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FIRST STEPS

Saturday 8th September

As the train from Fuengirola rattled on its way along the coast, I tried to remember the last time I'd seen a Spanish club side on its own soil in the flesh, and quickly realised that there hadn't been many such instances at all. In fact, for all that I'd watched numerous Spanish teams on their visits to England, today would be only my third time.

I could well remember my first, though, and not just because I'd never previously set foot in the country at all. For one thing, I'd managed to plummet through some rotting floorboards to end up half-naked in the thankfully deserted bar beneath, which, at four in the morning, had looked like a hundred-foot drop as I'd gurgled and clung to the last, useless chunk of decayed wood; another of us had fared much worse and ended up in hospital in Alicante with severe sunstroke. We'd all been of a certain age, in a good football age: August 1977.

It was an age when Albion's name still carried sufficient weight to see us invited to pre-season tournaments abroad. That one had pitted us against Dinamo Tbilisi of the Soviet Union who quite soon, with Chivadze and Kipiani to the fore, would demolish Liverpool in the European Cup; Beveren, who quite soon would twice be champions of Belgium; and the host club Hercules, who've still never lifted any meaningful Spanish trophy but ensured that they triumphed in that Trofeo Costa Blanca through blatant cheating. Not an auspicious

introduction for myself where watching Spanish teams was concerned.

Whereas the season's leading marksman in Spain receives the *Pichichi* award that commemorates a legendary Athletic Bilbao goalscorer of the early twentieth century, the season's leading referee gets the *Guruceta* accolade, commemorating the country's supposedly finest ever who died in a car crash in 1987. Jose Emilio Guruceta Muro: someone who'd fuelled Barca fans' notion that the dice were loaded against them in favour of Real Madrid during the Franco years by awarding the visitors a highly dubious and crucial penalty-kick at the Camp Nou back in 1970 that provoked a riot (he was chased off the pitch) and infamy (the whole episode remains significant not only in Spanish football history but also for Catalonia); and someone who was most definitely bribed by Anderlecht fourteen years later. Nottingham Forest had taken a 2-0 advantage to Brussels for the second leg of their UEFA Cup semi-final, which they lost 0-3, but Paul Hart had a perfectly legitimate goal disallowed, Brian Clough labelled a penalty-kick awarded against Kenny Swain 'a travesty', and Forest were denied two spot-kicks of their own. Hans van Breukelen, Forest's goalkeeper, had thought there'd been 'something fishy going on'. There certainly was: in 1997 Anderlecht's president Roger van den Stock finally admitted that his father and predecessor, Constant, had paid the referee, Guruceta, the equivalent of £18,000.

The final of the Trofeo Costa Blanca had meant nothing in comparison, but it was fixed all right. Guruceta gave Hercules two ridiculous penalty-kicks, waved unwarranted yellow cards at our lot, actually reduced us to nine men, and even flashed a red at Ronnie Allen too when all our manager was guilty of was approaching the touchline to substitute Willie Johnston, who'd become even friskier than usual. This wasn't fishiness, it was barely believable blatancy. After the fiasco (and a 5-1 scoreline) we saw Guruceta at a pavement table drinking and chuckling into the

night with two rather fetching young women. Ironically, sat with us nearby was a group of Albion players that included a young Bryan (“we shoulda broken a few bloody legs”) Robson, and Johnston, who flashed a few handsigns at the cheat when he glanced our way. After Guruceta and his two escorts departed, Albion’s physio George Wright, having looked at the right knee I’d twisted in my plummet, left for bed too, so enabling the rest of us to repair to the players’ hotel, the Gran Sol, and drink till dawn in its conference room, the concierge suitably in on the act. Yes, that was an age when top players and fans could still make a social connection. No-one around that table, not even Len Cantello, was wearing a £32,000 necklace.

My second time, fifteen months later, was a much more wholesome experience; indeed, it was the proudest I’ve ever felt as an Albion supporter. The result was only a 1-1 draw but, after we’d equalised an early goal in that UEFA Cup first-leg match, we’d totally dominated Kempes, Bonhof and the whole lot of them in the second half with a brand of football that was both powerful and sumptuous, consigning Valencia to submission in their own backyard – so much so that the entire full house stood to a man at the final whistle to salute us, the ovation prolonged, reverberating and tingling. We really should have won the UEFA Cup that season, and the English championship too, but didn’t, and Laurie Cunningham’s bewitching performance that night in Valencia alerted Real Madrid, for whom he left us in the summer. It was the beginning of the end for Albion as a force to be reckoned with.



I noticed three Malaga shirts join the train at Benalmadena but saw no others when I alighted. Two days earlier another taxi driver had expressed support for Malaga but he hadn’t known on which day of the weekend they’d be playing. He’d said that many

folk were interested only if they were in the top division. That was probably the case, too, for Jose, despite what he'd asserted to me on the evening I'd made his acquaintance back in May, albeit while everyone had been getting half-cut. A sturdy man in his thirties, clipped beard complementing black locks, a builder by trade and with fair English, he'd detested then how people from the area could lick the boots of big clubs instead of supporting their local team. He was, he emphasised, a *Malaguista* because this was his *pueblo* (home turf). But his brother David had dawdled into a Fuengirola bar and when I'd asked him if Jose was going to the Cordoba game on Saturday, David had chuckled and said: "No. He goes only when *La Primera!*" I'd also cast my mind back three months to recall the night that the championship had been decided when Real, Barca and (though rather tenuously by that stage) Sevilla had all been in contention on the last day. I'd watched the Real-Mallorca match on television and the Cuba Libre bar, like so many in Fuengirola that night, had been awash with people in Real Madrid colours, who afterwards lorded around the town. Had this been, say, somewhere in the Black Country, I'd thought to myself at the time, and awash with gloating Manchester United 'fans', others with homespun allegiances would surely have done something about that....

Those three Malaga shirts conveniently, since I hadn't a clue where the stadium was, led the way. Along the Avenida De La Rosaleda, skirting the Guadalmedina riverbed, surprisingly no bars to slake my thirst, over bridges, and after twenty-five minutes' stroll I was almost there. It had been an entirely straight road, in direct contrast to Malaga CF's convoluted lineage and indeed to its current predicament. And I wondered just how many, or how few, would bother to turn up to support them, for still those three shirts were the only ones I'd seen among the few folk making their way up that road, and the six-thirty kick-off was now just an hour away.

On the wide approach to the stadium, though, a vast car park

on my right was filling up and then ahead I could see hundreds of people milling around. This was match day now all right, and an Andalucian derby too, such locale somehow underlined by palm trees greeting this *extranjero* as he made for the ticket windows through the throng past stalls selling beer, water, various nibbles and, wonderfully, cigars. This wasn't England: no paranoia nor social pariahs here. A couple of years earlier I'd visited my prospective new home to come across several bars in Fuengirola displaying no-smoking signs as the Spanish authorities had decided to so regulate, based upon square metreage. A couple of months afterwards I'd revisited and those same bars now allowed smoking. Frank, a Mancunian who runs a bar on the Paseo Maritimo, naturally appreciative of what deters custom, had told me: "There's some very imaginative tape measures around here." Basically the authorities had tried, given up, and turned a blind eye. Myself, I can appreciate a no-smoking enforcement in theatres, cinemas, libraries, whatever. But in football grounds? In the dissipating open air? Where particularly tense people need to assuage their anxiety? (People who have to stomach their unassuaged anxiety over ninety-plus minutes because they care, while others miss the action to fetch picnics and then leave with ten minutes to go to pollute all around with their petrol fumes.) But I was in Spain now; although I didn't buy any cigars because I had my cigarettes.

Twenty-odd Cordoba fans, bedecked in green and white, came hurtling through the throng in horn-blowing self-announcement, heading for the beer stalls. I was in Spain now; this self-announcement was wholly acceptable. When I turned to look, I saw back-patting, and no police.

I decided to treat myself, eased my way to the front of the squash, and forked out thirty-five euros for a place high in the Tribuna Stand. Now, this *extranjero* encountered a little difficulty. It wasn't so much the kids' wanting you to somehow get them inside too (I'd offered one a crisp only to have my naivety

ridiculed), but the fact that gate nineteen was obstinately hiding, and there was no official around to ask other than the wrong turnstile operators who variously pointed me in opposite directions. But I finally arrived, via quite precipitous steps, in the correct area but not the right seat, on the back row overlooking the halfway line smack next to the Canal 2 Andalucia cameraman, lit a fag, and took stock. I also thumbed through a free club newspaper and a free match programme, quite a contrast to two and a half weeks earlier when I'd gone back to England to take in not only Albion's first home match of the season but also the Germany game at Wembley where a match programme there had creamed people for all of six quid.

I'm obviously a traditionalist. Yes of course you have to move with the times, with inevitable change, but I value tradition. I make a connection between tradition and soul. I think it'd been Otto Rehhagel, the German coach who fantastically led Greece to become champions of Europe in 2004 while Eriksson fannied around with supposedly superior players (multi-millionaires with only one useful foot), who'd said that all of these new stadia must have come from just one computerised blueprint: you could be here, there or anywhere now, whereas once upon a time you knew for sure where you were, Hamburg, Munich, wherever. Right on, Otto. Leaving out of the argument dear Lord Justice Taylor's recommendations, leaving out of the argument English football's chasing after a new well-monied consumer, and leaving out of the argument too that personally I can't equate watching my team with comfort in any case, since I'd much rather stand than squirm in my anxiety, must virtually all of those new English stadia be so utterly characterless? You could put black seats in the Walkers Stadium and be in Derby, you could put blue seats in Pride Park and be in Leicester, you could put red seats in either and be in Southampton. Just a dash of individualistic design, a point of traditional reference to the past, some *pueblo*-equivalent feature, would just about suffice: but no. Maybe that's the way

preferred by the powers-that-be in England today: blob stadia populated by blob folk too shy to shout up and stand out, all overseen by satisfied Health And Safety, totally soulless.

So I lit another fag and gazed around. Was the Estadio La Rosaleda characterless or not so? Thirty years earlier I'd been inside perhaps my most characterful stadium of all: old Ibrox, with its grand Archibald Leitch main stand and two huge banks of end terracing, one roofless, the whole place timeless and oozing history and spiritual presence, evocative of a Morton dribble, a Baxter shimmy and all the countless legendary deeds forming the Rangers badge that bound the baying hordes of successive generations. For its character, old Ibrox was a ten. In its anonymity, Middlesbrough's Riverside was a zero.

La Rosaleda had had early problems. Building had begun in June 1936, but due to the Civil War (and Malaga had been committedly Republican) it wasn't completed until 1941. Upgraded for the 1982 World Cup, it'd finally arrived at its present form in the summer of 2006 with the completion of the Tribuna Stand in which I now sat. It was a two-tiered bowl of blue and white seating, but the ends were open to the elements (and, yes, it can rain violently on the Costa del Sol). High opposite to the right was perched the fourteenth-century Gibralfaro castle. To my left swept the sierra. I gave La Rosaleda a five.

I'd earlier given myself a headache trying to unravel that convoluted lineage. Unpicking a Moroccan rug would have been more straightforward.

Malaga Football Club had been formed in 1904 and changed its name, with the royal blessing of Alfonso XIII, to Real Malaga FC in 1927. In the meantime, in 1912, a rival club named FC Malagueno had started up. In 1930 Real Malaga FC became Malaga Sports Club. Three years later the rivals merged to form Club Deportivo Malacitano and eight years after that this new club began calling itself Club Deportivo Malaga. In 1948 it took

over a junior club to act as its reserve team and renamed those reserves Club Atletico Malagueno. Eleven years on, and CA Malagueno separated from the parent club to register as an independent club in its own right.

CD Malaga's financial problems would become so acute that it ceased to exist come 1992. Once merely a reserve team, CA Malagueno now assumed the mantle of the city's football representation, and within a year had gained promotion to *Segunda Division B* (Spain's third level). But in 1994 CA Malagueno encountered severe problems both on the park (relegation back) and off it (almost, like CD Malaga before them, disappearing entirely). At this point the club, following a referendum among its members, changed its name to Malaga Club de Futbol, and two knights named Fernando Puche and Federico Beltron rode in to rescue it from bankruptcy. Such was its subsequent progress that in 1999 Malaga CF was promoted to the top division. Whereas the defunct CD Malaga had enjoyed twenty seasons in the *Primera Division*, this was of course new territory for the city's surviving club.

For six of their seven seasons in the top flight, without pulling up any trees, Malaga CF had acquitted themselves quite well despite, with financial difficulty forever lurking, being a selling club. In 2001 they finished as high as eighth, while in 2003, having knocked out Leeds United and AEK Athens along the way, they reached the quarter-finals of the UEFA Cup. But 2006 saw predicament weigh like a ton of bricks.

The club was relegated in bottom place having acquired a paltry twenty-four points from its thirty-eight matches, winning only five and conceding sixty-eight goals. The club immediately above them gained twelve points more: Cadiz, fellow Andalucians, where Malaga had capitulated 0-5 in the final match of that awful season. Meanwhile the president and biggest shareholder, Serafin Roldan, who'd taken over four years earlier upon Puche's departure, was looking to sell the debt-ridden club.

Alarming to anyone with the purest sporting principles at heart, one consortium reported to be interested in November 2005 was said to have close links with Arsenal; like Beveren of Belgium, Malaga would now become just a feeder club, merely servants of the destiny of another, a passport office for South Americans or Africans biding time for a higher stage. Malaga CF would be made financially secure through selling their right of self-determination. Thankfully, it never sank to that.

In the summer of 2006 the club got a new owner in the bulky shape of Lorenzo Sanz, the ex-president of Real Madrid whose son Fernando was already at La Rosaleda as centre-back and captain. Sanz paid six million euros to take control, took on the club's horrendous debt of thirty million, and installed Fernando – at the age of just thirty-two – as president. The Sanz family duly embarked upon sorely needed changes in the running of the club and unsurprisingly some measures were unpopular. As part of a huge economy drive, it was even proposed in September that some players and staff in the reserve team should work unpaid, and a strike was promptly threatened. Two months later Fernando Sanz announced that there was no alternative but to voluntarily appoint a legal administrator to restructure the debt now standing at twenty-eight million euros: a lengthy process.

It's easy for myself to say this, but it seems to me that Fernando Sanz deserves much credit. At one point his father had given him licence to quit, given the flak he was getting, but he'd insisted on seeing matters through. One of those matters he'd seen through had been the team's averting catastrophe. If the building of the new Tribuna Stand perhaps had been, in hindsight, a financial gamble at that time, then the 2006–7 season on the pitch might have brought financial disaster. With the higher waged players moved on, a depleted team struggled against further demotion, and salvation was achieved only in the penultimate match. Had the club sunk into the third division, it would surely have been the end.

Fernando Sanz had also, meanwhile, overseen the appointment of a new coach who'd joined from UD Marbella back in October. This new man was Juan Ramon Lopez Muniz, a disciple of and former assistant to Juande Ramos of Sevilla fame when the latter had coached Malaga in the 2003-4 season. In the past close-season Muniz had brought in no fewer than eleven new players – nine 'bargain buys' and two loanees – and a similar number exited. With such wholesale change, the coach could now look upon the team as one of his own making. All he had to do now was get it to play. He hadn't made a bad start to this 2007-8 campaign: Malaga had won their first two league games, at home to Salamanca and away at Alaves, and three days prior to this Cordoba match they'd also knocked Celta de Vigo out of the Spanish Cup. Maybe things were looking up.



La Rosaleda was filling up, though nowhere near to capacity: whatever that was. *Marca*, a daily sports (mostly football) newspaper, had stated in its glossy guide to this new season that the capacity was 22,800. Others had put it appreciably higher at 34,000. It looked nearer that latter figure to me. La Rosaleda was also loudening up.

Away to my left, at the bottom of that end, a large group who'd determinedly spend the entire proceedings on their feet was kicking up a choral din, flags and banners aflight. Opposite them was a similar scene, one banner there proclaiming that Antonio Banderas was a *Malaguista* (which indeed he is). Above both groupings, of those who weren't sporting Malaga's blue and white stripes, most seemed to be wearing no shirt at all as the sun seared. There was – and would remain – a thundering drum somewhere. But the most vociferous lot of all, standing on high and just to the right of the Preferencia Stand across the pitch from me, were the *Malaka Hinchas*, Malaga CF's major mob of

exhortation, dutifully recalling the city's original name given it by the founding Phoenicians. On the fringe of the *Hinchas* I could see a flag with three lions in its top left corner. The *Pena Internacional Malaguista*, created by expats eight years earlier in Marbella, was by now an officially recognised supporters' club, and around two thousand – mainly British – expats now held Malaga CF season tickets. Those English opposite were evidently committed: like myself, they'd come here this evening instead of watching England play Israel in a Euro 2008 qualifier 'live' on television.

It wasn't only the home fans who were warming up. To my right, in a corner of the upper tier, was the travelling Cordoba contingent. Something I've forever found baffling about Spanish football fans is that, unlike in England, and except for cup finals or particularly crucial matches, they barely seem to do just that: travel. Maybe the culture is indeed one of just defending your *pueblo* without needing to invade that of others (unless perhaps you're a Real or Barca fan watching your club once a season in your hometown stadium). Yet some fans do feel the need to follow their team, so I still wonder why more don't. Cordoba isn't so far from Malaga, but I estimated their following to be around only a couple of hundred. Fair play to these, though: the *Brigadas Blanquiverdas* were all announcing themselves now.

As the evening unfolded, matters off the pitch would engage me most of all.



The pitch itself wasn't in best condition. In years gone by the legendary likes of Ricardo Zamora, Helenio Herrera and Ladislao Kubala had sat alongside it as CD Malaga's coach, and Juanito had bestrode it in the late 1980s after his stellar years at Real Madrid, but a month ago it'd staged a pop concert and taken a real battering. Sections of it had subsequently undergone reurfing,

but still it looked messy – rather like this match today, in which no individual would catch the eye as being better than ordinary. Two absentees through injury, both centre-forwards, were Malaga's Salva Ballesta who'd won the *Pichichi* in 2000 when with Racing de Santander, and Cordoba's Javi Moreno who'd scored twice in three minutes in the 2001 UEFA Cup Final when Alaves bravely were edged by Liverpool.

Malaga, with so many new faces, were naturally still in the process of bedding in and so a lack of cohesion on their part today was entirely understandable. For their own part, Cordoba had only just clawed their way out of the third division. Fifteen thousand watched, then, this somewhat untidy affair of too many unforced errors, the poor quality typified not only by wayward passes and heavy touches but also by lack of intelligent movement. And while Muniz would have been horrified by the visitors' 22nd-minute equaliser when Pineda was allowed to turn and cross from the left for Cristian Alvarez, unmarked at the back post, to put away the header, Cordoba's coach Paco Jemez would have been similarly appalled on the hour by Baha's totally free header in front of goal.

That goal by Baha was Malaga's demoralising fourth, just three minutes after their third, but until this quick-fire double the contest had actually been quite even. Malaga's first goal, on sixteen minutes, had been the game's most spectacular, an explosive thirty-yard free-kick by their Brazilian-born left-back Rossato, which Cordoba's veteran goalkeeper (Julio Iglesias!) even so should have dealt with. The lead had been regained four minutes before the break by a twenty-yard low potshot from the Portuguese centre-back Helder Rosario, and added to when ex-Barca junior Antonio Hidalgo, who would also provide the cross for Baha's fourth, ran through unopposed from central midfield to slot home.

It wasn't an ill-tempered match (though Cordoba's centre-back Pablo Ruiz became rather feisty towards the end and, having

first been cautioned, got sent off), and nor were there any really bad tackles (though, pleasingly without this being any diving show, knocks were occasionally ‘emphasised’ by their recipients), but the referee somehow saw fit to issue eight yellow cards and two reds: one of the latter, for dissent, to no less a figure than Paco Jemez. This, after half an hour, provided the evening’s most farcical moment when, thus banished to the stands, Jemez chose the gymnastic route by clambering over the fencing. If the referee, a sort of Extremaduran Uriah Rennie named Ceballos Silva, pompous but poor and basically from another planet, wasn’t enamoured by this mickey-taking, nor would he have been best pleased by his subsequent *Marca* rating: zero. In truth, *Marca* uses a somewhat imprecise scale of nought to three; and, for the record, of the twenty-seven players rated for their performances at La Rosaleda, nineteen received just one, only five were awarded two, and three, including Julio Iglesias, like the ref, got zilch. Despite the fact that, between them, they’d provided five goals.



If Paco Jemez had acted eccentrically, then there was a wonderfully similar episode five minutes after Malaga’s fourth goal.

Those *Hinchas* kicked up a virtually continuous racket, but should they pause for breath then they’d immediately be whipped up again by the groups behind the goals, fed by them, especially those fans to my left who were virtually forever at it themselves, and quite often most of the rest would join in as well. From the *Brigadas Blanquiverdas*, too, would come thunderclaps. Fair play indeed to these Cordoba fans. Just after their team had gone 1-4 down, they bellowed particularly vigorously; and such a show of loyalty drew genuine applause from the *Malaguistas*, which in turn provoked each set of supporters to then chant the other team’s

name, before everyone launched into some mutually engaging Andalucian ditty. A derby, yes, but there was respect and kinship about it: heartwarming stuff. But my cockles were warmed no more so than after sixty-five minutes. Some character emerged from among the *Hinchas* carrying a massive blue and white flag and proceeded, stopping in turn in front of each section, to run the entire length of the Preferencia Stand wielding it, stirring up those fans still more and rousing the whole lot around La Rosaleda. His egged-on return run brought the same, then he disappeared back whence he'd sprung to a roar of re-embrace and another reverberating din of support.

Towards the end of the game there was a mass-celebratory, Argentinian-style, feet-bouncing boing all around the place; even the Cordoba lot engaged themselves in it. To myself, that seemed the icing on the cake of this mightily refreshing rumbustiousness which I'd encountered here. Prawn-sandwiched Old Trafford, old Highbury library, all the mute rest of them, this wasn't. Raw vitality, this was.



The temperature was still twenty-four degrees as I departed, past the beer stalls where fans mixed, revelling car horns amid the cacophony, dangling *Malaguista* flags amid the gridlock. As I made my way back towards the train station, I reflected on what I'd just seen. Though the standard of football hadn't been good, the overall experience had been an uplifting one, the atmosphere brimming and the support truly marvellous, stewards (and indeed police) barely in evidence either, any plainclothed stewards that there were just on hand to point towards your seat, no bumptious jobsworths in orange anoraks eyeing you as prey. Football fans had been trusted and allowed to give full vent to their emotions, and no-one had crossed any line. Christ, that took me back.

FIRST STEPS

Back in Fuengirola, I called into Bar Everest, run by Cristobal, to catch the last half-hour of Spain's struggling 1-1 draw in Reykjavik, part of their struggle to qualify for Euro 2008. Cristobal chunters a lot, is a touch batty, and mad-keen on Real Madrid, his walls festooned with *Madridista* paraphernalia, pride of place given to a huge ornamental boot presented to him by Fuengirola-born Juanito. Back in June, after Real had clinched the league title, Bar Everest had been boisterously chock-full, but now there was only a handful, and silent at that. "Always problem....every time...." said Cristobal matter-of-factly, and nor did anyone then show much emotion when Iniesta equalised with four minutes to go. Certainly not two nearby old women sat nattering outside their open front doors on white plastic chairs evidently borrowed from the bar, even though it was knocking midnight by now.

But I gazed at this little dimly lit street scene, and at Cristobal's photographs as he started, jabbering again, to clear away, then remembered something Graham Hunter had once said on television in the days when I'd had to content myself in Birmingham with Sky's coverage of Spanish football, wishing I were there: '....to rediscover a love of football, which was one of the reasons I came to Spain....'

Well, here I was myself now; and, for better or worse, I'd made a start.