

Valladolid English Seminarists 6 - Real Madrid 2 Before the Champions, of course.



In 1907 the seminarists of the Royal English College at Valladolid thrashed the mighty Real Madrid

Spain's football supremacy is once again confirmed with an all-Madrid European Champions League final between Real and Atlético in Lisbon. In *La Roja* – a journey through Spanish football, Jimmy Burns documents how the development of football in Spain has benefited from its rich and exotic history. He extols and celebrates the extraordinary characters and individuals that have defined and shaped the emergence of Spain as a football superpower. But, there is, unfortunately, no mention in his book of the true pioneers of football in Spain.

To identify these spirited evangelists of the beautiful game on the Iberian Peninsula and to understand the real significance of their influence we must turn toward the Catholic Church and to a religious foundation established during penal times by the dynamic Jesuit Robert Persons.

The excommunication of Elizabeth I in 1570 had resulted in severe penalties being imposed against English Catholics, who were now branded as agents of a foreign power. The number of English foundations of religious orders of men and women found refuge in the Low Countries within easy reach of England yet in relative safety since they were under the protection of Spain. Soon the number of candidates for the priesthood – and footballers – at the seminary at Valladolid increased.

And it was here at this college of martyrs and saints such as Henry Walpole, Ambrose Barlow and John Lloyd that an extraordinary and seminal football match took place in the grounds of an English seminary in the Castilian city of Valladolid. FC Real Madrid issued a challenge to all-comers. *Los meringue*, a familiar sobriquet for Real, had completed their third successive league title and seemed invincible. The seminarists of the Royal English College at Valladolid took up the gauntlet. On a bright April day in 1907 the mighty Madrileños were defeated 6-2.

Fr Linehan, who captained the college side and played as goalkeeper, later served with great distinction as a Chaplain with the East Lancashire Regiment in the Dardanelles, Mesopotamia and Gallipoli. In the late 1950s while attending a football match at Old Trafford Fr Lineham, now a priest in the diocese of Salford, was introduced to Señor Santiago Bernebeu, the then president of Real Madrid who had participated in the historic football game, and Bernebeu told him: “That game changed the whole history of football in Spain by showing us how football should be played.”

The match report at the time in *La Correspondencia de España* also extolled the virtues of the English trainee priests, the football played by the seminarians of Valladolid being one of study, precision and accuracy. It seems to all intents and purpose to have been learnt from a textbook. The seminarians did not waste a pass and all 11 players moved like one with one intelligence and one will controlling their every movement and thought. There is no doubt if this team played in the Spanish league it would have won it for sure, and the reporter went on to say that he had never seen football played like this in Spain, not even from visiting international teams.

It is generally accepted as fact that British sailors and engineers working in the tin mines of Rio Tinto introduced the game of football into Spain. The first official club, Huelva Recreation Club, was founded in 1878 in Andalucía. However, there is considerable debate concerning the veracity of this claim. Jose Miguel Ortega, writing in a local newspaper, *El Mundo de Valladolid*, states that it was the seminarians of the Royal English College at Valladolid who were the true pioneers of football in Spain, “expending their spare moments practising the game that was already rife in their own country”.

Perhaps we should not be too surprised that trainee priests should be spending so much time playing football. In the late 16th century the Yorkshire martyr John Pibush wrote to the Jesuit superior Henry Garnett stressing the qualities which he thought the missionary priests coming from the continent to work on the English Mission should have. “My Father,” he wrote, “those who propose to come to this country and to work ... must forgo all pleasures and renounce every game but that of football.” Pibush certainly understood the idea that sport can be an apt symbol for the Christian life. As we know St Paul fought the good fight, ran the race and even strained for the goal! A sentiment the seminarians at the Royal English College certainly took to heart.

Historically it is indubitable that the students of the English College do have a prior claim for spreading the good news of football on the Iberian Peninsula since the College at Valladolid dates from 1589 and it is further documented that games of football were certainly played within the College grounds – and possibly beyond – long before the migrant engineers ever threw down their coats as makeshift goals and kicked off.

In 1989, when I was a student at the college, to mark the fourth centenary of its foundation we wrote to the president of Real Madrid suggesting a re-match to give Los Blancos the opportunity to overturn the first leg trouncing but, sadly, we received no reply to our challenge. FC Real Madrid has risen way beyond its humble origins and perhaps preferred not to remember that bright April day when a team of trainee English priests demonstrated how football should be played!

But I suppose we can, at least, feed off some crumbs of comfort when watching the wizardry of Andres Iniesta, Pedro, Xavi Hernandez and their companions in this summer's World Cup knowing that somewhere in the "gene-pool" of football we have contributed invaluable DNA to Spain's seemingly invincible footballing Armada. Let us pray – should England meet Spain in the latter stages of the competition – for a fair and, perhaps, providential wind to throw them off course and give us at least some small chance of success.

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