

THE LAST GENUINE LOCAL TEAM:

ATHLETIC BILBAO SURVIVING IN THE SPANISH LEAGUE

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A regular season NHL game in Montreal is suspended for twenty minutes when local protestors manage to enter the court and tie themselves to one of the goals. They are carrying signs calling for Quebec's separation from Canada and the release of local Quebecer terrorist suspects. Naturally, this incident comes as no surprise, since political protest is common in hockey games. In fact, the home team, the Montreal Canadiens, is associated with the region's separatist movement and only uses Quebecer players in its squad.

This description surely sounds ludicrous. Professional sports have little to do with politics in Canadian reality, especially when it concerns sensitive issues such as the division of Canada. In general, sports hardly ever serve as a political tool in North America (aside perhaps from issues of racism, such as Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's ban on African-American players). Moreover, the mere thought of a team only employing players from a certain ethnic background is inconceivable; not only is such a policy racially discriminatory by itself, it is also bound to be disastrous on the professional level, since the talent pool for such a team is incredibly small. However, such a situation does exist in the professional sports scene, and not in a society that can conveniently be dismissed as fundamentalist or conservative by a patronizing outsider. It happens in Western Europe, and in the world's most popular sport: soccer.

Athletic Club is the soccer team of Bilbao, the main port city of Spain's Basque county. The aforementioned incident, completely absurd in North American culture, did in fact take place in February 2002, when Athletic played host to Spanish Champions Real Madrid; dozens of people invaded the pitch, or playing field, carrying signs, forcing the referees to suspend the match. Again, hardly anyone was surprised. Arguably the strongest Basque symbol in the world, the club's essence is as political as it is sportive. Therefore, calls against the Spanish government and cheers for the Basque separatist movement are often heard in the Bilbaoan San-Mamés stadium. Indeed, as soccer researchers Vic Duke and Liz Crolley point out in their book *Sport, Nationalism and the State*, no occasion seems more appropriate for protest than the annual home match against Franco's favorites (35)—the cocky, *Real*, or royal, Madridians, if they even deserve this title, for of Real's eleven starting

players, six were foreigners. Athletic, on the other hand, fielded eleven Basques, the traditional *la cantera*, an all Basque-squad, as it always does.

The Basques are one of Europe's oldest peoples. Although they are formally a part of Spain, most Basques regard the Spanish people as foreigners, and so a persistent (although rather unsuccessful) nationalistic struggle for independence has taken place in this small part of the world for the last century. The link between soccer and politics in this case is evident even in the simplest chronological sense: Both Athletic Bilbao and the local nationalist movement emerged in the late 19th century and gained popularity during and after the Spanish civil war. This is not a unique phenomenon. In many other parts of the world, sports and particularly soccer have been used as a tool to advance certain ideologies. By and large, even the worst totalitarian regimes in modern times have made it a practice to avoid soccer stadiums, which in turn became centers of political demonstrations. In the Soviet Union, for instance, the only place where one could openly express his objection to Communism was in Spartak Moscow's ground, or stadium, a unique spot in the city that the secret police dared not enter (Kuper 46).

Similarly, sport sociologist Jeremy MacClancy applies the same principle to the Basque case. In "Nationalism at Play: The Basques of Vizcaya and Athletic Club de Bilbao," he states that during the years of Franco's regime, soccer "became one of the very few legal ways by which Basques could demonstrate who they were and what they were made of" (192). Moreover, the club's relentless commitment to the Basque goal has won it "great popularity throughout the country" (186), even though and perhaps because, it was forced to give up the original name of Athletic Club: as part of his attempts to eliminate all regional, separatist elements from Spain, Franco forced all institutions to Hispanicize their names. From 1941 until Generalissimo Franco's death in 1975, Athletic Club de Bilbao was known as *Atlético Bilbao* (Duke and Crolley 36, MacClancy 191). Hence, since supporting a certain club can often serve as a powerful way of expressing political ideas (the right to self-determination in this case), it is only natural that a team with such a glorified ideological history as Athletic insists on using only Basque players. Or is it?

In the contemporary European soccer market, relying strictly on local talents is practically suicidal. In fact, the use of foreign players, which today has become nothing less than a necessity, was just as acceptable in the past. Men from neighboring countries or from South America have played professionally in Europe

since soccer's first days; even the greatest players in Spanish football (soccer) history, Ferenc Puskas and Alfredo Di-Stefano, were not born in Spain, but came from Hungary and Argentina respectively. What allowed teams such as Athletic to succeed with no outside help in earlier periods, however, were the strict limits imposed on imported players: in most cases, a club could not have more than three foreigners on its squad, which of course meant that at least eight local players played in every match.

Historically, then, Athletic is one of Spain's most successful clubs, the winner of eight national championships and twenty-three king's cups (local competition separated from the regular league). Only two teams have bigger trophy cabinets: Real Madrid and Barcelona. When discussing recent times, however, the picture changes dramatically. Bilbao has not won any title since 1984, and is generally no longer considered to be a leading force in Spanish soccer. True, it is still one of the only clubs in Spain ever to avoid relegation, but except for one successful season in 1998, which earned the club the third place in the league, it has become quite insignificant from a pure sportive perspective. Athletic has declined so much recently simply because soccer does not operate in a void. The globalizing trend that has swept the world in the last few decades has not skipped over the world of sports. Calls for the elimination of foreign limitations were heard in Europe as early as twenty years ago, but the international federations, fearful of the chaotic implications of such a move, disregarded them at the time. The game's highly nationalized structure was kept in place until December of 1995, when the European Union court of appeals delivered a ground breaking decision.

In response to a suit brought by Jean Marc Bosman, the court determined that transfer fees for players whose contract expired were illegal. Bosman, a relatively unknown Belgian player, decided to file the suit after his club refused to allow him to leave once his contract ended. The EU court accepted his position and determined that just like in any other field of business, one was free to move on once he or she is no longer under contract with a certain employer. More importantly, the court outlawed all limitations on the number of EU-nationals playing on a certain team. At once, European state borders became insignificant for soccer; any European club could use as many EU players as it wanted, regardless of their home country. These two decisions, commonly known as the "Bosman ruling," changed soccer forever. The meaning of nationality for the European clubs has been practically drained by

this ruling. Chelsea, for instance, the London team notorious for its right wing semi-fascist group of supporters (Buford 17), cast a watershed in soccer history on December 1999, when in a match against Southampton Italian manager Gianluca Vialli chose a lineup that “contained not a single British player” (Garland and Rowe 14). The trend actually continues to this very day - the club, owned by a Russian and coached by an Italian, currently has nineteen foreign players out of a squad of twenty eight! Hand in hand with the soaring ticket prices and the elimination of standing terraces, or seatless stands, Chelsea’s reliance on foreigners has changed the faces of its crowd, transforming the typical group of supporters “from Grey Shirts to Grey Suits” (Lee 30). Soccer, once a cheap leisure time activity for the masses, is today a hobby for the upper classes.

Such changes have made Athletic’s policy anachronistic. Not only do all other professional teams use foreigners, they are the stars of the team in most cases; the locals who play are usually younger reserve players. The notion of a player beginning and ending his career in the same club, like Paolo Maldini of Milan, has become virtually inconceivable. The Bosman ruling has introduced market economy at its fiercest to the world of European soccer, and so, as expected, the smaller clubs are the first to suffer (Crocchi and Ammirante 11). Provincial clubs are currently locked in a Catch-22 situation: having lost their main source of income—the sale of homegrown star players, who are nowadays allowed to transfer for free once their contract expires—they cannot afford to pay their best men, who then move on once their contracts expire. Teams with a glorious heritage like West Ham United of London or Napoli of Naples, unable to compete financially of the bigger clubs, are sinking into oblivion.

The implications of the Bosman ruling were felt well beyond the boundaries of Europe; it opened up global soccer markets completely. Limitations on all foreigners in soccer (and in other sports such as basketball) have been mostly lifted or reformed by the vast majority of the international federations. It was a necessary measure to take on their part, otherwise teams from EU member countries would have had an unimaginable advantage over teams from the rest of the world. Thus, an influx of South American and African players has arrived in Europe; some do all that they can to acquire EU passports (marriage, family ties and so on), while others play as foreigners. And so, when the European Champion, Real Madrid of Spain, consists of four Brazilians, two Argentineans, one Colombian, and of course several other

Europeans—French, Portuguese and British players—one question arises: is the current state-based structure of world soccer collapsing?

Robert D. Kaplan, author of "The Coming Anarchy," would probably argue so. Having traveled extensively in under-reported areas such as West Africa, Kaplan concluded that contemporary world maps are soon to become irrelevant. Our future will be determined by a constant struggle over scarce, finite resources, which will blur the current borders. Our contemporary state-centered world order is about to become useless. Following this theory, if one views sporting talent as a resource (Rhoden), and the game of soccer as an indicator of the existence of an independent "imagined community," that is a group of people with a unique sense of kinship, then it is clear to see that national boundaries as used by soccer bodies will soon become insignificant. In the world of soccer, wherein players can choose their club regardless of their origin state, "the future map—in a sense the last map—will be an ever mutating representation of chaos" (Kaplan 68). Just as present-day physical boundaries are about to become politically useless due to the depletion of natural resources and the migration of millions, so will they become extraneous for the world of soccer.

Chelsea's midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron, for example, was born in Argentina. However, that fact by itself does not automatically mean he is considered an Argentinean player, since he also has an Italian passport due to his ancestors' origins. Actually, he has spent most of his adult life outside South America, playing for Italian and English clubs. Yet Veron cannot independently decide to renounce Argentina and declare himself to be an Italian soccer player, a member of the Squadra Azzura, the Italian national team – FIFA, soccer's governing body, will never allow it. The International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) currently has two-hundred and four nation-members and its estimated annual global financial turnover in 1997 was \$250 billion (Sugden, Tomlinson, Darby 11); for comparison's sake, it has thirteen more members than the UN, and a GNP larger than that of General Electric. This organization's power can not be overstated. All of its members must obey strict and organized rules regarding national teams and the game-play itself, or they will be banned from playing international soccer. FIFA regulations state clearly that a player has to choose a national team and stick with it for the rest of his career, or he will be banned. Had Veron switched national teams in the midst of his career, he would

have been immediately disqualified by FIFA from playing professional soccer worldwide.

Secondly, the importance of nationalistic feelings and the crowds must not be underestimated. To be sure, all of us live in a global society to some extent, but that does not mean nationalism is dying, certainly not in sports; on the contrary, at times it seems that nationalistic soccer benefits from globalization (Crolley and Hand 10). While it seems unlikely that a soccer-caused war like the one between Honduras and El-Salvador in 1969 (after the latter managed to qualify for the World Cup at the expense of the former) could happen again today, one cannot rule it out completely. Witnessing a whole city stop in the midst of rush hour to watch its nation's under-17 team play, a common event in metropolitan cities such as Buenos Aires during every youth world cup, is sufficient evidence to prove that, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the rumors of the death of international soccer (played between national squads) have been greatly exaggerated. One also needs to keep in mind that although players are usually paid ridiculously low sums for their participation in the national teams, they still regard it as the peak of their careers. Although Veron's annual salary is estimated at four million dollars (G. Jones) he chose to spend last summer playing for Argentina in the World Cup instead of going on vacation. This tournament's enormous success proves that Kaplan's prophecy is yet to be fulfilled when it comes to soccer; even in our "global village" club level activities are still secondary to international competitions. Oddly enough, Athletic's semi-declared Basque nationalist stand does not interfere with its players' international careers. Several of them, like midfielder Julen Guerrero, have been proudly representing Spain. Even Athletic's symbol throughout the 1970s, goalkeeper Iribar, who was well known for his pro-separatist opinions, captained the Spanish national squad (MacClancy 194). It seems that nationalistic sentiments are important for the Basque players of Athletic, just as long as they do not interfere with the personal fame and glory attached to playing at the more prestigious international level.

For the fans, on the other hand, such sentiments create the opposite effect. Ironically, international tournaments, which do not have a formal Basque representative, are the ones responsible for keeping the supporters of Athletic motivated. For most of them, Athletic is not simply the team of the city of Bilbao; in many ways, it is the Basque national team. True, some of the best Euskadi (the local name for Basque) players like Gaizeka Mandietta play in other clubs, but it is the

club's commitment to its Basque origins that keeps the fans united, high spirited, and devoted. For Basque nationalists, supporting Athletic is the best way (aside from terrorism, sadly) to gain recognition and attract attention to their struggle. At least in the soccer world, it seems to be working: the club is world famous for its policies, and even computer soccer games like Championship Manager 4 have been programmed to include a new nationality—Basque.

In Spain, a “deeply ritualistic country,” as English journalist (and current resident of Basque county) Phil Ball characterizes it in his book *Morbo: the Story of Spanish Football* (191), soccer takes on much more meaning than sports do in most other places. Even a book (and movie) like “*Fever Pitch*,” supposedly presenting soccer fandom at its peak in England, pales in comparison to the Spanish football culture which incorporates added political layers (Barnes 45). A Spanish club “named after its pueblo quickly [becomes] an extension of its soul... [and comes] to represent its community more strongly than either their fiestas, their people or their histories” (Ball 192). Naturally, with so much political weight on their shoulders, the Bilbaoans are even more committed to their club than most other fans. The European proverb “a soccer team is like a mother—you only have one” seems to most vividly come to life in the mindset of Athletic's fans. Aptly named after the local saint San-Mamés, the team's stadium is often dubbed “The Cathedral,” supposedly due to its physical proximity to a church. However, this nickname for this “four-sided enclosure of everything that lies outside” (Ball 193) was not arbitrarily chosen, for it is an alternative shrine, almost a holy place. Once inside the stadium, time seems to stand still, as Ball writes about the first match he attended there:

The atmosphere was unlike anything I have experienced before or since. . . this club is special. Outside the ground that night I saw acts of friendliness and goodwill that would have brought a lump to the throat of the hardest football cynic. . . The ground, smart though it is, is like some throwback to a happier, sepia-tinted football era. As you take your seat... you seem to be transported back to the days of rattles, cloth caps, steaming hot mugs of tea, mud, rain, and a hard but appreciative working-class audience. (84-85).

Indeed, there is an underlying nostalgic message in the club's behavior, an attempt to bring back the old values of local patriotism back into modern soccer. In fact, a whole mythology surrounds Athletic Bilbao. The team's nickname, *los leones*, the lions,

suggests an undefeatable, strong stand, in accordance with the Euskadi belief that San-Mamés was fed by lions as a child - a sign of his courage and invincibility. In a land where “the symbols of the clubs, their colors, their nicknames and club songs are of paramount importance” (Ball 193), the supporters expect nothing less from their team than to fight like lions on the pitch.

While such soccer folklore is common in Spain, Bilbao does stand out because unlike most professional sports teams, its squad truly reflects the local community. All children in Spain share the same dream—playing for their favorite club. It is also very much what the supporters hope for: local players have always been the most loved ones, not necessarily in direct relation to their performance on the playing field. Of Real Madrid’s current unprecedented collection of stars, for instance, the most popular players are striker Raul and goalkeeper Iker Casillas. Born and raised in Madrid, they have a stronger connection with the fans than the club’s foreign stars. Thus, it is no wonder Athletic is so well loved—all of its players proudly represent the Basque ideal, and its crowd feels like an integral part of the club, as novelist Luis De Castresana explains:

Athletic is for me something more than a football team; a part of the emotional landscape of my Bilbao, My Vizcaya... at root, we Vizcayans love Athletic because we intuit that it has something which belongs to us, because we intuit that within it is a piece of ourselves. [Athletic has] an identity as an umbilical cord linking men to the land, a geographical-emotional capacity. (MacClancy 189)

Unlike in most other cities in Europe and the rest of the world, such images will be as relevant to today’s children of Bilbao as they were for their parents and grandparents, since Athletic still maintains its unique local identity.

Seemingly strict at first, Athletic’s principles have in reality become more and more flexible with time (Wilkinson). The original decision to use only Basque players was made in the early 1920s; beforehand, there was no such policy, probably because many Englishmen played for the yet-to-be professional club. Once the original decision was made, however, the side only used men of Euskadi descent, born and raised in Vizcaya. This rule was somewhat bent when it was decided that anyone born in the Basque county was eligible to play for the club, regardless of his family’s origins. In the last twenty years the rules have flexed even more and today anyone can play for Athletic, just as long as his soccer skills were acquired in Basque

county (www.athletic-club.net). Hence, players such as Brazilian born Biurrun, who immigrated to the region at a young age, played for the club in past seasons (www.amz.org).

Another barrier was broken with the purchase of defender Bixente Lizarazu, the first French born Basque to join the club. This move, which appeared to be another step in the dismantling of the club's policy, was in reality the exact opposite: the Basque Provinces in France usually do not share the same intense nationalistic aspirations with their people from the west. By recognizing Lizarazu's Basqueness and making him a part of the unofficial Basque national team, Athletic has in effect created an incentive for their brothers to join them in the nationalist struggle - a new common denominator.

This philosophy of *la cantera* has gained Athletic many admirers, but also quite a few haters. While most fans do not even think there is room for debate on this issue, local journalists often feel severely limited by the supporters: they are allowed to criticize the players or the coach, but fundamentally doubting the club's nature would be "very difficult... [and] would be seen as a tantamount to criticizing Basque society itself" (MacClancy 188). The Basques regard Athletic's policy as an innocent, somewhat romantic gesture to a world long gone, wherein soccer was truly the people's game. Conversely, many others see *la cantera* as a xenophobic policy that discriminates on the basis of ethnicity (Crolley and Hand 134), and call for its immediate abolishment (R. Jones). This accusation may well have been valid in the past, but should no longer be made, since the current policy is as open as that of any modern state. Just as the European Union is entitled to its own legislation regarding immigration and working permits, so can Athletic morally determine who can be accepted to represent it. The cases of Lizarazu, Biurrun, and many other Bilbao players who are not from Basque descent prove that the *la cantera* philosophy is far from being xenophobic. Likewise, it should not be referred to (as it commonly is) as a "no foreigners" policy, but as a "Basque born or grown" policy. The former description immediately generates antagonism to the club, while the latter seems to create respect for it.

Examining the club's history proves yet again that accusing it of racial intolerance is simply unjustifiable. Similar to many other soccer clubs around the globe (River Plate of Argentina, for example), Athletic was founded under the influence of Englishmen—students who resided in Bilbao. The club's origins inspire

it to this very day, from the English spelling of its name to its desired style of play. Distinct from the rest of the world, wherein employing the adjective “English” to describe soccer has become somewhat of an insult, insinuating it to be primitive and violent, the Basques believe one cannot compliment a team more than by calling it “English.” Therefore, Athletic’s fans have “an obsession with playing the English way” (Crolley and Hand 133), which is greatly reflected in the team’s “genuinely English flavor” tactics on the pitch (Unzueta, qtd. in Crolley and Hand 133).

Even English fans and journalists visiting Bilbao are surprised at the amount of respect the supporters have for their teams (Ball 84). As a matter of fact, Athletic plays in red and white jerseys to this very day, probably as “a nod to both [English clubs] Sunderland and Southampton” (Ball 73). Although another theory suggests that this outfit was chosen for more trivial reasons: “these were the cheapest stripes to manufacture because the same combination was used for bed mattresses” (Ball 197). No xenophobe will take such pride in foreign customs and influences.

This connection with Britain also serves as an explanation for the most obvious paradox in the club policy, the lack of restrictions on the coaching staff’s ethnicity. Apparently, since *la madre tierra*, the motherland, is rooted in soccer as a whole and their club in particular, the Bilbao supporters feel it is acceptable and even preferable to receive professional guidance from outsiders. Accordingly, not only are no limitations applied concerning the nationality of the coach, using foreign aid to cultivate the local talents has become a preferable option (Ball 80), and so today German Jupp Heynecks is coaching the club—further refuting the allegations of xenophobia.

As easy as it is to regard Bilbao as the ultimate underdog, it would be a grave mistake to do so. Despite its proven shortcomings in recent years, it is still one of Spain’s most important clubs, and certainly the biggest Euskadi one. In its home region, Bilbao is the local Gulliver - a giant in a Lilliputian Basque county. The club compensates for its lack of alternatives in player purchases in the simplest way: buying the best local talents from the fellow Basque clubs. This strategy naturally breeds resentment and frustration amongst other Basque clubs, especially in Real Sociedad de San Sebastian. Sociedad gave up the dream of an all Basque team more than a decade ago, yet it did not lose any of its crowd support due to this change. Interestingly enough, the club had an even more controversial policy in place than Bilbao’s until this season: although it would gladly purchase foreigners, it maintained

its refusal to use non-Basque Spaniards - an indisputable illustration of xenophobia at work (Ball SoccerNet). Nevertheless, this ultra-nationalist, quasi-patronizing decision was overturned in 2002, when the young Spanish defender Boris joined the club; no special protest has been voiced because of this transfer. Sociedad's supporters willingly accepted the Spanish enforcement, fully knowing they needed new players.

The reasons for these changes in policy were not idealistic but rather pragmatic in nature. Athletic grew so big it could afford to buy practically any player it wanted from the San-Sebastian side. According to Javier Exposito, Sociedad's general secretary, Athletic left no choice for the smaller club but reluctantly to turn to foreign markets (Ball 86). The end result was probably not so bad, as a quick glance in the league table shows: Sociedad is currently a serious title contender. Taking the road less traveled by has indeed made all the difference for Athletic. With less insistence on upfront nationalistic behavior (i.e. the exclusive use of Basques), the club's story could have been very similar to that of Barcelona FC, Barça. In many aspects, the two clubs are almost identical: both represent a large city in the heart of a region seeking independence (Catalonia in the Barcelona case), both are among Spain's first soccer clubs (Athletic claims to be founded first, but that is well debated), and both have an avid crowd that is happy to mix politics with sports, expressing support for separation through the team.

Yet Barça is also a stark opposite of Athletic. It is a huge club, easily one of the leading five in the world, and it has absolutely no limitations on player purchases. This season, for example, the club has fifteen foreign players, which is not at all unusual. As Jimmy Barnes notes in his book, *Barça—a people's passion*, at one point in the late 1990s under Dutch coach Louis Van Gaal, more than eight players from the Netherlands alone played for the Catalan side (23)—an authentic demonstration of the irrelevance of political borders for the game of soccer after the Bosman ruling.

To illustrate this point even further, one only needs to consider one of most admired people in the city of Barcelona, Johan Cruyff, *el Salvador*. As a player, he led the team to the final of the European Champions Cup. As a manager, he guided them to winning this trophy, creating the club's best squad ever—"The Dream Team," in which the major stars were all not Catalan: a Dane (Laudrup), a Bulgarian (Stoichkov), a Dutch (Koeman), and even a Basque captain (Bakero) (Barnes 315). When his son was born during the Franco regime, Cruyff insisted on naming him Jordi, after the

Catalan saint—a name banned by the authorities. How did he get away with that? Simple—Cruyff is Dutch. A Catalan symbol indeed, but one that was born and raised on the outskirts of Amsterdam. In Bilbao, such a scenario could not have happened.

Other clubs outside of Spain have also imposed limitations on themselves regarding foreign players. Italian side Piacenza, for example, had until recently also refused to sign any non-Italian players, based on political-nationalistic beliefs. Yet, after spending the better part of the 1990s in the Italian second division, last year the club heads finally acknowledged outside help was needed in order to survive in the professional soccer scene. It is not just a matter of talent anymore, but also very much a matter of finances: a young Brazilian will cost less in wages than an equally talented European, not to mention the added training costs of a European prodigy in his youth. Athletic's current coach is well aware of the implications the Basque-only stand has on his squad's success. After being appointed for a second term (the first in the mid 1990s), Heynecks has made it clear he wishes to see the ban on foreign players lifted (Burgen), but to no avail. The club's policy remains and is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

To understand fully the severe limitations Athletic is imposing on itself, one does not even have to look outside of Basque County. Alaves of Vitoria, traditionally considered a small minor club, reached the 2000 UEFA cup final under the leadership of Spanish (but not Basque) forward Javi Moreno. It is an achievement that seems miles away from the current gray Bilbao team, presently more occupied with avoiding relegation than with winning titles. Athletic has not won any major title for the past two decades for a good reason. Simply put, its squad is not good enough. At first, it is tempting to declare that nowadays all efforts to top the likes of Real Madrid are futile, but this is hardly the case. Granted, such big clubs have an almost infinite amount of resources, but other teams have won titles in recent years; even the current Spanish champion, Valencia, is generally considered to be a smaller club than Athletic. Money is not solely the issue here. Bilbao fails to win matches because of its autonomous decision to limit player purchases. Hence, in many ways the question is not whether Athletic will be able to relive its glorious past, or even not if it can survive in the world's best soccer league with this policy in place, but rather for how long will it be able to maintain its place there.

Yet, despite recurring grim predictions, the team prevails year after year. While big-budget clubs like Atlético Madrid have been relegated to the second

division, Athletic has kept its place in top flight since the league's first day. This year, again with no major purchases, it is still unlikely to be relegated. Perhaps, after all, playing with a homogenous Basque team does have a certain value, not just in the political sense, but also when it comes to sports. True, Athletic may never be a real title contender with an all-Basque squad, but is that really the most important thing?

A vast majority of Athletic's supporters think the club's values are more important than its material success on the soccer pitch. When Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* carried out a survey among a thousand of the club's members, the results were clear: "76 percent of them said that they would rather see Athletic relegated to the Second Division than allow the club to give up the tradition of *la cantera*" (MacClancy 195). The club's official stance as presented by its board of directors is no different: "we must and we want to maintain our philosophy [of *la cantera*], and this obligation won't be conditioned by the sportive results" (www.athletic-club.net). For this team, then, "winning is not the most important thing," and certainly not the "only thing," as legendary football coach Vince Lombardi put it. In this exceptional case, maybe the real winning is not done on the pitch, but in the terraces, where pride, respect, and identity are the most important things—the only things. The Basque nationalist struggle has so far failed to attract the world's attention; supporting Athletic is probably the best way to raise awareness to this issue, which is far more crucial than sports. What will one remember from the match against Real on February 2002? That Bilbao won 2-1, or that dozens of Basque activists charged into the playing field in protest?

Clearly, it is hard to envision a professional sports team more preoccupied with political ideas than with winning percentages and profits. Discussing sports in the Basque context requires a complete change in thinking, an understanding *la cantera* as a bold statement of sovereign identity. This notion is perhaps best exemplified in former Athletic president Jose Maria Arrate's speech, delivered on the club's 100th year anniversary:

Athletic Bilbao is more than a football club, it is a feeling—and as such its ways of operating often escape rational analysis. We see ourselves as unique in world football and this defines our identity. We do not say that we are either better or worse than others, merely different. We only wish for the sons of our soil to represent our club, and in so wishing we stand out as a sporting entity, not a business

concept. We wish to mould our players into men, not footballers, and each time that a player from the cantera makes his debut we feel we have realized an objective which is in harmony with the ideologies of our founders and forefathers. (Qtd. in Ball 72)

AFTERWORD

As the 2002-2003 season of the Spanish Soccer League drew to a close, Real Sociedad de San Sebastian was on the verge of winning the league title: Had they won their last match and Madrid lost theirs, they would have been crowned as the Spanish champions, the first Basque squad to do so in more than two decades. Meanwhile, Athletic Bilbao also could not afford to lose; it needed a win to secure its qualification to the European UEFA cup. Sociedad did its part by winning its last game 3-0, yet the title remained in Madrid as Real encountered no particular problems in winning its game 3-1. It is only ironic that Real's opponent was Athletic Bilbao. Hence, the season ended in dismay for all Basques, as both teams failed to achieve their goals. This ongoing 2003-2004 season is not much different for Bilbao. With their all-Euskadi squad, they assume a safe position in the middle of the table, avoiding the risk of relegation. Unfortunately, the situation is much gloomier for Sociedad. The pride of San Sebastian, currently ranked in the bottom of the Spanish league, is likely to be relegated to the second division when this season ends. It seems success was just too sudden and quick for this foreign-strengthened *cantera*.

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