

Let the Boys Play:

Proper Reactions to Expressions of Nationalism through Sport

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"The thing about football - the important thing about football - is that it is not just about football."

- Terry Pratchett, Unseen Academicals

The current constitutional crisis in Spain has ignited sentiments that have been burning for centuries, spilling over to arenas other than politics. Historically, regional nationalism in Spain has been expressed through mediums such as language and sport. This has been especially true in football, where both are combined. Attempts from the governing bodies of the Spanish government and La Liga (The Spanish League) to regulate these expressions have only incited more resistance and caused problems. If these governing bodies want to maintain political stability, they should not try to control nationalist sentiments on the pitch, but rather respect the languages, traditions and symbols of these regions and clubs.

Spain has a long history of cultures clashing and coexisting on the península. You can walk the streets in any city and see the different layers of history: pre-Roman, Roman, Visigothic, Sephardic, Moorish, reconquista, renacentista, imperialist, revolutionary, civil war, dictatorship, modern democracy. These diverse and competing periods of history produce a complicated collage of cultural inheritances, language being chief among them. Linguistic diversity has played important roles in cultural identities in their regions in post-Franco Spain. This was not always the case, however, as under Franco all other regional languages and symbols were outlawed and all clubs with non-Spanish names were forced to be renamed. Most notable among them was Futbol Club Barcelona (FC Barcelona), which was renamed Club de Fútbol de Barcelona (CF Barcelona), and the Catalan flag removed from its crest during the Franco regime. As the Franco regime began to come to an end in 1974, the blaugrana team was quick to restore their name and symbols, returning to FC Barcelona.

The Spanish Constitution currently provides protection of the Spanish language, as well as the protection of other languages in the provinces of Galicia, Basque Country and Cataluña. In these areas, Gallego, Euskara and Catalan, respectively, have constitutional recognition as co-official languages. In the last 40 years, these regions have celebrated and championed bilingualism. However, access to materials in these languages outside of these regions is severely limited. If La Liga and the Spanish government want to foster and encourage unity, the first step would be to

raise the status of co-official language in all of Spain and make accessible all materials in these co-official languages. Doing so would reduce the feelings of alienation that may be harbored by fans in these regions, thereby making cooperation and dialogue smoother.

Interestingly enough, the spread of La Liga first-division teams across the country reflects the diglossic communities in those regions. Thirteen of the twenty clubs are from the abovementioned bilingual communities, leading one to rethink the definition of Spanish football, as most of the top clubs are from areas that speak something else in addition to Spanish. Moreover, only four (five including Las Palmas in the Canary Islands) are based in regions that have not been involved in independence movements in the last century. In the past, politicians and civilians alike have claimed grievances against the central government in Madrid on terms of economic and social benefits. These forces have seemed to materialize in the support of clubs, most notably Athletic Bilbao in the north and FC Barcelona in the east.

These clubs, just like any other club, have their traditions tied to history. Most prominent among them are the hymns in the regional languages of Euskara and Catalan, which have become rallying points for nationalists. The "Cant del Barça" focuses on the Catalan language as a pillar of cultural identity as a Catalan and Barcelona fan, claiming that "One flag unites us as brothers." La Liga should celebrate these traditions and petition the Spanish government to extend protection to them as a sign of goodwill and cooperation.

During the Franco regime, the *Clásico* rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona was a bi-annual reenactment of the clash of ideologies during the Spanish Civil War. It was during this period that the motto of FC Barcelona "More than a Club" came to life as the clubs themselves became symbols of the differing ideologies.

In recent years, the public display of symbols has been debated and contested. If one goes to a FC Barcelona home match at Camp Nou stadium, they will see thousands of *esteladas*, the flag most commonly used in association with the Catalan independence movement, being waved proudly. When FC Barcelona was set to play in the 2016 King's Cup against FC Sevilla in the Vicente Calderón stadium in Madrid, the Spanish government declared the *estelada* illegal and banned it from display by fans during the match. FC Barcelona appealed the ruling to a constitutional court and the ruling was overturned, and fans came by the thousands with their *esteladas* to support their club and their Catalunya.

In October 2017, FC Barcelona was advised by La Liga to cancel their game as the Catalan referendum took place, citing security concerns. FC Barcelona defied La Liga by playing their match behind closed doors as a symbol of solidarity towards the Catalan people and the desire for self-determination. While the match was played before an empty stadium, thousands of Spanish National Police attempted to interrupt the referendum process. These efforts by the governing bodies to censure nationalistic feelings were met by a ferocious reaction and brought the

issue outside of the stadium, when it should have stayed inside. La Liga and the Spanish government should recognize this reality and work towards protecting the symbols of these clubs, as they themselves are symbols of something greater than themselves - the people.

If the Spanish government and La Liga sincerely show that they are trying to work towards a polyphonic community, and not just a monolithic society, they certainly would be more successful in understanding and cooperating with differences. They could have minimized the reactions of nationalistic groups and mitigated the constitutional crisis.