



Goooooal! Spanish soccer fans in Barcelona's Plaça d'Espanya celebrate the winning shot

# A Nation Wins As One

Long considered soccer's great underdog, Spain has finally won the World Cup. But the greater victory is how the game has helped the country make peace with its different identities

BY LISA ABEND/MADRID

**Y**O SOY ESPAÑOL, ESPAÑOL, ESPAÑOL!" As a whistle in Johannesburg ended the final match of the 2010 World Cup, 5,000 miles away, an entire country burst into song. From the shirtless kids taking a celebratory jump into Madrid's Cibeles fountain to the couples draped in Spanish flags dancing their way down Barcelona's famous Ramblas, all of Spain, it seemed, was chanting the same joyful lyrics. But perhaps no one sang with more fervor than Mahbubul Alam. Watching the game through the window of a café in Madrid's Lavapiés neighborhood, his entire body shook as he belted out the words everyone was singing: "I am Spanish, Spanish, Spanish!" The fact that Alam is Bangladeshi hardly seemed to matter.

Every World Cup has its stories, but this year's competition was especially ripe with overarching narratives. From the romantic (in a live, postgame interview, ecstatic goalie Iker Casillas planted

a kiss on the shocked reporter who—sigh!—just happened to be his girlfriend) to the financial (the win, promised several newspapers, would bring a boost to the foundering economy), Spain's 2010 World Cup was about so much more than goals and penalties. It was about identity—what it means to belong to the new Spain.

Take, for example, the spectacular rise of Spanish athletes. When Andrés Iniesta took the shot, deep in overtime, that would be the final's only goal, he brought to an end an 80-year drought that had left Spain, despite its undeniable talent, without even a World Cup semifinal to its name. Throw in Formula One star Fernando Alonso, a handful of basketball players who, when they're not tearing up the court individually for the Memphis Grizzlies or the L.A. Lakers, are together winning the European championship, and a tennis player you may have heard of named Rafael Nadal, and suddenly the country is an athletic

powerhouse. "Thirty years ago our footballers would play in *alpargatas* [flat-soled espadrilles] on dirt fields," says Roberto Palomar, editor of the sports daily *Marca*. But when dictator Francisco Franco died in 1975, the democracy that followed brought in a Socialist-led government that created state subsidies and built the infrastructure necessary to raise a generation of serious athletes. "Today, there's a multimillion-euro athletic center in every town, and they all have AstroTurf," says Palomar.

Spain's World Cup win also tells a compelling tale about nationalism. In a country where the provinces of Catalonia and the Basque country, each with its own language and heritage, strive for ever greater autonomy from the central government in Madrid, soccer has long been an arena for symbolic politics. The vicious rivalry between Barça and Real Madrid derives in large part from the fact that support for the Barcelona team was one of the few means that Catalans had during the 40 years of Franco's dictatorship to express their regional identity (Franco was a big Madrid fan). Many Catalans, who dream of one day fielding their own team at the World Cup, have been loath to support any team bearing the name of Spain.

But this year was different. The national team included seven Barça members and, by promoting itself as La Furia Roja (the Red Fury), garnered a broader embrace than it normally might have. "If you feel your nation isn't Spain ... calling them La [Furia] Roja lets you still feel passion for the team," says Barcelona-based communications consultant Antoni Gutiérrez-Rubí. "Their uniform was a single color, but it held a variety of shades."

That doesn't mean football eradicated the country's regional tensions. The day before the final, Barcelona held a massive demonstration to protest the Spanish constitutional court's decision that the Catalonia region, although entitled to an extensive degree of autonomy, did not have the legal right to call itself a nation. But the following night some 75,000 Catalans turned up to watch the game on a giant screen that the municipal government, for the first time in its history, had erected outdoors. "I marched at the head of the procession on Saturday and then went home on Sunday to watch the game with my family," says Barcelona mayor Jordi Hereu. "You can do both."

The soccer-driven sense of togetherness didn't stop with the Catalans. In Lavapiés, one of Madrid's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods, Chinese wholesale shops press up against Moroccan butchers, and

Peruvian women in long black skirts buy fruit from Senegalese grocers—all the result of a massive wave of immigration that has, in recent years, raised the percentage of Spain's foreign-born residents to 11% of the total population. On the night of July 11, however, the neighborhood was a sea of homogeneity—one red shirt after another. José Romero, an immigrant from Ecuador, had even painted his black-and-white dog Spot with the Spanish colors for the occasion.

Seated outside with friends, Azhar Abbas, from Pakistan, was ecstatic before the game even began. With a red-and-yellow scarf tied around his neck and a Spanish flag emerging from his collar, he was sure Spain would win because it was such a good country. "It's not like Germany or Italy, where there's discrimination," he said. "Here there's no difference between Spaniards and foreigners." And just in case ethnic tolerance wasn't enough to guarantee victory, he added, "I went to the mosque today and prayed for Fernando Torres."

They were praying, too, at the Baobab, an African restaurant up the street, when Casillas blocked Arjen Robben's shot. Glued to the restaurant's television set, a group of Bangladeshis, one Chinese woman, a couple of native Spaniards

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and a half-dozen red-shirted Senegalese screamed in outrage when Nigel de Jong's foot connected with Xabi Alonso's chest. In unison, albeit in several different accents, they shouted obscenities at the referee.

The scene was much the same at Hasan Keyf's doner kebab restaurant around the corner. At one point during the evening, the 20 young Moroccan men sipping Fantas at tables draped in Spanish flags broke spontaneously into a chorus of "Viva España." "They're gods of the game," said Mohammed Dauud, referring to the Spanish team. The 22-year-old immigrated by himself to Spain from Morocco when he was just 12, and the intervening years, he said, explain his loyalty to the Spanish team: "This is where I live, who I am now. Of course, Spain is going to be my team." Asked if, by that logic, he supported Real Madrid, Dauud shook his head. "Are you crazy?" he asked. "I'm a Barça fan." ■