

# European Football: More Than Just a Game



David Ramos/Getty Images

## El Clásico: Real Madrid vs FC Barcelona

Competition has always been a big part of human society. It is engraved in our nature to compete against others, and this can be seen dating back to ancient Greece and Rome. The desire to win and compete runs in our blood. While not everyone can participate in organized sports, they can be an integral part of the sport by becoming fans. Most people support a team that their family supports or choose a team and stick to it for life. There is no divorce in this sporting marriage. Fans would fight for their team even if they are not on the playing field. This becomes clearer in the rivalries seen in European football. A globally known rivalry is El Clásico, a fierce rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. This rivalry is easily the largest in world football, and whenever these two giants come up against each other, there is always entertainment for the neutrals involved. In Spain, El Clásico is more than just a game of football, it is where the nation of Spain is divided. In this paper, we will be exploring how these two footballing giants represent the political standing of their fans and their regional identities.

**TABLE 1.** All-time-head-to-head record in competitive matches between Real Madrid and Barcelona (Summerscales, 2022)

<b>Competition</b>	<b>Matches Played</b>	<b>Real Madrid Wins</b>	<b>Barcelona Wins</b>	<b>Draws</b>
<b>La Liga</b>	184	76	73	35
<b>Copa del Rey</b>	35	12	15	8
<b>Copa de La Liga</b>	6	0	2	4
<b>Supercopa de Espana</b>	15	9	4	2
<b>Copa de la Coronacion</b>	1	0	1	0
<b>Champions League</b>	8	3	2	3
<b>Total</b>	249	100	97	52

Before we indulge in the cultural context of this rivalry, it is important to look at the statistics of this fixture. Historically, El Clásico has been a close matchup with Real Madrid only having three more competitive wins than Barcelona (Table 1). This matchup was first played in 1902 in a competition known as Copa de la Coronacion where Barcelona came out on top with a final score of 3-1 (Standard Sport, 2021). In February 1929, the first-ever El Clásico in the Spanish League known as La Liga was played which Real Madrid won with a scoreline of 2-1 (Standard Sport, 2021). However, Barcelona won the reverse fixture along with the first-ever La Liga title (Standard Sport, 2021). The largest recorded El Clásico victory was an 11-1 thrashing by Real Madrid in the Spanish Cup (Marsden, 2013).

El Clásico has been played by many footballing greats such as Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Alfredo Di Stéfano, Zinedine Zidane, and Ronaldinho. The mentioned players may not have Spanish roots, but they play with immense passion in this fixture, and it is this passion that makes this rivalry entertaining to watch. While many great players have played in this fixture, two players stand out when talking about this rivalry: Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. This rivalry was at its absolute peak when Messi and Ronaldo played for Barcelona and Real Madrid, respectively. During this time, El Clásico often seemed more about Messi versus Ronaldo than Barcelona versus Real Madrid (Grez, 2021). Messi holds the record for the most goals in this fixture with 26 goals in 45 matches (Garganese, 2022). Another legend of the game, Sergio Ramos has the joint record with Messi for the most appearances (45) in El Clásico (Garganese, 2022).

The passion behind El Clásico has its roots outside of football. The story behind this breathtaking rivalry cannot be seen with the naked eye. In the political and cultural affairs of Spain during the mid-20th century, the rivalry ignited into flames. There was a key historical event taking place in Spain during this period: the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). During this period, supporting either of these teams became more than just wearing a jersey and attending the match, it became a way to express an individual's ideas and beliefs about the world. Masses of people sharing similar beliefs would rally behind the crest of the organization they believed in (Biancalana, 2020). Therefore, supporting Real or Barcelona was not just supporting a sports team, it was identifying yourself with a political and cultural movement. Barcelona and Real came to eventually represent

two sides of the Spanish Civil War and were involved in the country's political spectrum as a whole (Biancalana, 2020).

The two Spanish giants came to be associated with different movements during the Spanish Civil War. Real Madrid became associated with the right-sided Nationalist movement, whose end goal was a unified Spain (Biancalana, 2020). While Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia became associated with the left-leaning Spanish Republic and supported an elected government (Biancalana, 2020). FC Barcelona became a symbol of Catalan identity opposing the political ideas of Madrid. Regional cultures, languages, and beliefs became suppressed as Spanish dictators looked to consolidate Spain (Biancalana, 2020). This meant that the Catalan identity became censored and suppressed. Following the Spanish Civil War, the Catalan club suffered due to the Nationalist regime, but despite this, the club embodied left-sided ideologies (Biancalana, 2020). This laid the foundation for this fierce rivalry.

While the rivalry was intense due to the differing political ideology, it was not as fierce as it is today. There were a few incidents that sparked this rivalry and caused it to grow as big as it is today. Francisco Franco, a Spanish dictator viewed Real Madrid (the Los Blancos) as a symbol of Spanish tradition – representing the language and culture of Spain. The Los Blancos represented the centralization of power in Spain that Franco desired (Beville, 2020). Due to this, Real was an ideal public relations tool for Franco. This led to one of the most controversial results of all time, the 11-1 thrashing of the Catalans by Real in the semi-final of the Spanish cup. Sid Lowe, a pundit of Spanish football described this as “the first game that first formed the identification of Madrid as the team of dictatorship and Barcelona as its victims” (Beville, 2020). This is because it has been revealed that the Barcelona players were threatened by both the military and police before this fixture (Beville, 2020). Joan Barau said in an interview with Goal.com, “In that tie, Barcelona were overcome by military pressure and people close to the Falange,” (Beville, 2020). The Spanish Fascist Party was called the Falange (The History Learning Site, 2015). Not only did the politics influence the fixtures, but also the transfers of players to the clubs were influenced.

Two controversial transfers added fuel to the fire in this rivalry: the transfers of Alfredo di Stéfano and Luis Figo. In the case of Di Stéfano, both clubs had an agreement to sign the players due to the legality of his departure from River Plate (Beville, 2020). A few years before the two Spanish giants were interested in the signing of Di Stéfano, he had left River Plate for a Colombian side

known as Millonarios during a player's strike. (Biancalana, 2020). This cast confusion and doubt regarding which club had registration rights over the player. Unknowingly of this situation, the Catalan club approached River Plate to sign the player (Biancalana, 2020). Di Stéfano even played part in a pre-season friendly for Barcelona in 1953, however, the Spanish Football Federation intervened in this transfer on the grounds that the Colombian club had not sanctioned this transfer (Beville, 2020). The Los Blancos pounced on this opportunity and reached an agreement with Millonarios and confirmed the signing of Alfredo di Stéfano (Biancalana, 2020). The board of Barcelona believed that the transfer was sabotaged by Franco as he exerted a fair amount of his influence on the Spanish Football Federation (Beville, 2020). While there is no evidence to back this up, the Barcelona fans (Culés) believe that politics had meddled in sporting affairs.



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Luis Figo, once the most loved player in Barcelona, quickly became the villain in the capital of Catalonia. Figo was signed by Barcelona from Sporting CP for a sum of \$2.75m (transfermarkt, 2018). At the Catalan club, he dazzled and amazed the Culés with his magic on the wing, but this would quickly come to an end due to his greed for more money. Florentino Pérez, a candidate in the presidential election for Real Madrid promised that he would sign Luis Figo for



the Los Blancos (Biancalana, 2020). Figo had reached an agreement with Pérez to sign for Real Madrid if he won the presidency of Real Madrid (Biancalana, 2020). Figo was given a signing bonus for the agreement, and he believed that Pérez would not win the presidency because all the odds were against Pérez winning (Biancalana, 2020). However, against all the odds, Pérez won the election and was the new president of Real Madrid and due to this Figo was obligated to join Madrid as per the agreement. After joining the Los Blancos, Figo was the most hated man in the city of Barcelona and remains to be hated amongst the club's supporters. On Figo's return to the Camp Nou donning the infamous white jersey of Real Madrid, he was greeted with expected hostility by the Culés. The Barcelona supporters were so angry with the Portuguese that they even threw a pig's head at Figo whilst he was taking a corner (Biancalana, 2020). Controversial events like this one helped develop the rivalry between the two Spanish giants.

With the death of Franco in 1975, Spain moved away from a dictatorship, and his successor Juan Carlos started the transition of Spain to a democracy (Beville, 2020). While the dictatorship has ended, there remains a preference amongst the Spanish government for Real Madrid to be the elite club in Spain. With the introduction of democracy in Spain, there have been fewer conflicts, but they have not completely stopped. In 2017, the Catalan independence referendum was held by Catalonia's pro-independence leaders (BBC, 2019). The referendum resulted in 90% of the population in Catalonia wanting separation from Spain, however, the Spanish court refused to acknowledge this referendum labelling it as "illegal" (BBC, 2019). The pro-independence leaders pushed forward with the movement and declared independence, and this resulted in Madrid activating Article 155 which granted emergency powers to the Spanish government (BBC, 2019). By invoking Article 155, the Spanish government used violent police forces which revived disturbing memories of Franco's dictatorship for some (BBC, 2019). In a response to these violent police forces beating protestors and voters, FC Barcelona shut its doors to fans during a game against Las Palmas (Beville, 2020). This demonstrated the cultural and political significance of the Catalan club as it was a vehicle for the representation of Catalonia when other representations are suppressed by the government.

*In football, the worst blindness is only seeing the ball.*

Images



Image from Barcelona vs Sevilla in the Copa del Rey.

Credit: Getty Images



Image from the 2017 Catalan Independence Referendum

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