

BARCELONA FOOTBALL CLUB: THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY BEYOND A HISTORIC SEASON

by Víctor Terradellas i Maré *

Hans Gamper, a Barcelona-based Swiss industrialist, would never have guessed that the club he founded on the 29th of November 1899 would, a century later, go on to become the most important football club in the world, economically, socially, politically and in terms of its sporting achievements. In fact, Gamper and a group of young, enthusiastic Swiss, British and Catalans initially wanted to join an existing club, Català Futbol Club, but the refusal they received from its members led them to found their own club: Futbol Club Barcelona.

In effect, *Futbol Club Barcelona's* unprecedented sporting achievement this season (achieving the Treble, by winning the UEFA Champion's League, the King's Cup and the League for the first time) is accompanied by an international dimension witnessed by figures which speak for themselves: more than 160,000 members and 1,888 supporters clubs spread over five continents. The club's sporting achievements include nineteen League titles, twenty-five Spanish Cups, seven Spanish Super Cups, three European Cups, two European Super Cups, four European Cup Winner's Cup and three Fair Cups (the precursor to the UEFA Cup). What is more, it is the only European club since 1955 to have always competed in one of the four European competitions.

In spite of the size and extent of the club's sporting achievements, these pale

into insignificance when it comes to a global understanding of the personality of a sporting institution that has connected and connects its sporting personality to a clear identification with the Catalan language, culture and nation.

A nation's team

It is difficult to separate Catalunya's recent history from that of the football club that, for many years, had to play the part of substitute. In effect, during General Franco's military dictatorship (which lasted from the coup in 1936 until his death in 1975), the stadium of the *Futbol Club Barcelona* (or *Barça*, as the Club is affectionately known) was the only space in Catalunya where people could publicly express their collective affection for a symbol of Catalanism without being subject to direct



repression on behalf of the regime. Such repression was typical of the earlier years of the Club's history.

The first wave of triumphant *barcelonism* arose during the twenties with the arrival of legendary players such as Samitier, Alcántara, Zamora, Sagi, Piera and Santo. During this period, a love for the Club's colours (blue and red) spread throughout the country and allowed it to be identified for all time with Catalan sentiment.

The inauguration of the Club's stadium took place on the 20th May 1922, in Les Corts. It was a magnificent arena with an initial capacity for 30,000 spectators, which in subsequent modifications rose to 60,000.

During Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, in 1925, in a match dedicated to

the *Orfeó Català* (the Catalan Choir), the crowd whistled the Spanish national anthem. In reprisal the Club was closed for six months and Gamper was forced to permanently relinquish the president's chair of his beloved Club. Even in the early days, the Spanish authorities viewed the growing popularity of the Catalan football club with suspicion.

Image of the *Ciutat Esportiva FC Barcelona Joan Gamper*, inaugurated on June 2006

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The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) also took its toll on the Club. *Barça's* president at the time, Josep Sunyol i Garriga, was shot by firing squad for 'disaffection for the regime' on the 6th of August 1936. Two years later, on the

16th of March 1938, a bomb dropped by the Fascist aviation landed on the club's headquarters, causing substantial damage. A few months later, Barcelona's occupation by Franco's troops brought numerous problems to a club that had become one of the great symbols of Catalunya.

BARÇA ARE THE AMBASSADORS OF A CATALUNYA THAT PRESENTS ITSELF TO THE WORLD WITH A DESIRE TO BECOME A FREE, SOVEREIGN NATION, ALONGSIDE THE REST OF THE WORLD'S NATIONS

These have been the Spanish state's most brutal expressions of hostility towards the Catalan Club. In addition, throughout the remaining years of the dictatorship, repeated episodes of political interference occurred, in order to weaken *Barça* on a sporting and institutional level.

During the Franco period the organisation came to be known as the *Club de Futbol Barcelona*, the Spanish version of the more Anglicised *Futbol Club Barcelona* (an offence that was not rectified until 1973) and the four bars on its shield were reduced to two until 1949, when it regained its original format.

The most blatant example of vindictive manipulation of the sport were the efforts on behalf of Franco's government to obstruct the signing of Di Stéfano by the Club. They had already obtained the rights to the player, but the Argentinean ended up at *Real Madrid*. These crude but effective actions were to change the course of the history of the Spanish leagues and, in turn, the early years of the European Cup. Moves by influential members of the Franco regime to force Barcelona to give up their right to Di Stéfano have been amply documented: The decisive,

intimidatory role of Barcelona's civil governor, Acedo Colunga, the surprise visit by the president of the Spanish Football Federation to La Coruña, where a meeting was being held by the Cabinet, in order for him to receive his instructions and the pressure applied by the *Instituto Español de la Moneda Extranjera* (Spanish Institute of Foreign Currency) on the then-president of *Barça*, Martí Carreto.

A *Barcelonist* renaissance occurred during the dictatorship following the arrival of a star player Ladislau Kubala, in June 1950, making FC Barcelona an unstoppable team and ensuring the Les Corts stadium was too small to accommodate all the fans. Between 1951 and 1953, *Barça* won all the competitions in which they took part. The 1951-52 season in particular is historic in that the team won the five competitions in which they competed.

Change of stadium, change of an era

This magnificent sporting moment facilitated the building of a new stadium: *Camp Nou*. The project was much more ambitious, both from an architectural standpoint as well as for the economic commitment on behalf of the Club.

Initially, however, *Camp Nou* was not only to be the scene of these great triumphs, it also experienced a grey period in the sixties, in which it failed to win any trophies.

The sporting triumphs returned with Johan Cruyff's arrival at the Club on the 28th of October 1973. His signing led to a great reversal in the Club's fortunes and led to them winning the 1973-1974 league. *Barça* were to win the final by beating *Real Madrid* 5-0.

The end of the dictatorship also led to the democratisation of sporting institutions and in the first elections in which all the Club's members were eligible to vote, Lluís Núñez became president. Thus began the longest presidency in the Club's history (1978-2000).

In 1979 *Barça* regained its role in Europe by winning its first European Cup Winner's Cup, in the Swiss city of Basle. It was a triumph that also demonstrated the Club's social strength as witnessed by more than 30,000 supporters who travelled to watch the final in person. The victory in Europe warranted a never before seen celebration on the streets of Barcelona and other Catalan cities. In 1982 and 1989, *Barça* once more won the European Cup Winner's Cup.

Great disappointment came after winning the Spanish League Championship in 1985, with *Barça* losing the European Cup final in Seville. This led to the start of a period of sporting and institutional difficulties for the Club, that was not to end until Johan Cruyff's arrival on the trainer's bench in 1988.

Thanks to Johan Cruyff, *Barça* regained their winning-streak and were dubbed the Dream Team, with four consecutive League titles (1991-1994) and their first European Cup, which they won in London on the 20th May 1992.

The resignation of Núñez in July 2000 led to an election which was won by Joan Gaspart, who had been vice president for the previous 22 years. During Gaspart's term as president the Club did not go on to win more trophies, which exacerbated the Club's crisis. In February 2003 he resigned, giving way to a period of uncertainty that continued until July when more elections were held.



From national role models to universal role models

The early years of the twenty-first century have marked an important turning point in the history of this centenarian club. On the 9th November 2006, a lawyer, Joan Laporta i Estruch, became the new president of FC Barcelona, after obtaining more than half the votes cast. This made him the most voted for president in the history of the Club. Once elected, the new president invited all the fans to begin a new journey, when he stated that with the elections, 'the members have voted for change' and that the new *Barça* 'takes to the air tonight'.

Thus a new era was to begin, with the hope a new project brings and with the signing of world-class players such as Ronaldinho, Deco and Eto'ò. The new team did not take long in achieving results, winning the 2004-2005 League, and repeating its victory the following year. These sporting successes, culminating in the second UEFA Cup, were combined with a strong desire to relaunch and update *Barça's* social commitment. Alongside the sporting campaign, the new leadership launched

Carles Puyol, the 'great captain', provided one of the memorable images of his team's 6-2 win over *Real Madrid* when he kissed the Catalan flag

‘the Great Challenge’ and in 2006 the Club’s members exceeded 150,000. 2006 was also a splendid year in the sporting arena, with the Club winning its second UEFA Cup in Paris, facing Arsenal in the final.

At an institutional level, *Futbol Club Barcelona* took on a completely new challenge for a football club. Laporta and his management team wanted to consolidate the Club on an international scale by participating in initiatives that reaffirmed the ethical and civic values the organisation wishes to represent. This was accompanied by a desire to project the national dimension of Catalunya in the international arena.

FUTBOL CLUB BARCELONA HAS AMPLY DEMONSTRATED THEIR COMBINATION OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND SPORTING ACHIEVEMENTS THAT ARE ALMOST UNHEARD OF ANYWHERE ELSE ON THE CONTINENT

The outcome was an agreement, in 2005, between *Barça’s* president and the president of the *Fundació CATmón* (and the writer of this article), Víctor Teradellas. It enabled one of the first actions of its kind to take place in the Balkans and in Bosnia Herzegovina with the visit of a committee to the area. The committee was made up of the heads of the two organisations, and counted on the collaboration of David Minoves, director of the ACCD (the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation).

This trip is significant in that, beyond the establishment of a *Barça* supporters club in Sarajevo canton, the committee visited aid projects run by *IGMAN-Acció Solidària* on behalf of the *Fundació CATmón* and the ACCD. Catalan aid organisations have been present in Bosnia since the start of the

war and this manifests itself in the Catalan delegation being given the status of a state by the Bosnian authorities. Laporta’s speeches symbolised *Barça* as the ambassadors of a Catalunya that showed itself to the world with a desire to become a free, sovereign nation, alongside the rest of the world’s nations.

As part of this plan, in December 2006, the *Futbol Club Barcelona* signed an agreement in the headquarters of the United Nations in New York that was to make them the first football team ever to wear the Unicef emblem on their shirts. After their 107-year history, the *Barça* strip was to be sponsored, but in a reversal of convention, it was based on aid sponsorship. The *Fundació del Barça* was to pay one and a half million euros a year to Unicef for five seasons.

From crisis to ecstasy

Paradoxically, this new, triumphant period for *barcelonism* was accompanied by mediocre results during the 2007-2008 season. The change in fortunes was seized upon by those most critical of the Club’s management, leading to a vote of no confidence in the president and his board which, ultimately, was proved unsuccessful.

As a result, as president, Laporta and his management team were conscious of the fact that their credibility was at stake in the 2008-2009 season. Laporta took personal responsibility for the risk of naming a young Catalan coach manager of the A team. The person he chose above coaches with an international reputation was Josep Guardiola, who had moved up *Barça’s* ranks.

Guardiola had formed part of the Dream Team as a player, and had worked as a coach with the Club’s other

teams. In spite of his complete lack of experience in first division teams, Guardiola became the protagonist behind the best team in the history of *Barça* and achieved something unheard of in the history of the Club by winning the UEFA Champion's League, the King's Cup and the League for the first time. It is a historic achievement that was made possible thanks to a combination of teamwork (with seven players in the A team who had moved up the ranks, in particular, Puyol, Xavi, Piqué and Iniesta) and the sheer working capacity, far from the media spotlight, of stars such as Eto'o and Messi. It led to an unprecedented sporting success that included winning away to Real Madrid, 6-2.

The need for a league for the top European teams

This great social and sporting moment for the blue and red team again brings to the fore the need for Europe's top teams (Manchester, Paris Saint Germain, Bayern, Milan, Ajax and so on) to go beyond intra-state competitions and establish the continent itself as their natural playing field.

The economic strength and the sporting dimension of these clubs calls for new competitions that make every game a sporting occasion of extraordinary dimensions. As is the case in the American basketball league, the NBA, there could be a closed competition between a certain number of teams that represent the continent's best.



This is the future of European football and in this future the Catalan team, *Futbol Club Barcelona* will fully participate, having demonstrated their combination of social, political and sporting achievements that are almost unheard of in the rest of the continent.

Josep Guardiola's sporting philosophy was key to his team's success last season

If what we Catalans say is true, that '*Barça* is more than a club' it is also necessary to realise that behind them there is much more than a compact group of supporters that have only a sporting passion for a football team. Behind *Barça* there is a sporting sentiment that is strongly linked to signs of a national identity that also overcame the social, political and economic barriers that the twentieth century placed before it. Now, in the twenty-first century, it wishes to join the rest of the European nations with its own voice.

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