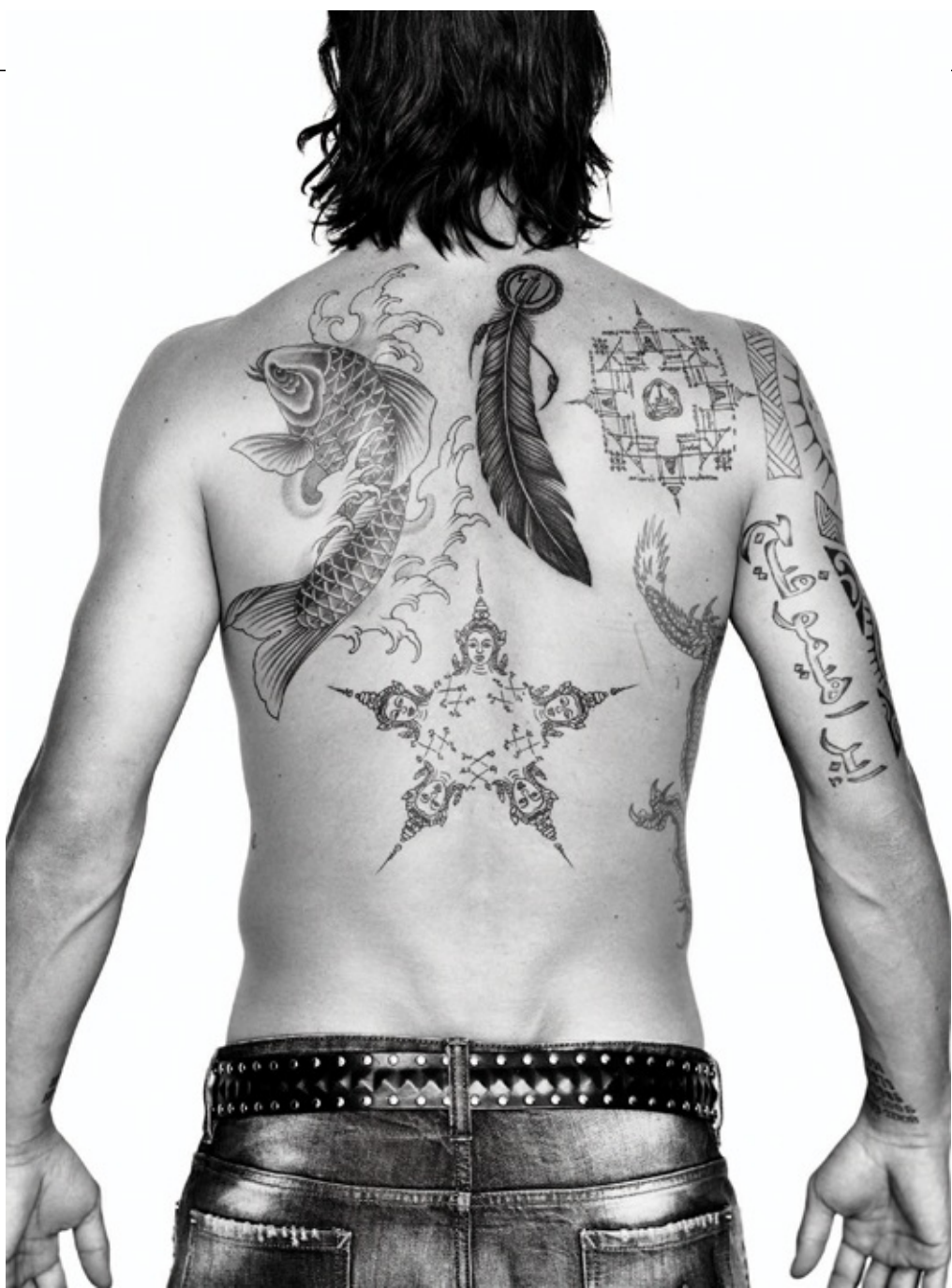
—MARCUS SAMUELSSON,  
bestselling author of  
*Yes, Chef*

A black and white portrait of Zlatan Ibrahimović, a professional footballer, looking directly at the camera. He has long, dark hair and a goatee, and is wearing a black V-neck t-shirt and jeans. The background is a gradient of red and orange.

# I AM ZLATAN

MY STORY ON AND OFF THE FIELD

as told to DAVID LAGERCRANTZ





PRAISE FOR

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# I AM ZLATAN

SHORTLISTED FOR THE AUGUST PRIZE 2012

“The best footballer’s autobiography of recent years is probably *I Am Zlatan*.... In fact, having sold 700,000 copies in Sweden alone and been published in fifteen countries, it’s probably the bestselling European immigrant’s tale since Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*.... Once you get past the obligatory snigger prompted by the phrase ‘footballer’s autobiography,’ you can see that Zlatan’s book strangely resembles an earlier immigrant’s tale: *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Philip Roth’s classic novel about growing up Jewish in 1930s and 1940s Newark, New Jersey. Each man’s story illuminates the other. Moreover, each illuminates the increasingly typical yet rarely heard immigrant experience. Most of the talk about immigrants comes from politicians pontificating about them. These books are wonderful first-hand accounts of what it’s like to grow up in an immigrant family. Though Zlatan and Roth are separated by an ocean and four decades, the overlaps are remarkable.”

—*Financial Times* (UK)

“Might well be the most compelling autobiography ever to appear under a footballer’s name.”

—*The Guardian* (UK)

“This is no PR fluff, nor the usual watered-down account of a pampered multi-millionaire... When was the last time a footballer still playing at the peak of his powers spoke out with such devastating honesty? And the whole story is delivered like he is sitting on a bar stool next to you, telling a tale over a pint down the pub. This book must be treasured.”

—*Daily Mail* (UK)

“This is a snarling, fizzing, unrepentant firecracker of a book; if footballers’ memoirs bore you, make an exception for this one.”

—*The Independent* (UK)

“It is so good. It is so bloody good.... A future classic that will change Sweden.... masterpiece.”

—*Aftonbladet* (Sweden)

“Good God, this is dynamite!”

—*Sportbladet* (Sweden)

“This has to be the best contemporary depiction I have read of the Swedish working class.”

from the big city suburbs.”

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—*Kulturnytt* (Sweden)

“Sensationally honest and well written.”

—*Expressen* (Sweden)

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# I AM ZLATAN

MY STORY ON AND OFF THE FIELD

ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIĆ  
*with* David Lagercrantz

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY

Ruth Urbom



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NEW YORK

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# Career Timeline

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# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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<b>Co Adriaanse</b>	My first coach at Ajax.
<b>Aleksandar, also known as Keki</b>	My little brother, born in 1986.
<b>Massimo Ambrosini</b>	AC Milan team captain. Midfielder.
<b>Micke Andersson</b>	My coach at Malmö FF, in the Superettan League and later in the Allsvenskan League.
<b>Roland Andersson</b>	Former soccer player and member of the Swedish national team. My coach when I joined Malmö FF.
<b>Mario Balotelli</b>	Young talent with Inter Milan. Striker. Later with Manchester City.
<b>Marco van Basten</b>	Striker, outstanding goal-scorer. Totally dominated at AC Milan. Named World Player of the Year in 1992.
<b>Leo Beenhakker</b>	Soccer boss, previously managed teams, including Real Madrid. Sports director at Ajax when I joined that team.
<b>Txiki Begiristain</b>	Sports director at Barcelona during my time with that club. Later resigned.
<b>Silvio Berlusconi</b>	Owner of AC Milan. Former Italian prime minister.
<b>Hasse Borg</b>	Former player and defender with the Swedish national team. Sports director at Malmö FF during my time with the club.

Arrived at Juventus at the same time I did. Defender.

**Fabio Cannavaro**

Named World Player of the Year in 2006. Won the World Cup with Italy in 2006.

**Fabio Capello**

Demon manager. My coach at Juventus.

**Antonio Cassano**

Striker at AC Milan. Member of Italian national team.

**Tony Flygare**

Childhood friend. Soccer talent at Malmö FF.

**Louis van Gaal**

Soccer boss. Former manager. Director of Ajax during the latter part of my time there.

**Italo Galbiati**

Capello's right-hand man at Juventus.

**Adriano Galliani**

Soccer boss, vice president of AC Milan.

**Gennaro Gattuso**

Midfielder at AC Milan. A warrior. Won the World Cup with Italy in 2006.

**Pep Guardiola**

Former midfielder, played for Barcelona. My coach at that club.

**Helena**

My girlfriend, my partner. Mother of my children.

**Thierry Henry**

My friend at Barcelona. French superstar, formerly with Arsenal, where he became that club's top goal-scorer of all time. Won the World Cup in 1998 and the European Championship in 2000 with France.

**Andrés Iniesta**

Brilliant midfielder and winger with Barcelona. Won the World Cup in 2010 and the European Championship with Spain in 2012.

**Filippo Inzaghi**

Striker, leading goal-scorer. Star with AC Milan. I lived in his apartment in Turin. Won the World Cup with

<b>Jurka</b>	My mom. Born in Croatia. She worked as a cleaner.
<b>Kaká</b>	Brazilian, attacking midfielder, global star. Named World Player of the Year in 2007. Transferred from AC Milan to Real Madrid.
<b>Ronald Koeman</b>	My coach during the latter part of my time at Ajax.
<b>Joan Laporta</b>	President of Barcelona for most of my time with that club.
<b>Henrik “Henke” Larsson</b>	Legendary Swedish striker. Played for Celtic and Barcelona. Recipient of the European Golden Boot award in 2001. A mentor to me at the start of my career.
<b>Bengt Madsen</b>	Chairman of the board at Malmö FF during my time there.
<b>Daniel Majstorović</b>	Member of the Swedish national team, has played for various teams abroad. A good friend.
<b>Roberto Mancini</b>	My coach during my first two years at Inter Milan.
<b>Marco Materazzi</b>	Rock-solid defender who won the World Cup with Italy in 2006. Played with me at Inter Milan.
<b>Hasse Mattisson</b>	Team captain at Malmö FF during my time with the club.
<b>Maximilian</b>	My eldest son, born in 2006.
<b>Maxwell</b>	Brazilian player. Incredibly elegant defender. My friend ever since my early days at Ajax. We also played

together at Inter Milan and Barcelona.

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**Olof Mellberg**

Friend, member of the Swedish national team, defender. Played for Aston Villa and Juventus, among other teams.

**Lionel Messi**

Global star. Focus of the game in Barcelona. Joined the club as a thirteen-year-old. Named World Player of the Year in 2009 and 2010.

**Gudmundur Mete**

A good friend. We played together at Malmö FF.

**Mido**

Striker. Egyptian. A good friend at Ajax.

**Luciano Moggi**

Soccer boss, legendary sports director at Juventus during my time with that club.

**Massimo Moratti**

Oil baron, owner of Inter Milan.

**José Mourinho**

Legendary manager. My coach at Inter Milan. Later went to Real Madrid.

**Pavel Nedvěd**

Midfielder with me at Juventus. Named European Player of the Year in 2003.

**Alessandro Nesta**

Star defender with AC Milan. Won the World Cup with Italy in 2006.

**John Steen Olsen**

Agent who discovered me at Malmö FF. Managed to sell me to Ajax. One of my close friends today.

**Alexander Östlund**

Friend, former member of the Swedish national team. Played for various clubs including Southampton.

**Alexandre Pato**

Brilliant young striker at AC Milan. Brazilian.

<b>Andrea Pirlo</b>	Midfielder at AC Milan, later sold to Juventus. Won the World Cup with Italy in 2006.
<b>Mino Raiola</b>	My agent, my friend, my adviser.
<b>Robinho</b>	Super-talent from Brazil. Second striker at AC Milan, previously with Real Madrid and Manchester City.
<b>Ronaldinho</b>	Brazilian. Superstar. Named World Player of the Year in 2004 and 2005. We played together at AC Milan.
<b>Ronaldo</b>	One of the greatest players of all time. Brazilian. Striker. Named World Player of the Year in 1996, 1997, and 2002. My idol as a kid.
<b>Cristiano Ronaldo</b>	Striker, global star. Named World Player of the Year in 2008. Played for Manchester United. Transferred to Real Madrid for a record sum. (Usually referred to as “Cristiano” in this book to distinguish him from the player who, for me, will always be the one true Ronaldo.)
<b>Sandro Rosell</b>	Joan Laporta’s successor as president of Barcelona.
<b>Sanela</b>	My older sister, born in 1979.
<b>Sapko</b>	My older half-brother, born in Bosnia in 1973.
<b>Šefik</b>	My dad. Born in Bosnia. Has worked as a bricklayer and property caretaker.
<b>Thomas Sjöberg</b>	Former soccer player and member of the Swedish national team. Assistant coach during my early days with Malmö FF.
<b>Thijs Slegers</b>	Dutch journalist and friend.

**Rune Smith**

Journalist who wrote the first major article about me.

**Lilian Thuram**

Defender. Played with me at Juventus. Won the World Cup in 1998 and the European Championship in 2000 with France.

**David Trézéguet**

French goal-scorer and star. We played together at Juventus. European champion in 2000 and World Cup winner in 1998 with France.

**Rafael van der Vaart**

Midfielder during my time at Ajax.

**Patrick Vieira**

Midfielder, played with me at Juventus and Inter Milan. Superstar. Friend. Brilliant player. Won the World Cup in 1998 and the European Championship in 2000 with France.

**Vincent**

My second son, born in 2008.

**Christian Wilhelmsson  
("Chippen")**

Midfielder, member of the Swedish national team, friend.

**Xavi**

Brilliant midfielder at Barcelona. Joined the club as an eleven-year-old. Won the European Championship in 2012 and the World Cup in 2010 with Spain.

**Gianluca Zambrotta**

Legendary defender, played with me at both Juventus and AC Milan. Won the World Cup with Italy in 2006.

Pep Guardiola, the Barcelona manager, with his gray suits and brooding expressions, came to me, looking a little self-conscious.

I thought he was all right in those days, not exactly another Mourinho or Capello, but a okay guy. This was long before we started to do battle with each other. It was the autumn of 2009, and I was living my boyhood dream. I was playing with the best team in the world and had been welcomed by seventy thousand people at Camp Nou. I was walking on air—we were maybe not completely. There was a certain amount of nonsense in the papers. That I was a bad boy and all that: that I was difficult to manage. Even so, I was there. Helena, my partner and our sons liked it. We had a nice house in Esplugues de Llobregat, and I was ready. What could possibly go wrong?

“Listen,” Guardiola said. “Here at Barça, we keep our feet on the ground.”

“Sure,” I said. “Fine!”

“So we don’t turn up to training sessions in Ferraris or Porsches.”

I nodded, didn’t go ballistic on him and say things like What the hell business is it of you telling me what cars I drive? At the same time, though, I was thinking, What does he want? What kind of message is he sending here? Believe me, I don’t need to make a big deal of looking tough anymore and drive up in some flash car and park it on the pavement or something. That’s not what it’s about. I do love cars. They’re my passion, and I could sense something else behind what he was saying. It was like, Don’t think you’re anybody special!

I’d already gotten the impression that Barcelona was a little like school, or some sort of institution. The players were cool—nothing wrong with them—and Maxwell was there, my old friend from Ajax and Inter. To be honest, though, none of the guys acted like superstars, which was strange. Messi, Xavi, Iniesta, the whole gang—they were like schoolboys. The best soccer players in the world stood there with their heads bowed, and I didn’t understand any of it. It was ridiculous. If the coaches in Italy say, “Jump,” the stars will look at them and go, What are they, nuts? Why should we jump?

Here everyone did as they were told. I didn’t fit in, not at all. I thought, Just enjoy the opportunity. Don’t confirm their prejudices. So I started to adapt and blend in. I became way too nice. It was crazy.

Mino Raiola, my agent and good friend, said to me, “What’s up with you, Zlatan? I don’t recognize you.”

Nobody recognized me—none of my friends, no one at all. I started to feel down, and here you have to know that, ever since my days at Malmö FF, I’ve had the same philosophy: I do things my way. I don’t give a damn what people think, and I’ve never enjoyed being around uptight people. I like guys who go through red lights, if you know what I mean. Now, though, I wasn’t saying what I wanted to say.

I said what I thought people wanted me to say. It was completely messed up. I drove the club’s Audi and stood there and nodded my head the way I did when I was at school, and



rather the way I should have done when I was at school. I hardly even yelled at my teammates anymore. I was boring. Zlatan was no longer Zlatan, and the last time that happened was when I went to school at the ritzy Borgarskolan, where I saw girls in Ralph Lauren sweaters for the first time and nearly shit in my pants when I tried to ask them out. Even so, I started the season off brilliantly. I scored one goal after another. We won the UEFA Super Cup. I was amazing. I dominated on the pitch. Yet I was a different person. Something had happened—nothing serious, not yet, but still. I grew quiet, and that was dangerous—believe me. I need to be angry to play well. I need to shout and make some noise. Now I was keeping it inside. Maybe it had something to do with the press. I dunno.

I was the second-most-expensive transfer in history, and the papers wrote that I was a problem child and had a flawed character, all the crap you can imagine, and unfortunately I was feeling the pressure of everything—that here at Barça we don't make a show and stuff—and I guess I wanted to prove that I could do it too. That was the stupidest thing I've ever done. I was still awesome on the pitch. It just wasn't as much fun anymore.

I even thought about quitting soccer—not walking out on my contract, though: after all, I'm a professional. But I lost my enthusiasm, and then it was the Christmas break. We headed back to Sweden, to a ski resort up north, and I rented a snowmobile. Whenever life's at a standstill I need some action. I always drive like a maniac. I've done 325 km an hour in my Porsche Turbo and left the cops eating my dust. I've done so much crazy stuff I don't even want to think about it, and now in the mountains I was ripping it up on my snowmobile. I got frostbite and had the time of my life.

Finally an adrenaline rush! The old Zlatan was back, and I thought, Why should I stick it out? I've got money in the bank. I don't need to slave away with that idiot of a manager. I could just have fun instead, and look after my family. It was a great time. It didn't last long, though. When we returned to Spain, disaster hit—not right away, it was more like it crept up on me, but it was hanging in the air.

There was a massive blizzard. It was as if the Spaniards had never seen snow before, and in the hills where we lived there were cars stranded all over the place. Mino, that fat idiot—the wonderful, fat idiot, I should say, just to prevent any misunderstanding—was shivering like a dog in his street shoes and his summer jacket, and convinced me to take the Audi. That turned into a complete and utter shambles. We lost control on a downhill slope and crashed into a concrete wall, wrecking the car's entire right axle.

A lot of guys on the team had crashed their cars in the storm, but nobody did it quite so massively as I did. I won the crashing-your-car tournament, and we all had a good laugh about that, and I was still actually myself once in a while. I still felt pretty good. Then Messi started saying things. Lionel Messi is awesome. He's totally amazing. I don't know him as well as that well. We're very different people. He joined Barça when he was thirteen years old. He's been brought up in that culture and doesn't have a problem with that school crap. Within the team, the play centers on him, which is entirely natural—he's brilliant. But now I was there, and I was scoring more goals than him. He went up to Guardiola and told him, "I don't want to be on the right wing anymore. I want to play in the center."

I was the striker. Guardiola didn't give a damn about that, though. He changed the tactical formation. He swapped the 4-3-3 for a 4-5-1 with me at the front and Messi right behind me, and I ended up in the shadows. The balls passed through Messi, and I didn't get to play

my game. On the pitch I've got to be as free as a bird. I'm the guy who wants to make difference at every level. Guardiola sacrificed me. That's the truth. He locked me in up front. All right, I can understand his dilemma. Messi was the star.

Guardiola had to listen to him. But I mean, come on! I had scored loads of goals at Barça and I'd been pretty awesome as well. He couldn't change the whole team to suit one guy. I mean, why the hell had he bought me, anyway? Nobody pays that kind of money to strangers to buy me as a player. Guardiola had to take both of us into consideration, and, of course, the atmosphere among the club's management grew tense. I was their biggest investment ever and I wasn't happy in the new setup. I was too expensive to be left unhappy. Txiki Begiristain, the sports director, insisted that I had to go and speak to the manager:

"Sort it out!"

I didn't like that. I'm a player who accepts circumstances. "All right, fine, I'll do it."

One of my friends told me, "Zlatan, it's as if Barça had bought a Ferrari and was driving like a Fiat," and I thought, Yeah, that's a good way of looking at it. Guardiola had turned me into a simpler player and a worse player. It's a loss for the whole team.

So I went over to him. It was on the pitch, during a practice session, and I was careful about one thing. I wasn't going to get into an argument, and I told him that.

I said, "I don't want to fight. I don't want to have a war. I just want to discuss things," and he nodded.

He might have looked a little scared, so I repeated what I'd said.

"If you think I want to have a fight, I'll drop it. I just want to have a word."

"That's fine. I like to talk to the players."

"Listen," I continued, "you're not making use of my capacity. If it was just a goal-scoring you were after, you should have bought Inzaghi or somebody else. I need space, I need to be free. I can't just run straight up and down the pitch the whole time. I weigh two hundred pounds. I'm not built for that."

He mulled it over. He always mulled everything right into the goddamned ground.

"I think you can play like this."

"No, it'd be better if you put me on the bench. With all due respect, I get where you're coming from, but you're sacrificing me in favor of other players. This isn't working. It's as if you bought a Ferrari, but you're driving it like a Fiat."

He mulled it over a bit more.

"Okay, maybe that was a mistake. This is my problem. I'll straighten it out."

I was happy. He was going to straighten it out. I left with a spring in my step, but then came the cold shoulder. He hardly looked at me, and I'm not somebody who gets worked up about that sort of thing, not really, and in spite of my new position, I carried on being brilliant. I scored goals—but not as pretty as the goals I'd scored in Italy. I was too far up front. It wasn't the same old "Ibracadabra" anymore, but even so ... Playing against Arsenal in the Champions League over in the new Emirates Stadium, we totally outplayed them. The atmosphere was intense. The first twenty minutes were absolutely unbelievable: I scored 1-0 and 2-0, both beautiful goals again, and I thought, Who cares about Guardiola? I'm just gonna go for it!

Then I was taken out, and then Arsenal came back and made it 1-2 and 2-2, which was bullshit for us, and afterward I had an injured calf muscle. Normally, the managers at

worried by something like that. An injured Zlatan is a properly serious thing for any team. But Guardiola was cold as ice. He didn't say a word, I was out for three weeks, and not once did he come up and ask me, How are you doing, Zlatan? Will you be able to play the next match?

He didn't even say good morning. Not a single word. He avoided eye contact with me. If I went into a room, he would leave. What's going on? I thought. Is it something I did? Do I look wrong? Am I talking funny? All these things were buzzing around in my head. I couldn't sleep.

I was thinking about it constantly. Not because I needed Guardiola's love, exactly. He could hate me, as far as I was concerned. Hatred and revenge get me going. Now, though, I lost my focus, and I talked things over with the players. Nobody had any idea. I asked Thierry Henry, who was on the bench then. Thierry Henry is the best goal-scorer in the history of the French national team. He's brilliant. He was still amazing then, and he was also having a tough time with Guardiola.

"He's not talking to me. He won't look me in the eye. What do you figure happened?" I asked.

"No idea," Henry replied.

We started to joke about it, saying things like Hey, Zlatan, did you make any eye contact today? Nah, but I caught a glimpse of his back. All right, you're making some progress! Silly stuff like that, and it did help a bit. It was really getting on my nerves, though, and I would ask myself every day, every hour, what did I do? What's wrong? I couldn't find any answer, nothing. Only that him giving me the cold shoulder must have had something to do with the conversation about my position. There just wasn't any other explanation. That would be ridiculous if it was true. Was he trying to psych me out ahead of a chat about my position? I tried to step up to him. Go up to the guy and look him in the eye. He was avoiding me. He seemed worked up. Sure, I could have scheduled a meeting and asked him what was going on. But there was no way I was going to do that. I had groveled enough to him. This was his problem.

Not that I knew what it was. I still don't know, or maybe I do ... I think the guy can't handle strong personalities. He wants well-behaved schoolboys—and what's worse, he runs away from his problems. He can't cope with looking them in the eye, and that just makes everything worse.

And things did get worse.

The volcanic-ash cloud came from Iceland. All flights throughout Europe were grounded, and we were supposed to face Inter Milan at San Siro. We went by bus. Some bright guy at Barça thought it was a good idea. I was free of injury then. The journey was a disaster. It took sixteen hours, and we arrived in Milan exhausted. This was our most important match so far, the semifinal in the Champions League, and I was prepared for boos and hysteria at my old home ground: no problem—quite the opposite, in fact. I feed on that kind of thing. The situation otherwise was rotten, and I think Guardiola had a hang-up about Mourinho.

José Mourinho is a big star. He'd already won the Champions League with Porto. He'd been my manager at Inter. He's nice. The first time he met Helena, he whispered to her, "Helena, you have only one mission. Feed Zlatan, let him sleep, keep him happy." That guy says whatever he wants. I like him. He's the leader of his army. But he cares too. He would

text me all the time at Inter, wondering how I was doing. He's the exact opposite of Guardiola. If Mourinho lights up a room, Guardiola draws the curtains. I guessed that Guardiola was trying to match up to him.

"It's not Mourinho we're up against. It's Inter," he said, almost as if we were sitting there imagining we were going to play soccer against the manager, and then he got started on his philosophizing.

I was barely listening. Why should I? That was advanced bullshit, about blood, sweat, and tears, and all that. I had never heard a soccer manager talking like that. Absolute nonsense. Now he was actually coming up to me. This was the training session at San Siro, and people were there checking us out, and they were saying things like Ibra's back!

"Can you play from the first whistle?" Guardiola asked.

"Definitely," I replied. "I'm up for it."

"But are you ready?"

"Absolutely. I'm good."

"But are you ready?"

He was like a parrot, and I was getting some bad vibes.

"Listen, it was a terrible journey, but I'm in form. My injury's healed. I'll give a hundred percent."

Guardiola looked doubtful. I couldn't figure him out, and afterward I phoned Mino Raiola. I'm constantly on the phone to Mino. Swedish journalists always say, Mino's hurting Zlatan's image. Mino is this, Mino is that. Shall I spell it out here? Mino is a genius. So I asked him, "What's up with this guy?"

Neither of us could figure it out. We were getting pissed off. I did get to play in the starting lineup, and we were up 1-0. Then things took a turn. I was taken off after sixty minutes, and we lost 3-1. That was bullshit. I was furious. In the past, like when I was with Ajax, I used to dwell on a loss for days and weeks. But now I had Helena and the kids. They help me forget and move on, and so I focused on our return to Camp Nou. It was important to recover, and the atmosphere kept getting ratcheted up every day.

The pressure was insane. It was as if there were rumblings in the air, and we needed a big win in order to move on. But then ... I don't want to think about it—well, actually I do because it made me stronger. We won 1-0. But it wasn't enough. We crashed out of the Champions League, and afterward Guardiola looked at me like it was all my fault, and I thought, That's it. I've played my last card. After that match, it felt like I was no longer welcome at the club, and I felt rotten when I drove their Audi. I felt like shit when I sat in the locker room, and Guardiola glared at me as if I was a disturbance, an alien. It was ridiculous. He was a wall—a brick wall. I didn't see any signs of life from him, and every hour with the club I wished I could be out of there.

I didn't belong anymore, and when we had an away match with Villarreal, he let me play for five minutes. Five minutes! I was seething inside, not because I was on the bench. I can deal with that, if the manager is man enough to say, You're not good enough, Zlatan. You haven't made the grade.

Guardiola didn't say a word, not a peep, and now I'd had enough. I could feel it in my whole body, and if I'd been Guardiola, I would've been scared. Not that I'm saying I'm hands-off with my fists! I've done all kinds of shit. I don't get into fights, though. All right, on the pitch

I guess I've headbutted a few people. When I get angry, the red mist descends. You don't want to be nearby.

Now, if I'm going to go into details here, I went into the locker room after the match and hadn't exactly planned any frenzied attack. But I was not happy, to put it mildly, and now my enemy was standing there, scratching his head. There weren't many other people there.

Touré was there, and a few others, and then there was the metal box where we put our uniform from the match, and I was staring at that box. Then I gave it a kick. I think it was flying about three meters, but I wasn't finished yet. Not by a long shot. I yelled, "You haven't got any balls!" and certainly even worse than that, and then I added, "You're shitting yourself in front of Mourinho. You can go to hell!"

I completely lost it, and you might have expected Guardiola to say a few words in response, something like Calm down, you don't talk to your manager like that. He's not that type, though. He's a spineless coward. He just picked up the metal box, like a little caretaker, and then left, never to mention it again, not a word. Of course, word got out. On the bus everybody was beside themselves, going, "What happened? What happened?"

Nothing, I thought to myself. Just a few words of the truth. I didn't feel like talking about it. I was furious. Week after week, my manager and boss had shut me out, with no explanation why. It was completely ridiculous. I'd had massive arguments in the past. But the next day, we'd sorted things out and there were no hard feelings. Now, though, there was just silence and mind games, and I thought, I'm twenty-eight years old. I've scored twenty-two goals and fifteen assists here at Barça alone, and I'm still being treated like I don't exist. Should I sit back and take it? Should I carry on trying to adapt? No way!

When I realized I would be on the bench against Almeria, I remembered that line: *Here in Barcelona we don't turn up to training sessions in Porsches or Ferraris*. What kind of nonsense was that, anyway? I'll take whatever car I want, at least if I can piss off idiots. I jumped in my Enzo, put my foot down on the gas, and parked right in front of the door to the training facility. Of course, it was a huge circus. The papers wrote that my car cost as much as the sum total of all the Almeria players' monthly wages. I didn't give a damn. The crap in the media was small potatoes in this context. I'd made up my mind that I was going to have my say.

I'd decided to start to fight my corner, and you should know that that's a game I know how to play. I'd been a fighter before, believe me. I couldn't neglect my preparations, though, and so I talked it over with Mino. We always plan our tricks together, both the smart ones and the dirty ones. And I ran it by my friends.

I wanted to see things from different perspectives, and, my God, I got every kind of advice. The Rosengård guys wanted to come down and smash the place up, and of course that was nice of them, but it didn't really seem like the right strategy under the circumstances, and of course I discussed things with Helena. She's from a different world. She's cool. She can be tough too. Now she came out with some encouragement: "At any rate, you've become a better father. When you haven't got a team you like, you make a team here at home," she said, and it made me happy.

I had a lot of kickabouts with the kids, and I tried to make sure everybody was doing it right, and of course I sat around with my videogames. That's a bit of an addiction with me. I get completely sucked in. Since the years with Inter when I could stay up till four or five

the morning and go to practice on just two or three hours' sleep, I've set some boundaries for myself: no Xbox or PlayStation after ten o'clock.

I couldn't just fritter my time away, and I really tried to dedicate those weeks in Spain to the family, and just cool off in the garden, even have an occasional Corona. That was the good side of things. At night, though, when I lay awake, or in training sessions when I saw Guardiola, my dark side woke up. The rage just throbbed in my head, and I clenched my fists and planned my retaliation. No, I came to realize, there was no turning back now. It was time to take a stand and become my old self again.

Because, don't forget: *You can take the boy out of the ghetto, but you can never take the ghetto out of the boy.*

I got a BMX bike from my brother when I was little. I named it Fido Dido.

Fido Dido was a fierce little cartoon guy with squiggly hair. I thought he was the coolest thing ever. But then my bike got stolen from outside the Rosengård swimming pool, and my dad came up there with his shirt open and his sleeves rolled up. He's the sort who's like, "Nobody lays a hand on my kids! Nobody takes their stuff. Not even a tough guy like my dad could do anything about it, though. Fido Dido was gone, and I was absolutely heartbroken.

After that, I started stealing bikes. I picked the locks. I got to be an expert at it. Boom boom—and the bike was mine. I was the bicycle thief. That was my first thing. It was quite innocent. Sometimes it did get out of hand. One time I got dressed all in black, Rambo-style, and took a massive pair of bolt-cutters and stole a military bike. I definitely got a buzz from that. I loved it. To be honest, it was more for the kicks than the bikes. I started sneaking around in the dark, and I chucked a few eggs at windows and that sort of thing, and I only got caught a few times.

One time that was pretty embarrassing happened in Wessels department store out at Jägersro shopping center. I deserved it, to be honest. A pal and me went into a department store wearing big puffer coats in the middle of the summer—totally stupid thing to do—and under our coats we had four table-tennis paddles and some other junk we picked up. "Are you just how do you plan to pay for this?" the security guard asked us when we got caught. I took out six 10-öre coins—less than one krona, or equivalent to about five cents—from my pocket. "With these." But the guy had no sense of humor, and I resolved to be more professional in the future, and I guess I ended up a pretty skilled little terror in the end.

I was small as a kid. I had a big nose and a lisp and had to go to a speech therapist. A woman came to school and taught me how to say "S," which I thought was humiliating, and I guess I needed to get my revenge. Besides that, I was completely hyper. I couldn't sit still for a second and was constantly running around. It felt like nothing bad could happen to me as long as I ran fast enough. We lived in Rosengård, outside Malmö in southern Sweden, and the area was full of Somalis, Turks, Yugos, Poles—all sorts of immigrants—and Swedes. All of us played at being cocky. Anything could set us off, and things weren't easy at home—not by any stretch of the imagination.

We lived in an apartment up four flights of stairs in those days, and we didn't go in for hugs and that sort of thing. Nobody asked, How was your day today, little Zlatan? There was none of that. There was no adult around who helped with your homework or asked you about your problems. You had to deal with things yourself, and there was no whining if someone had been nasty to you. You had to grit your teeth, and there was chaos and arguing and a fair few smacks and slaps. Sure, sometimes you'd hope for a bit of sympathy. One day I fell from a roof at the child-care center. I got a black eye and ran home bawling, expecting to get a pat on the head, or at least a few kind words. I got a clip on the ear.

"What were you doing up on the roof?"

There was no Poor Zlatan. It was “Stupid idiot, climbing up on a roof, I’ll give you thrashing.” I was completely shocked and ran off. Mom had no time for giving comfort, not in those days. She worked her fingers to the bone to provide for us—she really was a fighter. She couldn’t cope with much else, though. She’d had it tough, and all of us had a terrible temper. There was no Swedish-style civilized conversation at home, like Darling, could you please pass the butter? It was more like Get the milk, asshole! There were doors slamming and Mom crying. She cried a lot. She’s got my love. She’s had to work hard her whole life. She would clean for about fourteen hours a day, and every now and then we would go along with empty wastebaskets and stuff to get a little pocket money. Sometimes, though, Mom would blow a fuse.

She’d hit us with a wooden spoon, and sometimes the spoon would break and I’d have to go out and buy a new one, as if it were my fault she’d hit me so hard. I remember one day in particular. While I was at the child-care center I’d thrown a brick and it somehow bounced and broke a window. When Mom heard about it, she went ballistic. Anything that cost money made her crazy, and she hit me with the spoon. Bang, boom! It hurt, and maybe the spoon broke again. I dunno. Sometimes there weren’t any of those spoons at home, and one time Mom came after me with a rolling pin. I managed to get away, and I talked it over with Sanela.

Sanela is my only full sibling. She’s two years older than me. She’s a tough girl, and she thought we ought to pull Mom’s leg a bit. Goddamn, hitting us over the head like that. Insane! So we went to the supermarket and bought some of those spoons, three for 10 kronor (a couple of bucks), and gave them to Mom as a Christmas present.

I don’t think she got the irony. She didn’t have any space for that sort of thing. There had to be food on the table. All her energies went toward that. There were a lot of us at home, including my half-sisters (who later vanished from the family and broke off contact with a couple of us), and then my little brother, Aleksandar, known as Keki, and there wasn’t enough money. There wasn’t enough of anything, and the older kids looked after us younger ones. We wouldn’t have made it otherwise, and there were a lot of instant noodles with ketchup and eating at friends’ places or at my Auntie Hanife’s. She lived in the same block of apartments and had been the first of all of us to come to Sweden.

I hadn’t even turned two when Mom and Dad got divorced, and I don’t remember any of it. That’s probably just as well. It wasn’t a good marriage, from what I understand. It was noisy and messy, and they’d gotten married so Dad could get a residency permit, and I assume that it was natural that all of us ended up with Mom. I missed my dad. He was better off, and there was more fun stuff going on around him. Sanela and I would meet up with Dad every other weekend. He’d often turn up in his old blue Opel Kadett, and we’d go to Pildamm Park or out to Ön, the island off the coast of Malmö, and get burgers and ice creams. One time he splurged and got us each a pair of Nike Air Max, those cool trainers that cost about a thousand kronor (over \$100). Mine were green and Sanela’s were pink. Nobody else at Rosengård had trainers like those, and we felt totally wicked. Things were good with Dad, and we could get 50 kronor (about \$6) for a pizza and a Coke. He had a good job and one other son, Sapko. He was our fun weekend dad.

Later, things got tougher. Sanela was brilliant at running. She was the fastest in her age group in the whole Skåne region in the 60-meter dash, and Dad was proud as a peacock and



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