

Football and the politics of place: Football Club Barcelona and Catalonia, 1975–2005

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Although Football Club Barcelona has been closely tied to Barcelona and Catalonia throughout its history, the narrative of that relationship has varied. Those narratives provide different understandings of how FC Barcelona is implicated in the social construction of Barcelona and Catalonia as places. The relationship between club and place is dynamic and constantly renegotiated. Not only does the club change, but the political and social context in which FC Barcelona relates to these places also changes. This paper examines the place/identity/club nexus from 1975 to 2005 to illustrate how the club is mobilized to advance different ideas about Barcelona and Catalonia as places.

Keywords: cultural geography; place; sport; identity; Catalonia; Barcelona

Barça is not only a ball, not only patrimony, not only numbers and a treasury; but also emotion and sentiment . . . Barça [still today] represents a nation, Catalonia, that does not have complete recognition of its personality. (Antoni Rovira 2004)

The only factor that I think shapes the adhesion, enthusiasm, participation and identification with the club [FC Barcelona] in present times is purely sport related. (Jaume Sobrequés 2004)

Academia and the popular press recognize that Football Club (FC) Barcelona (often called by its nickname Barça) functioned as an important vehicle for the expression of Catalan identity and Catalan national sentiments under the authoritarian regime of Francisco Franco (Subartés 1982; Shaw 1985, 1987; Sobrequés 1991, 1993; Kuper 1994; MacClancy 1996; Colomé 1997; Espadaler 1998; Burns 1999; Ainaud de Lasarte *et al.* 1999; Barnils *et al.* 1999; Ball 2001; Foer 2004). As the quotes above suggest, what is less clear is the place-related role of the club in recent times, particularly since Franco's death in 1975 and the

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establishment of a new constitution in 1978. Catalonia has regained degrees of autonomy. The Catalan social, political and economic institutions outlawed during the dictatorship are now thriving. Given this, how are we to understand FC Barcelona's relationship to Barcelona and Catalonia today? To date, there has been little academic inquiry into the identity-related role of FC Barcelona in post-authoritarian Spain. In what ways has the club's role in local politics changed? Sobrequés suggests that under democracy, Catalans "express themselves through political parties, democratic associations and a million civic organizations" rather than football (2004). Here, I argue the contrary – that FC Barcelona continues to be deeply implicated in the politics of place and the social construction of place-based identities in Barcelona and Catalonia.

Highlighting the role of place, this article explores the depoliticization and re-politicization of FC Barcelona along nationalist tropes in the 30 years following the fall of authoritarianism in 1975. The relationship between FC Barcelona, Barcelona and Catalonia is complex and dynamic. This article is concerned with how the narrative of that relationship has changed under different club presidents since the fall of the Fascist regime. Sport is not a simple reflection of identity politics, but is itself implicated in how identities are socially constructed. This becomes clear when looking at FC Barcelona and the narratives of place advanced by the club leadership and sport tabloid media from 1975–2005.

Elsewhere, I discuss the historical development of FC Barcelona as national/banal/invented tradition (Shobe forthcoming) and its role in facilitating mass and popular connections to Catalonia during the periods of dictatorship in Spain (1923–30 and 1939–75). Here the focus is on how contemporary club officials have discursively rejected or embraced these connections. Specifically, I look at how the nationalist and place-based role of the club has been alternatively depoliticized by Josep Lluís Núñez (1978–2000) and Joan Gaspart (2000–03) and strongly re-politicized by Joan Laporta (2003–present). It is argued that the club's democratically elected presidency and the media have mobilized the club's connections to Barcelona and Catalonia as places in different ways. Club officials and the media are in powerful positions to suggest how the relationship between club and place should be seen, and in doing so, also suggest how Catalonia and Barcelona should be understood as places. This approach suggests that the relationship between sport, place and identity is not static but rather is fluid and constantly renegotiated. As mass football culture diffuses throughout global networks, ideas and discourses about places are advanced through football clubs and those discourses help structure the ways in which not only football clubs but places too are understood.

Football and the social construction of identities

Scholars from many disciplines have explored the ways in which sport is mobilized in the social construction of identities (see for example Duke and Crolley 1996; MacClancy 1996; Hague and Mercer 1998; Giulianotti 1999; Bale 2001; Gaffney forthcoming 2008). Three major theoretical foci are apparent in this body of research: collective identification, representation and power relations (Shobe forthcoming). Many (Jarvie 1993; Duke and Crolley 1996; Maguire 1999; Bairner 2001) have discussed how sport, particularly football, is involved in the reproduction of Hobsbawm's 'invented traditions' (1983) which maintain Anderson's 'imagined communities' (1991). Geographers in particular have argued that football teams and the stadiums in which they compete have strong roles in collective identification with place (Hague and Mercer 1998; Bale 2001; Gaffney and Bale 2004). The role of sport in facilitating collective identification becomes even more important during times of political repression. Connections between football and acts of popular resistance are evident in the cases of Catalonia and the Basque Country during periods of authoritarianism (Shaw 1987; Duke and Crolley 1996; Burns 1999; Ball 2001).

The second key idea advanced in the sport/identity literature holds that teams and clubs are expected to represent specific places and groups of people (Jarvie 1993; MacClancy 1996; Coelho 1998; Giulianotti 1999; Maguire 1999). This is particularly evident in international tournaments such as the World Cup and the Olympics, where participants must be citizens of the country they represent. However, this representation also occurs at other spatial scales. This will be discussed in the case of FC Barcelona which is often constructed as representative of the city of Barcelona and the nation/territory of Catalonia.

The third focal point of this literature explores the power relations involved in identification and representation, particularly as they relate to structuring ideas about difference (e.g. gender, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality). Here the patriarchal (Burstyn 1999; Schneider 2000; Vertinsky 2004) and imperialist (Carrington 1998) tropes of modern sport are examined. It is argued that sport lends itself to the image of a collective 'self', defined in opposition to a vilified 'other' (Said 1978). This dynamic opens sport to manipulation by power elites but also may provide a means of resistance to those on the margins of power (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002). These three themes from the sport/identity literature inform the following investigation of FC Barcelona and the politics of place in Barcelona and Catalonia.

FC Barcelona under Luis Núñez: a club displaced?

During the years of fascist rule in Spain (1939–75), the highly centralized regime denied Catalonia its political, economic, cultural and linguistic

institutions. Freedom of assembly was highly controlled. The regime banned Catalan symbols, including its flag and the crest of its religious patron, Saint George. At that time, the presidents of many football clubs in Spain, including those of FC Barcelona, were appointed by the regime. However, 100,000 people could gather at the *Camp Nou* (the 'New Field' Stadium built in 1957) where support for FC Barcelona became a surrogate for supporting the Catalan nation. This was particularly the case with games versus Real Madrid which was, for many Catalans, synonymous with the dictatorship and centralized Spanish political control. Although administered for many years by Franco's appointees, FC Barcelona and the Camp Nou stadium provided a venue for expressing the cultural/political idea that Barcelona and Catalonia are places distinct from Castilian Spain. In this way, FC Barcelona was deeply implicated in the social construction of Barcelona and Catalonia as places.

To understand the contemporary place-identity role of the club, it is important to examine how FC Barcelona navigated the social and political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. In the first half of the 1970s, during the last years of Franco's rule, several members of the Board of Directors began to actively re-politicize the club leadership through the mobilization of a nationalist discourse. The phrase '*El Barça es més que un club*' (Catalan which translates as 'Barça is more than a club') was increasingly adopted as a motto because it expressed the explicit social role that the club was re-staking. In particular, the club advocated Catalan language rights and education. FC Barcelona advocated use of the Catalan language in schools and increasingly used it to conduct its own affairs (Tomás 2004b). Joan Granados and Jaume Rosell, two club directors who played key roles in these initiatives, were also members of the conservative nationalist party *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*, which later merged with a rival party to form *Convergència i Unió (CiU)*. Thus, at the time that Franco died and democracy was adopted in Spain, it appeared that FC Barcelona was poised to be mobilized from within by nationalist politicians.

Convergència was led by Jordi Pujol and the party had already gathered significant political momentum by the time Franco died. Pujol founded *Banca Catalana*, a bank devoted to financing Catalan businesses including FC Barcelona. Several executive board members of FC Barcelona were also important officers of *Banca Catalana* and/or members of *Convergència* (Burns 1999). Part of Pujol's

... political ideal was to resurrect Catalonia's sense of national identity by influencing key institutions of the Catalan society and making them part of his movement ... When it came to Barça, Pujol clearly regarded the club as a key ally and vehicle for maintaining the concept of Catalanism as a living force. (Burns 1999, pp. 218–219)

As a new democracy in Spain began, it seemed likely that FC Barcelona would become closely tied to Pujol and *CiU*.

In September 1977, Agustí Montal, the president of FC Barcelona who presided during the transition to democracy, resigned his post, setting the stage for an election the following year. The resignation was unexpected, leading to much uncertainty as to who would lead the club in the new era. FC Barcelona is one of a small handful of clubs in Spain (and Europe for that matter) that is neither owned by a single individual or group of owners nor a traded commodity owned by shareholders. Instead, it is a sporting club owned by its membership. Members of a football club, who pay annual fees for the privilege, are called *socios*. The *socios* democratically elect a president who then directs the affairs of the club. In this way, FC Barcelona's president is directly linked to the supporter base in a way that the president of a privately owned club is not.

Once democracy was restored in Spain, democratic elections for the presidency of FC Barcelona began again as well. Several candidates with deep and longstanding ties to the club emerged as favorites to become the first president of the new era. Among the group was a relative newcomer to the club and an outsider to the Catalan bourgeoisie, Josep Lluís Núñez, president of Núñez and Navarro, the largest construction company in Catalonia. At this time of great political change in Spain and Catalonia, the *socios* of FC Barcelona ultimately chose Núñez, the least *catalanista* candidate, to lead the club. For the next 22 years, Núñez promoted the club as a sporting/economic institution and de-emphasized its role as a cultural/national institution.

Núñez was born in Bilbao, the unofficial capital of the Basque region, and moved to Barcelona at the age of seven. His family was not associated with Basque or Catalan nationalism (Burns 1999; Canut 2004). Although he grew up in Barcelona in the early years of the dictatorship, Núñez did not identify with the Catalan struggle against Franco. Rather, he went on to become a successful businessman by developing extensive real estate holdings in Barcelona. Núñez's business career took off after his marriage to Maria Luisa Navarro, daughter of a wealthy property developer. Trained in accounting, Núñez managed a series of businesses that he began with his father-in-law, who provided the capital that launched the operations. During the immigration influx of the 1960s, housing in Barcelona was in great demand. Núñez's construction firms put up massive blocks of inexpensively constructed buildings throughout the city, particularly in the *Eixample*. The *Eixample*, or the Urban Extension, is the large grid that dominates contemporary Barcelona. Platted beyond the now-dismantled walls of medieval Barcelona in the mid-1800s, city officials undertook this urban development in order to accommodate the housing needs of the rapidly industrializing city. Most of the housing construction in the *Eixample* transpired in the twentieth century. Critics of Núñez's profit-driven speculation on housing and office construction

suggest it ignores the needs and desires of the residents. (Pérez De Rozas 2004). Although he had no explicit political ties to the regime, Núñez created a profitable construction empire during the dictatorship, and for that, political opponents have criticized him.

The reasons for Núñez's surprise electoral victory are varied and there seems to be little consensus as to how he achieved it. For the purposes of understanding Núñez's conceptions of club and place, three points from the 1978 election are important. First, Núñez portrayed his candidacy as the choice for change and a complete break with the old ties. In doing so, Núñez ran a campaign that advocated for an independent Barça, one outside the sphere of regional politics (where he had no power). Although there were many ties between other candidates and nationalist political parties, those ties brought problems in addition to support. In some cases the parties were split between candidates or unwilling to fully endorse a candidate, not wanting to risk alienating themselves from the winner should their candidate lose (Burns 1999). This ultimately played into Núñez's favor.

Second, this election came during a time when the team was not playing particularly well and not winning major trophies. Núñez emphasized the lack of on-field success. In campaigning for an independent FC Barcelona, Núñez argued that the club needed to focus on reclaiming success on the pitch and that his business acumen was the key to financing that achievement. In this case, being an outsider helped Núñez.

Third, late in the campaign Núñez received the timely endorsements of two key players: Johan Cruyff and Charly Rexach. Cruyff was (and remains) an icon of the highest order to many in Barcelona and Catalonia. Cruyff was a world superstar, considered by many to be one of the greatest players in the history of the game. The year that he arrived as a player from his native Netherlands, 1974, Cruyff propelled FC Barcelona from mediocrity to the league championship. Rexach, in contrast, was from Catalonia and a long-time member of the club – the player who most embodied Catalanism at the time. The endorsements of the global superstar and the national favorite son were coups for Núñez. On 6 May 1978, Núñez won the election with 39.7% of the vote to the 36.5% of the next closest candidate, Ferran Ariño, with the participation of 48.6% of eligible *socios* (Alvarez 1997).

Although an immigrant to Catalonia who was not intimately connected to the political and social power structure of Catalonia and Barcelona, Núñez became the first democratically elected president of FC Barcelona in the post-Franco era. Unlike his immediate predecessors Enric Llaudet, Narcís de Cerras and Agustí Montal, Núñez did not emerge from the Catalan textile bourgeoisie (Canut 2004). Núñez's capture of the club presidency reflected his desire for political power. Some suggest it was a means of achieving his desired political and social

status (Burns 1999; Sobrequés 2004). Núñez insulated the club from prevailing political powers and conducted the affairs of the club with little regard for its social role in the context of Barcelona and Catalonia. In so doing, Núñez effectively reframed the political discourse of FC Barcelona in two ways.

First, Núñez constantly worked to keep FC Barcelona under his own control and away from the gravity of any particular political figures or parties (Artells 2004; Sobrequés 2004). Had another candidate been elected, strong political ties to *CiU* or another political party might have been established. Núñez battled with political figures who sought to mobilize FC Barcelona to advance nationalist discourses. In 1980, Pujol was elected president of the *Generalitat*, Catalonia's regional governing body. Núñez and Pujol served as presidents of FC Barcelona and the *Generalitat* respectively for roughly the same period, overlapping some 20 years. During that time, Pujol continually sought to bring FC Barcelona into association with *CiU* and the regional government, while Núñez consistently resisted those efforts. Pujol and *CiU* did not like to see Núñez as the head of a Catalan institution as important as *Barça* (Artells 2004).

Although maintaining a discourse of FC Barcelona's political independence, Núñez chose people from various political parties to form his Board of Directors. Núñez presented this as evidence of a lack of favoritism to any one party. Critics of Núñez counter that his choosing board members precisely because they were from particular political parties proves that he was, despite his claims, playing politics (Espadaler 2004). Núñez also brought in people from various political parties in an effort to improve relationships with the parties and other governing bodies, a strategy that was largely ineffective (Artells 2004). One of those brought in to provide balance was Catalan Socialist Party member Jaume Sobrequés, who explained that Núñez quite clearly wanted to keep *Barça* outside of *CiU*'s sphere (Sobrequés 2004). The Catalan Socialist Party was pleased that *CiU*'s power did not extend to FC Barcelona and saw it as a means of slowing down the *Generalitat*'s agenda (Espadaler 2004). As Sobrequés explains:

He [Núñez] wanted to maintain Barcelona independent from political power. This he did for many years and the socialists, without saying so and with a certain pride supported Núñez. They supported him because he was a bastion in front of the omnipotent power of *CiU*, a conservative nationalism that had carried away and won the election over the socialist party. (Sobrequés 2004)

Although not openly affiliated with a political party, Núñez is popularly associated with conservative Spanish nationalist parties. The degree of his explicit dealings with particular parties is a matter of debate (Espadaler 2004; Pérez de Rozas 2004). In some parts of Barcelona, particularly those with strong traditions of anarchist and communist politics, Núñez's

right-wing associations were highly problematic, as was the seemingly complicit support he received from some socialists.

Second, under Núñez, FC Barcelona was shielded and isolated from more general associations with Catalanism and related movements advocating increased autonomy or independence for Catalonia. Núñez greatly downplayed the Catalan character of the club. He did not see an increasingly autonomous Catalonia as related to the concerns of FC Barcelona. He distanced the club from nationalist symbols and discourse. For some, FC Barcelona under Núñez ceased to be an important Catalan political/cultural institution and became more of a business, one lacking a strong sense that the club represented any particular place (Batlle 2004; Canut 2004; Espadaler 2004; Pérez de Rozas 2004).

Núñez's desire to avoid any association with Catalanism is evident in his attitude towards recognizing the anniversary of Josep Sunyol's death. On 6 August 1936, just after the Spanish Civil War began, Sunyol, the president of FC Barcelona, was killed outside Madrid by fascist soldiers. Sunyol's political views were well known. Early in his career he founded a left-wing newspaper and later served as a deputy in the Spanish parliament, a member of the nascent leftist nationalist party, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*. In Catalonia, Sunyol's murder is sometimes referred to as an assassination. To avoid promoting connections between the club and Catalan political life, Núñez ignored the 50th anniversary of Sunyol's death. Only after prodding did Núñez publicly commemorate the 60th anniversary (Ball 2001).

Under Núñez, FC Barcelona also had rather acerbic relationships with other Catalan football clubs. Rather than work towards nurturing football in Catalonia and feeding young Catalan players into the Barça system, Núñez brazenly poached the star players of other Catalan teams with huge sums of money. This created conflict and bad feeling between clubs and often supporter bases as well. It also further dampened the notion of FC Barcelona as a Catalan team and promoted the rich, elitist reputation the club has among many of its detractors.

The constituency that seemed to matter most to Núñez was the club's *socios*. Núñez was careful to nurture ties to them, indeed the *socios* elect the president. Throughout his presidency, Núñez kept the price of season tickets relatively inexpensive. In keeping with the notion of Núñez treating the club as a business and not a Catalan institution, one could suggest that *socios* were considered to be shareholders and that the club was at the service of its shareholders rather than Catalonia. This focus on the *socios* led to critiques of Núñez for turning his back on the club's social role, "He wanted to take the Catalan flag out of the stadium, he wanted to convert the club in to some kind of business" (Espadaler 2004). Núñez also nurtured *penyas* (supporter groups) and notably, *penyas* in the rural, presumably more conservative areas of Catalonia (Artells 2004). The number of *penyas* increased steadily throughout Núñez's period in charge

of the club (Tomás 2004a). When up for re-election, he aided *penyas* in getting *socios* from rural areas to Barcelona so they could vote (Artells 2004). Focusing on the concerns of the *socios* and *penyas* helped Núñez remain in power.

If Núñez operated the club as a business, most would concede that, by and large, he was successful. Drawing upon his expertise in real estate, he greatly increased FC Barcelona's patrimony. Under Núñez, the club became one of the richest clubs in Europe. The money he made for the club was in turn splashed onto the global market of elite football players. On the field, the club experienced the most successful period in its history. Núñez brought some of the most talented and most famous players in the world to FC Barcelona. In 1982, the club signed Argentine striker Diego Armando Maradona, widely recognized as one of the best players in the history of the game. The year that Maradona arrived, FC Barcelona won the Spanish Cup final against Real Madrid. However, the key to FC Barcelona's greatest successes came in the familiar form of Johann Cruyff (who left the club as a player in 1978), returning to FC Barcelona in 1988 as team manager. Under Cruyff, the team won four consecutive league titles and, perhaps more significantly, the European Cup (a competition renamed the Champions League starting in the 1992–93 season), the only one in the club history until 2006. By contrast, rivals Real Madrid have won the trophy a record nine times. The 1992 European Cup triumph further lionized Cruyff, but also buoyed Núñez, who easily won his next election.

The early and mid-1990s was a period of great success for the team on the pitch. However, Núñez became increasingly antagonistic to those outside of the club, to both institutions and individuals. His already strained relations with the *Generalitat*, the *Ajuntament* (city government) and the press deteriorated further. Núñez became increasingly antagonistic with the iconic player-turned-coach, Cruyff. The relationship deteriorated and in 1996, Cruyff left the club (but not the city of Barcelona). This led the press and others to discuss how FC Barcelona had fractured along lines of support for either Núñez or Cruyff, creating fairly evenly divided and entrenched camps within the club – *Nunistas* and *Cruyffistas* (Artells 2004; Batlle 2004). Those dynamics were still active at the time of the 2003 election won by *Cruyffista* Joan Laporta.

The end of Núñez's tenure was hastened by a failed proposal to redevelop the grounds around the stadium, a plan he called *Projecte Barça 2000*. The plan called for not only enlarging the grounds for football but also for developing a leisure park and an athletic park. Perhaps Núñez saw *Projecte Barça 2000* as an opportunity to cement his legacy as both club president and urban construction magnate. The downfall of the project lay not only in disagreements with the plan itself but in the discord associated with his presentation of the plan (Batlle 2004; Canut 2004;

Espadaler 2004; Pérez de Rozas 2004; Sobrequés 2004). Núñez announced *Projecte Barça 2000* as a *fait accompli*, neither having sought any input from outside parties in its design, nor bothering to publicly explain the project in any detail. The vague promises of a leisure park surrounding an extended sporting complex alarmed many people in *Les Courts*, the neighborhood in which the stadium is located. Neighborhood groups reacted strongly against Núñez for his heavy-handed approach (Batlle 2004; Sobrequés 2004). They feared the development of a huge commercial complex with restaurants, cinemas, stores etc. (Artells 2004; Espadaler 2004). Progressive grassroots organizations rallied against the project, demanding to know what the social benefits to the neighborhood and city would be (Pérez de Rozas 2004).

Projecte Barça 2000 also met strong resistance from the governments of Catalonia and Barcelona. There was a growing conflict with the *Ajuntament* over the plans concerning both the financing and the process by which Núñez was attempting to accomplish his vision (Batlle 2004). The *Generalitat* was similarly opposed to the project (Batlle 2004; Canut 2004). The project failed in large measure due to Núñez's antagonistic relationship with *Les Courts*, Barcelona and Catalonia. Had the project been presented by someone else, it might have been realized (Pérez de Rozas 2004). Indeed in 2006, Joan Laporta announced his intention to enlarge the stadium and develop the immediate area, which was met with initial support rather than initial resistance.

As *Projecte Barça 2000* failed to materialize, these long-standing antagonisms worsened. Meanwhile, the team also struggled on the pitch, testing the patience of *socios*. Critics now characterize Núñez as '*anti-más que un club*' and discuss his final years in terms of 'social fracture' (Espadaler 2004). Núñez's administration of the club became increasingly insular towards the end of his tenure, provoking further protest. After 22 years in power, Núñez stepped down as president of FC Barcelona in June 2000. In the elections that followed, on 23 July 2000, Joan Gaspart, long-time club vice-president in the Núñez administration, was elected president of the club. His election was widely interpreted as a continuation of Núñez's policies (Artells 2004; Batlle 2004). The following three years brought high salaries, disappointing results on the field and mounting debt, putting increased pressure on Gaspart to leave. On 12 February 2003 Gaspart resigned. Less than three months after his departure, it was announced that the club had incurred 55 million euros in debt from the 2002–03 season, bringing the net debt of the club to 98 million euros (Gimeno and González 2003). After Gaspart's resignation, Enric Reyna became the interim president until elections were arranged. Gaspart's departure marks the end of the Núñez era (Artells 2004).

Election 2003

The 2003 election for the presidency of FC Barcelona was the first election in Spain's democratic era that did not feature Núñez or someone who represented a direct continuation of his policies. Entering the race later than the other candidates was Joan Laporta, a lawyer who had been the spokesperson for an anti-Núñez block of *socios* called the *Elefant Blau* (Blue Elephant). The *Elefant Blau* had previously called for votes of no confidence against Núñez. Neither *Sport* nor *El Mundo Deportivo* (the two daily sport newspapers in Barcelona) ran a feature story about Laporta's candidacy until the last week of April, after several other candidates had declared and been covered for weeks. On 30 April *El Mundo Deportivo* ran its first story about Laporta's possible run, indicating that his candidacy brought together "a series of young liberal professionals that belong to a diverse scope from Catalan social life" (Aguilar 2003a, p. 17). That same day, *Sport* printed results of a poll suggesting that Lluís Bassat was the odds-on favorite with 42.6% support. Laporta tied for a distant fifth place with 2.2% of the poll, although nearly 40% were undecided (Bassat en cabeza 2003).

Laporta campaigned on a platform of total change. On the social level, Laporta promised to return the club to Catalonia, "To project Barcelona in the world, it is necessary to know where we come from and our idea is to recuperate the *catalanismo* of Barça" (Giménez 2003, p. 12). One of five bullet points in a Laporta print campaign advertisement lauds, 'Projecting Barça and what Barça means: civicism, fair-play, Catalanism, plurality, democracy and modernity' (Canviem: tu decideixes 2003). Although there were no *nunista* candidates, each of Laporta's five opponents campaigned with individuals who were in some way involved with the Núñez/Gaspard era. This allowed Laporta to portray any other candidate, in this case the leader Bassat, as the candidate of the *status quo*. Slowly Bassat's lead in the polls began to fade.

Laporta's platform called for more revenue through media exposure and increased global marketing. The plan hinged on buying one or two world-class football players who were also media stars and who could drive the FC Barcelona brand. On 30 May the newspapers announced that Laporta had reached an agreement with Manchester United to bring David Beckham to FC Barcelona. This greatly increased both the profile of Laporta and the profile of the election in the greater football world. With news about Beckham now public, Laporta appeared capable of delivering a first tier athlete/superstar to the club. Ultimately it may be that notion, more than the promise of Beckham himself, which propelled Laporta's campaign to success. However, much of the English-speaking sport media later portrayed Laporta's victory as a direct result of the promise to deliver Beckham, an assessment not widely held in Catalonia.

In the last weeks of the campaign, Basset began to attack Laporta. At a debate, Bassat and candidate Josep Martínez-Rovira, criticized the Laporta candidacy, questioning its independence from outside influences. The attack concerned one of Laporta's key advisors and proposed directors, Sandro Rosell, a former executive with the Nike Corporation. The other candidates suggested that Rosell, who worked for Nike over an eight-year period, was still on contract with the Oregon-based superbrand. This accusation suggests that the candidates thought they could garner support by playing upon the fears of globalization and foreign interference into how the club was run. In the following days, the Laporta campaign worked to explain through the press that Rosell was no longer under contract to Nike (Rosell niega vínculos con Nike 2003). It became public knowledge that Laporta's contacts with Manchester United had been facilitated by Rosell's relationship with its general director Peter Kenyon (Aguilar 2003b). This relationship was formed during Rosell's days with Nike, as the company outfits both Manchester United and FC Barcelona.

As the campaign came to a close, the remaining candidates increasingly targeted Laporta, who was criticized both for trying to sign Beckham and for not yet convincing the player to come to Barcelona, although it was public knowledge that Manchester United was ready to deal (*Cinco contra Beckham* 2003). Laporta hammered on with his themes of complete change. He promised to bring in media stars who would jump start both the sporting and economic slumps. He declared that his administration would be financially strong, modern and the most *catalanista*.

Reconnecting with Catalanism: FC Barcelona under Joan Laporta

On 15 June 2003 Joan Laporta was elected president of FC Barcelona by the largest margin in club history (Aguilar 2003c). Laporta was elected because he represented the greatest change. Members of Laporta's Board of Directors reinforce this view. In reflecting on the campaign, director Toni Rovira explains, "We sent a message, a discourse of total change, a rupture with what had come before it, of not staying trapped in the past" (2004). Rosell suggests the same, "our candidature was a complete break with the past . . . the most radical change" (2004). This break came in two main forms, through a remobilizing of a *catalanista* discourse and through a massive effort to brand the club globally. Under Laporta, FC Barcelona is simultaneously promoted both as Catalonia's club and marketed as a global superbrand. Here, I discuss the explicitly Catalanist aspects of the situation and consider FC Barcelona as a global brand elsewhere.

The adoption of explicitly Catalanist policies served as a clear break with the Núñez/Gaspart eras. In public discourse, FC Barcelona's

leadership framed these policies in the context of recovering the club's social role. For Laporta, reasserting the social role of the club included the use and promotion of the Catalan language, use of Catalan symbols and improved relations with the city and regional governments. His young modern image meshed with a polished rhetoric about the inseparability of the club and Catalonia. As Artells (2004) explains, "Laporta has a discourse very rooted in Catalanism and in the country [of Catalonia]. And when he speaks he will say so directly because he wants Barça to be a Barça that is implicated socially, very *catalanista*".

This discourse of FC Barcelona and Catalonia as naturally and necessarily connected is implicit in the increased use of the motto '*mes que un club*.' For some, the phrase had lost all meaning under Núñez and Gaspart. '*Mes que un club*' speaks directly to the club's social role vis-à-vis Catalonia, a role the club's directors believe is as relevant currently as it was during periods of dictatorship (Rovira 2004). Rovira submits that nationalistic sentiments make FC Barcelona more than a club (2004). Although many have proffered explanations of how this motto relates to the deep connections between place, club and national identity, few articulate the discourse as clearly as Espadaler, who writes periodically about the social role of FC Barcelona. For Espadaler, *mes que un club* articulates that FC Barcelona is a social phenomenon and not just a team that goes out on the field every week trying to win at all costs (2004). For him, the club is not only expected to represent Catalonia and certain ideas associated with the place, but to be an active agent in advancing those ideas. Espadaler evokes the historical role and the social relevance of the club in discussing the motto:

It is an expression, a way of seeing, still valid because Barça is a little different than other clubs. In Spain, football clubs normally are only football clubs that hold together local pride or serve the power of a magnate and help advertising for his businesses or serve political ambitions or ambitions of social status. Barça has become so big as it belongs to the *socios* and has a history tied to the history of the resistance of the country against franquismo but also against the dictatorship of the 1920's, it has been a distinctive club that has addressed many social concerns. Barça is the only team that has had an impact in the press, has created press, has had relationships with artists, with politicians, that has been behind a country, that tried to bring together the immigration of the 1960s and 1970s. (Espadaler 2004)

He continues by explaining that the club's role is more than political, that it corresponds to Catalan values and ideas Catalans have about life. This also suggests that the club is closely involved with how people collectively identify as Catalans and how that is communicated to others:

It [FC Barcelona] has tried to represent an idea about football and style of play that is akin to an idea about life. It is a club that has an opinion on

things ... That is to say that there are aesthetic and ethical dimensions to the style of play that make football, in an advanced society like this, still have predominance ... That is to say that the idea of 'more than a club' is not only political but also social, anthropological if you like. (Espadaler 2004)

Espadaler persuasively states the case for the important social role of the club. However, his claim that FC Barcelona is the *only* team to have played such a role is problematic. There are strong examples in many other places of football teams that play very key roles in the politics of place and identity. Athletic Bilbao plays a very strong role in this regard for the Basques of Vizcaya (MacClancy 1996). Celtic and Rangers in Glasgow provide another powerful example of how football clubs can become wrapped up in nationalist politics (Giulianotti and Gerrard 2001). Even without explicitly nationalist dynamics, football clubs are powerfully involved in local identity politics in cities throughout the world. Football can also be important in maintaining geographical memory and local identity at much smaller scales in smaller places (Hague and Mercer 1998). Nevertheless, that FC Barcelona is seen as unique by many *catalanistas* only reinforces the place-identity role of the club. The club is expected to field a team that plays an attractive and bold style because the team is expected to represent Catalonia (Espadaler 2004).

These social connections to place are evident in Laporta's rhetoric. Instead of eschewing connections to Catalonia, Laporta and his board seek them out, using the club as an active voice of Catalanism. Through the media, Laporta promotes a narrative of FC Barcelona as primarily a Catalan institution, "Our project is the joy of an entire country, of the majority of Catalans" (Laporta: *Este proyecto* 2005). While visiting Bosnia-Herzegovina, Laporta declared, "Barça is a club from Barcelona, capital of our country, Catalonia. We are proud to be Catalans and here we can demonstrate those feelings with the same pride you have when you say we are Bosnian (Laporta: *El Barça* 2005). The media provides a daily and normalized venue for advancing the club's narrative of place.

The Catalanist discourse promoted by the Laporta administration is very much a self-conscious effort. Club officials talk openly about FC Barcelona as necessarily linked to Catalanism and Catalonia. Laporta himself is careful not to publicly criticize Núñez or Gaspart, but members of his board have done so more freely. For Rovira, "Barça was losing its soul, Barça was not the Barça from before, Barça did not appear to be Catalan" (Rovira 2004). In explaining the most important change the new administration has made, Rovira points out:

The discourse ... A discourse clearly catalanista. Without hiding it, but to the contrary. Emphasizing it ... for us, the most important thing is to return

the catalanidad to Barça. To return Barça to the country because Barça has disengaged a little bit from the country. This is, together with sporting success, our big challenge. To make a great Barça and that Barça returns with Catalonia, elbow to elbow. (Rovira 2004)

Rosell articulates similar thoughts in comparing the current administration with those preceding it:

I think above all it has been a change in mentality. It is a change in management style . . . I think the present management team is basically very barcelonista and very catalanista. Historically, Barcelona (the club) has always been a catalanista reference, of catalanidad, an instrument for explaining to the world what Catalonia is and what it means to be Catalan. I think the previous club administrations have lost a little of this identity between the club and Catalan identity. (Rossell 2004)

Both Rovira and Rossell define the club in terms of its relationship to Catalonia. More significantly, Rossell suggests that one of the ways that Catalonia is understood, particularly for those outside the region, is through FC Barcelona, "an instrument for explaining to the world what Catalonia is" (2004). Here, FC Barcelona is not only expected to contribute to other ideas about Catalonia as a place but is sometimes expected to be the *sole* means by which Catalonia is known.

The idea of returning the club to Catalonia reinforces the very notion of an autonomous Catalonia as an important and distinct place. In promoting this discourse, the club evokes the board of directors that led Barça during the 1970s when, as discussed above, the club began to reclaim an active social role during the final years of the dictatorship. Laporta and his board are tied in various ways to the directors of that era. In his first speech as president, Laporta declared that one of his greatest influences was Armand Caraben (Solé 2003). Caraben was a vocal *catalanista* and also an early opponent of Núñez (Rovira 2004).

In addition, Laporta recognized that it was Caraben who was chiefly responsible for bringing Johann Cruyff to the club. Laporta was close to Caraben until his death in 2003, and he remains close to Cruyff (Espadaler 2004). Two directors, Sandro Rosell and Xavier Cambra, are sons of directors from that era. Sandro Rosell, FC Barcelona's vice-president of football under Laporta until June 2005, is the son of former club secretary Jaume Rosell, who played a key role in guiding the club during the transition from Franco's last years in power to the early years of democracy. Rosell himself emphasizes in many ways that the Laporta administration represents a continuation of the ideals acted upon by his father's group (Rosell 2004). He suggests that Laporta and his directors are very much the ideological children/heirs of the *catalanista* directors of the early 1970s.

FC Barcelona and the Catalan language

The strongest illustration of how Laporta has repoliticized the club is through support of Catalan language rights and education. The Catalan language has long been a core value in defining most notions of Catalanism (Conversi 1990). The club has begun to use the Catalan language in nearly every facet of their operation. All of the player contracts, no matter the star's status or country of origin, are written in Catalan (Rovira 2004). FC Barcelona works with the *Omnium Cultural*, one of the most prominent Catalan cultural organizations that promotes official use and status of Catalan. It has also helped to promote *Free Catalonia/Catalunya Lliure*, an organization that lobbies for Catalan languages programs in schools and funds the teaching of Catalan to immigrants (Rovira 2004). In addition, Laporta traveled to Brussels to support the effort to have Catalan declared an official language of the European Union by the European Parliament. The Barcelona sporting press occasionally highlights the degree to which players become integrated into Catalan society by running features about the Catalan abilities of non-Catalan players. The club has Catalan language and culture classes available for the players (Rovira 2004) and the local sporting press plays up the situation regularly. Here, language and sport are brought together in promotion of a nationalist discourse.

In some instances the club's use of Catalan has prompted criticism. Specifically, Laporta's use of Catalan at certain meetings of *penyas* has been criticized for alienating Castilian-speaking *socios* and supporters of FC Barcelona. Artells suggests that this dynamic may reflect too strong an effort to align the club with Catalanism:

Barça has some 115,000 socios and in Catalonia five million supporters and many throughout Spain. Not all are catalanistas, and when president Laporta goes to a *penya* and speaks in Catalan, there are many people that do not understand it and are bothered because he is their president too. And this they need to be careful with because the president of Barça represents many people that think in many ways and do not speak only Catalan, perhaps speak Castilian and do not understand Catalan, here in Catalonia and outside of Catalonia. I think he has committed certain errors, applying a politic that does not correspond with the average Barça supporter. It is a Catalan club, but it is important to be careful not to cheat the followers of Barça that do not understand Catalan, that are not catalanists and are for Barça. There has to be a balance. (Artells 2004)

Here, Artells articulates a dilemma. As the club captures a broader and broader following, the spatiality of support becomes more extensive. Thus in certain instances, the use of Catalan, which reinforces a connection with and a commitment to Catalonia and Barcelona, becomes increasingly exclusive. This poses problems for a club also looking to expand its international membership and its image as a global brand. As Artells

suggests, Laporta's twin approach, the global and the local, presents some place-based tension.

Through the example of FC Barcelona and Catalonia, this article has argued that football is an important vehicle for the expression and social construction of place-based identities. Club presidents, management and the media have strong roles in suggesting how sport, place and identity should be understood. As the case of FC Barcelona demonstrates, this role is neither static nor monolithic. Instead, it is constantly being renegotiated and thus in flux. The meanings involved in attaching football to place are contested. Connections to particular places are mobilized by individuals and groups in different ways at different times. In this way, the role that sport plays in the social construction of place is flexible. Football teams do not just mirror dynamics of the city or region in which they are located but rather are actively drawn upon to advance ideas about places.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Rachel Greer, Karin Waller, Alexander Murphy, Susan Hardwick, Shaul Cohen, Ronald Wixman, Lynn Kahle and three anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and comments on versions of this article.

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