Hi everyone! Thank you for reading, and I appreciate your comments. My main goal with this brown bag is to see what it would take to get this paper into the shape of an article, as I am not sure where to begin. Does it all hang together? Is my argument convincing? What other questions or literatures should I address in order to address as broad a field as possible? Etc, etc. Thanks and see you on Monday!

“A unique case in the world of football”: Athletic Club, Nationalism, and Basque Exceptionalism

Each home soccer game at Bilbao’s San Mamés Barria stadium begins the same way. After on-pitch warm-ups, the loudspeakers announce the names of that day’s starting lineup for the home team, Athletic Club de Bilbao. Each name is met with thunderous applause from the crowd, which often nears the stadium’s 53,000 seat capacity. After the player introductions comes the singing of the club’s anthem, at which point the entire stadium gets to its feet. Those who have Athletic Club fan scarves hold them spread wide above their heads. A stentorian voice sounds from the loudspeaker: “Athleeeeeetic!” The fans respond, at full volume: “Eup!” They continue: “Athletic, Athletic, geuria…Athletic, zu zara nagusia!” The anthem is quite a bit longer than that, but it is in euskera, the Basque language, so most Athletic fans (known as athletizales) only know the most important lines: “Athletic, Athletic, you are ours…Athletic, you are the best!”

Despite the fact that their team has only won one minor trophy in the past thirty-four years, Athletic Club’s fans are famous for their devotion to their team. Athletizales routinely fill their stadium to 98.9 percent of its capacity (for comparison, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, two powerhouse superteams, fill their stadiums to 91 and 72 percent capacity), and they are well-known for traveling en masse to away matches. There is a popular joke that goes something like this: if a particular region or city in Europe is not doing well economically, all they need to do is arrange a match between the local team and Athletic—so many athletizales will travel to cheer on their club that they’ll boost the local industry. Many believe that the fans’ vocal, unceasing support in the home stadium even has a direct impact on the run of play: a former player theorized that their enthusiasm accounted for 12-15 extra points on the classification table.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even visiting teams feel the weight of Athletic’s fanbase: “We must be prepared to play at San Mamés, because the fanbase squeezes you [aprieta] and matches seem to last forever,” said José Mendilibar, head coach for SD Eibar, in May of 2016.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Intense fan attachment of this nature is not a new nor a unique phenomenon; however, Athletic’s fans’ identification with their team goes a step further. Athletic Bilbao’s claim to fame—its most distinctive quality—is its exceptionalism, its uniqueness in a nationalist sense…and its extremely localist recruitment policy, which limits its player pool to only “Basques”; that is, anyone who was born or raised in any of the seven provinces that make up the historic Basque country. While other teams have also adopted policies similar to that of Athletic Club’s—notably, fellow Basque team Real Sociedad de San Sebastián—Athletic’s ability to both retain such a policy and to have continued success in perhaps the most elite league in international soccer is unique.

Athletic Club is often characterized as a team with a deep and proud history; a team that, like FC Barcelona is “more than a team.” Athletic Club’s cantera policy, as well as other narratives of difference that have historical roots in Basque narrative discourse, have established it as one of the foremost and most enduring symbols of Basque cultural nationalism. The team’s enduring popularity stems, I will argue from fans’ intense desire to take part in the Basque exceptionalism that has become such fundamental part of the club’s identity. This exceptionalism is made all the most potent by the way in which Athletic is de-politicized.

*The birth of Basque nationalism, 1860-1880*

It seems coincidental that one of the most enduring emblems of Basque cultural nationalism would emerge at the same as the political movement that legitimized and exalted that nationalism. While many would argue that Athletic Club’s ties with political nationalism are and have been minimal[[3]](#footnote-3), its continued use of unambiguously nationalist symbols, such as the ikurriña, or Basque flag, bely this argument. While it is true that members of Athletic do not openly promoted independence, the identity they and the team embody is one that is distinct from (and some would say in opposition to) Spanishness. While nationalist histories claim that the first glimmers of the Basque nation appeared in the distant past most other scholars locate the formation of a separate Basque identity in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This identity, which rested on so-called Basque “distinctiveness”, would become the basis for a political nationalist movement that advocated independence and political sovereignty. Basques’ distinctiveness rested primarily on the existence of the fueros, which were a set of charter agreements between Basque elites and Isabella I of Castile that established separate laws, taxation, and courts for the Basque provinces in exchange for their incorporation into the kingdom of Castile. Beginning in the mid-19th century, proto-nationalists began to argue that the unique government that the fueros provided was evidence that Basques were unique as a people. Coro Rubio Pobes has described this reasoning in this way: “[we Basques] possess special laws because we are a special country, a special people, and those laws cannot be destroyed without gravely assaulting this country, for they [the laws] are themselves an essential part of its very nature.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The somewhat circular logic of this argument—that Basques were a distinct people because they had a distinct legal system separate from that of the rest of Spain, and they had a distinct legal system because they were a distinct people—did not particularly trouble regionalist thinkers.

Euskera, the Basque regional language, also had great importance for the nascent Basque identity. As a language isolate, euskera is not related to any other Indo-European language; regionalists (and later nationalists) used this fact to demonstrate Basque uniqueness and singularity. Euskera’s existence seemed to “prove” that Basques had never been conquered: they had successfully resisted both military and cultural advances by the Romans, Moors, and Castilians. The sense of uniqueness and particularity imparted by discourses about the fueros, euskera, and Basques’ mythical history as a people formed the basis for what would become a broader, inter-provincial, cross-class ideology of Basqueness that was distinct from –but compatible with--Spanishness. For mid-nineteenth century regionalists, the ultimate goal was a kind of dual identity: ethnic-Basque but civic-Spanish.[[5]](#footnote-5) The end of the century, however, gave rise to a movement that broke abruptly from the regionalists’ ideals: that of Basque nationalism.

The concept of Basque distinctiveness—in reality, exceptionalism—reached its apogee in the writings of Sabino Arana, who is widely considered the “father of Basque nationalism.” Arana, a Vizcayan whose family had to flee to France after the loss of the third Carlist War, became an intensely important thinker for what would become the Basque national movement. While most of his more radically conservative philosophies were soon abandoned, Many of the most familiar narratives about Basques—the fundamental importance of Basque difference, the incompatibility of a Spanish-Basque identity, the idolization of a “mysterious” and “ancient” culture—emerged from his pen. He was primarily politically active during the decade of the 1890s, during which wrote and published a series of essays in Basque newspapers; these writings would form the cornerstone of Basque nationalism. In addition, he founded the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacional Vasco, PNV) in 1895; the party quickly became a powerful political force in the region, and it has dominated the Basque regional government both before and after the Franco dictatorship.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps his most widely used contributions, however, were the many nationalist symbols he invented. Perhaps the most famous of which are the red white and green ikurriña, or Basque flag, which is based on the Union Jack--and which also adorns Athletic Club’s captain’s armband.

Like many of his contemporaries, Arana saw the end of the nineteenth century as a period of relative crisis for the Basque country. First, 1876 saw the three provinces of Álava, Vizcaya, and Guipúzcoa lose the foral rights that they had enjoyed for centuries; they had backed the wrong horse in the third of the Carlist Wars and lost the fueros in retaliation. Secondly, the massive quantities of high quality iron ore in the hills of Vizcaya drove the extremely rapid industrialization of Bilbao and its environs, drawing in great numbers of migrants from the rest of Spain seeking economic prosperity; they came to be known derogatorily as maketos. While the loss of Basque sovereignty was blow enough, Arana saw the “invasion” of the maketos as an equally great threat: exposure to these outsiders and the secular modernity that they represented would destroy the Basque community. In contrast to the lazy, godless heathens from other regions, Arana’s Basques were rural, hard-working, simple, honest, and exceptionally pious. For Arana, protecting the sanctity and purity of Basqueness was of paramount importance, and required him to break with the regionalist thought of his predecessors and declare the necessity of an ethnic Basque nation. The fueros and euskera became proof not only that Basques were a distinct population within the Spanish nation but that they were in fact a distinct race--indeed, that they were the purer race. Basques became, through the myth of euskera’s ancient and singular origins, direct descendants of the first inhabitants of Europe; this myth not only “recreated a culture of continuity, purity, isolation, and resistance”—it “ended the historical cohabitation of Spanish and Basque identities”[[7]](#footnote-7). While the PNV has modified this stance over the course of the century, Basque exceptionalism and non-Spanishness has frustrated the creation of “a modern Spanish nation” because it was “embedded in some of the most dynamic and outward-looking areas of growth and change within the Spanish economy.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is this very embeddedness that justifies many of Athletic’s more explicitly nationalist policies.

*The birth of Basque football, 1890-1930*

Curiously, the industrialization of Bilbao, which brought to the Basque country the maketos that were such a threat to the sanctity of Basqueness, also brought to the region what would become one of its most enduring symbols of nationalism—football. While the presence of abundant and high-quality iron ore in the hills of Vizcaya had long been known, the it was not until the British-led industrial revolution that extraction began in earnest. A somewhat prosperous fishing and commercial hub throughout most of its history, by the end of the nineteenth century Bilbao had been transformed to an industrial powerhouse—one of the busiest harbors and centers of iron production in Europe. Bilbao’s proximity to Great Britain allowed for the easy export of iron ore to the island’s many blast furnaces—in fact, by the 1890s British furnaces were smelting more Vizcayan ore than they were British. Vizcayan ore and the industry it birthed drew not only British capital but also British laborers, who could not find employment in their local industry. According to legend, football arrived in Bilbao in the hands of these English workers, who would play the game in their free time, attracting the attention of local working-class Bilbaoans. The locals, intrigued by this foreign game, decided to try their hand and challenged the British workers to a match in 1894—which they lost 0-6. Despite the loss, the daily El Nervión reported that there was a “great contest…and the game will be repeated.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The historic patch of grass which witnessed the first football in Bilbao would later come to be known as the Campa de los Ingleses (the field of the Englishmen). The field no longer exists today, though it is memorialized in a plaque in the space where it used to sit—at the foot of the Guggenheim museum. Athletic Club—and Basque football generally—grew out of these working class encounters.

In reality, the establishment of football as a Bilbaoan pastime was driven just as much by the sons of wealthy Basque industrialists as it was by British laborers. The Bilbao bourgeoisie sent its progeny to British boarding schools to receive their education; a number of these students caught football fever and brought it back with them to Bilbao. In 1898, a number of these students founded Athletic Club de Bilbao—spelled in the English fashion—and organized matches against other teams. In 1901 the founders of Athletic Club met again to formalize rules and regulations, and the next year they merged with another Bilbao team, Bilbao Football Club, which had been founded by British workers such as the ones who played at the Campa de los Ingleses. The first decades of club play had a decidedly bourgeois character, as match tickets were out of reach for many working class people. Matches themselves were social events, full of “fine and elegant society”[[10]](#footnote-10); contemporary photographs show a great number of women in elegant dresses and fine hats attending to watch their team play. Athletic Club during this period also had some of its strongest ties to the political Basque nationalist movement in the form of Alejandro de la Sota, who was president of the club from 1913-1918. The Sotas were shipping and mining magnates and were notorious for their nationalism; Alejandro was no exception. He founded the abertzale, or patriotic daily sport paper Excelsior in 1924 and advocated the use of sport, particularly football, to indoctrinate the working class to nationalism. While there was initially resistance to this new game—football was a foreign sport, unlike pelota, the Basque sport par excellence, and it was associated with a plutocratic elite—eventually football prevailed. By the 1930s, football was the most popular sport in the Basque country not only because of its accessibility but because it was a valuable tool to strengthen and preserve the Basque race.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Indeed, Basques as a people were seen to be particularly well-suited to football: the Basque masculine values of strength, virility, fairness, and open-air life were strengthened and promoted by the sport. Football “admirably suits the character of the Basque race and produces such good effects among the young” that it “contributes to the improvement of the race and to sustaining all its virility and vigour.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Indeed, while these nationalist, racialized arguments were certainly not the sole nor even the primary cause for football’s immense popularity, “there is no doubt that one of the reasons for football’s success in the Basque Country was its perceived compatibility with the characteristic virtues to which Basques laid claim.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Alejandro de la Sota mused that even football’s foreignness, which had initially been seen as a knock against it, brought certain advantages: “the British game and its professionalization promised the Basques progress, modernity, and internationalism.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Basque footballers’ increasing proficiency at the sport was evidence of their modernity: “The Basque land…offers today the type of young man who is strong, agile, and intelligent, who leaves the farmsteads and flips the coin of chance in the vestibule that invites him to take the first steps toward the most modern of professions.” De la Sota’s vision of the ideal Basque nation—one that was modern, cosmopolitan, and progressive--differed sharply from that of Arana, who advocated a return to tradition. Despite these differences, their vision of the ideal Basque masculinity remained constant—thus linking football and the virility it provided its players to the ideal Basque nation. Athletic Club, by upholding this vision, could be an important symbol of Basqueness without engaging in any apparent politics at all.

Basque masculinity and its apparent singularity made Basque football distinctive from the very beginning. This distinctiveness encompasses both Athletic Club as well as San Sebastian’s Real Sociedad, their league rivals. Basque players were “more athletic, more virile, more physically demanding. The players from here are physically giants compared to ours,” wrote Sevillan journalist Francisco Fernández when his team came to play a tournament in 1923.[[15]](#footnote-15) Basque football from this period was played “in the English style,” which was characterized by long passes up the pitch to a center-forward, who will get it into the net with foot or head. Athletic Clubs’ particularly close relationship with British players and tactics, as well as Basques’ stereotypically larger physique, led them to adopt a style based more on speed and aggression than technique and skill. This was well suited to the Basque character: as Sabino Arana noted, “the Basque race is, through the conviction of its positive physical superiority, one of the most saturated with that healthy spirit of battle, of competition, which is summed up by Saxons in the word “struggle”.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Thus, Basque football mirrored the values of Basque masculine force and determination: by playing a style “of vigorous players who, it was proclaimed, would not give up but would relentlessly pursue the ball until the final whistle,” both Athletic and Real Sociedad showcased the ideal versions of Basque manhood.

In fact, it was this characteristically "Basque" style of play that became typical of the Spanish national team after the 1920 Antwerp Olympics. During the second half of the semi-final match against Sweden, Athletic player Jose Maria Belausteguigoitia—known as ‘Belauste’--scored a “herculean” goal off a free-kick, overwhelming the Swedish defenders and heading it into the net.[[17]](#footnote-17) Shortly afterwards, he scored another goal after catching a long pass and beating three defenders to the goal. Such was the passion, force, and physicality of the play that the European press soon began calling the Spanish national team ‘la furia española’—the “Spanish fury.” The association of Basques with this particular style of football plays an important discursive role in the conceptualization of Basque nationalist masculinity. Whether or not the play of the Basque teams was really so distinctive from that of the rest of the peninsula is immaterial--the meaning that both followers and members of these teams, as well as the media who covered them, accrued from exploiting these perceived differences discursively establishes a Basque exceptionalism that is based on an apparently apolitical masculinity.

The sense that this exceptional masculinity was a particularly Basque quality was strengthened by the development of the philosophy of the cantera. According to this policy, which is still in effect today, Athletic will only field players born or trained in the Basque country. This localist recruitment policy has its roots in 1912, when the last two Englishmen left Athletic’s ranks. While it is not clear when the club leadership made the decision to only recruit locals, club historian José María Mateos wrote in 1921 that “playing with players “made” in the Basque lands…is neither a challenge nor a depreciation of anyone. It is simply a posture adopted right from the beginning”[[18]](#footnote-18)—implying that by then the philosophy was already a fundamental part of the club’s identity. The cantera, or “Basque-only” policy, as it is sometimes known, has made Athletic “un caso único en el fútbol mundial”[[19]](#footnote-19)—a singular case in all of world football—and is the most successful and popular of its nationalist policies. The policy, which is still in effect today, makes Athletic an oddity in the world of increasingly globalized football.

*Athletic Club under Franco, 1939-1975*

The years of the Franco dictatorship were, somewhat paradoxically, incredibly useful in providing Athletic Club a narrative of Basque exceptionalism and resilience in the face of political oppression, a narrative which has been useful in promoting both the club and Basque cultural nationalism itself. Athletic Club’s astonishing success during the years, coupled with its status as a self-consciously Basque team, transformed it into a symbol of resistance to the repression of the dictatorship.

General Francisco Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War established a facsist military dictatorship that lasted forty years, one that was marked both by intense political repression in regions that had opposed Franco during the war and also a rabid desire to stamp out the “vile regionalist passions” that plagued the Spanish nation. Catalonia and the Basque country were obvious targets of this Spanish nationalist impulse. This involved the eradication of Basque nationalist symbols both in civil society but also in sport: euskera was suppressed, the ikurriña was made illegal, and members of Franco’s party, la Falange, were parachuted into the executive boards of both Real Sociedad and Athletic in order to keep an eye on things. Despite this repression, however, Athletic Club remained an important symbol of the power of Basque masculinity—if not explicitly then in a set of discourses that established their difference from other Spaniards. The idea of the cantera and the localism it implied is an example of this, as is the persistent image of Athletic players as “once aldeanos” (eleven villagers). Even the fact that Athletic purposely kept its players’ salaries low for many years so they would not get rich served to differentiate Athletic and the Basque masculinity it represented from other Spaniards.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Even Franco himself employed the discourse of Basque exceptionalism, though to different ends. The dictatorship often presented “lo vasco” (“that which is Basque”) as the original Spanish character. The ultimate goal of this tactic was to prove that Basques and Spaniards were more alike than nationalist Basques would want to admit; however, in asserting that “lo vasco” was not a mere invention they implicitly acknowledged nationalist claims of Basque distinctiveness. Indeed, the dictatorship’s claim that Basqueness was the essence of Spanishness hearkened back to the regionalist views of the nineteenth century—indeed, to Sabino Arana’s traditionalist views.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to Carlists and other nineteenth century regionalists, Catholicism and the fueros represented the authentic Spain; liberal and secular ideas were alien to both Basques and the Spanish nation as a whole.[[22]](#footnote-22) As early as January of 1939 *Marca*, a Francoist sport daily, ran a special report profiling Basque pulsolaris, or competitive stone-lifters, and reported that pelota was a “genuinely Spanish game, played par excellence in the Basque provinces.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus, the regime attempted to reclaim the most traditional of games, the one that abertzales most authentically Basque, and reframe it as a Spanish game.

The dictatorship applied the same strategy to coverage of Athletic Club, portraying its players as “the incarnation of male Hispanic values: virility, impetus, and fury.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Most of those who had played on the fateful team for the 1920 Antwerp Olympics had been Athletic players; thus, Athletic players were the truest distillation of the “Spanish fury” that had come to define the Spanish national team. It made no difference to the regime that the man who had scored the two “furious” goals, Belauste, had been an ardent anti-Spanish nationalist and had run the PNV’s Youth Football team for a number of years. The club came to represent the Spanish fury not only because of its playing style but of its cantera policy: Athletic was “the only top team that played exclusively with Spaniards. The Falange had turned the “Basque-only” philosophy into a symbol of Spanish nationalism, one that overrode any separatist philosophy with the power if the Spanish nation. Franco’s attempt to pivot these discourses of cultural Basque nationalism to further the cause of the regime were not altogether successful; however, they merit examination precisely *because* they occurred. Athletic Club became such a long-standing symbol of Basque nationalism in part because of attempts such as these to downplay the power of its culture of exceptional Basque masculinity.

One of the regime’s primary strategies for achieving the mythical homogenous Spanish nation was to suppress all regional languages in favor of Castilian—but his linguistic cleansing did not end there. The eradication of “foreign” influences from the Spanish state was to be so thorough as to apply even to the vocabulary of football. Because Franco hoped to use football as his own method of nationalist indoctrination, preserving and uplifting the sport’s “Spanishness” became of paramount importance. Having only been recently imported, football in Spain remained extremely Anglicized: most of the terms used were cribbed directly from their English counterparts. Franco’s new initiative did away with that vocabulary and replaced it with Spanish versions: corner kick became saque de esquina, for example, and offsay (offside) became fuera de juego. This initiative to cleanse football of its foreign influences reached new heights, however, when several teams were forced to change their English names to Spanish to appease the Francoist censors. Thus, Sporting de Gijón became Deportivo de Gijón, and Athletic Club de Bilbao became Atlético de Bilbao.

While it seems rather silly, this name change had great implications for many of the narratives surrounding the history of the club, and it remains an important point for fans of the team, myself included. The name “Atlético de Bilbao” has extremely negative connotations among modern fans, and they will not hesitate to point out the mistake. As the dictatorship wore on, and especially after Franco’s death in 1975, the name “Atlético de Bilbao” came to be regarded as a symbol of Francoist repression. Modern fans think of the name “Atlético” as an imposition forced upon the team in order to try to rob it of its difference, of its uniqueness—a narrative which plays quite neatly into the discourse of Basque exceptionalism. Changing Athletic’s name to a Spanish counterpart obscures the strong English ties that were so central to the club’s early identity. Playing in the “English style” has long been a point of pride for the club: “the association of the club with the homeland of the game was seen…as a source of additional prestige, since the most successful British teams were…regarded as among the very best in the world.” It also presents the nationalist idea that not only is Basque difference a historical fact, Basque people have in fact been punished for that very difference. For that reason, referring to Athletic as Atlético is seen not only as a mistake; it becomes a deliberate act of erasure erases the team's first, true name in order to make it more palatable to “mainstream” Spanish audiences. Misspeaking the name becomes, through this narrative, itself a kind of anti-Basque oppression. It erases the difference that is such a key part of the narrative of Basque identity, the cognitive dissonance of one of the strongest and most enduring symbols of Basque nationalism having an English name.

One of the more popular contemporary narratives about Athletic players is that, despite their fame and money, they are nothing more than “once aldeanos”, or eleven villagers—that is, they are no different from any other person on the street in Bilbao. The phrase arose in 1958, when Athletic Club defeated Real Madrid in the Generalissimo’s Cup. This was a great victory on a number of levels, in part because Real Madrid had won both the Spanish Liga and the European Cup (the predecessor to the modern Champion’s League) that season. Just as importantly, however, was the quality and starpower of Real Madrid’s players: Alfredo di Stéfano, an Argentine forward who was widely considered the best in the world, had recently joined their ranks following a dubious trade with Barcelona. Athletic Club’s win, then, demonstrated not only the footballing quality of the Bilbao side but also the moral superiority of their rural manhood: as then-president of Athletic Enrique Guzmán famously declared, “We have humiliated them with eleven villagers!” According to this narrative, “the simple, honest, and unassuming Basque rural man…[can] through sheer will and tenacity beat sophisticated and powerful opponents”[[25]](#footnote-25) —the ultimate triumph of Basque (nationalist) masculinity. The success with which Athletic transmitted ideals of Basque nationalism without necessarily being attached to its political arm through the PNV is a perfect example of the ways in which discourses on masculinity and manhood become nationalized.

While early in the regime Franco and the Falange kept a tight grip on all expressions of regionalist nationalism, the 1960s and 1970s saw them grow more lenient—to a certain extent. This was due to two separate circumstances: first, after the 1960s changes in the legislation surrounding associations meant that many of these agencies were no longer under the control of Francoist authorities, and both Basque and Catalan nationalists quickly sought refuge.[[26]](#footnote-26) The second circumstance was that the dictatorship began to see the use in allowing small displays of regional nationalism during sporting events—doing so on the football pitch might distract those very same nationalists from taking more direct political action elsewhere. While Athletic's more explicitly nationalist activities would occur mostly in the 1960s and 1970s, when ETA's activities spurred a radicalization of Basque nationalism, there are still earlier examples of the ways in which the Basques of Athletic Club promoted their vision of rugged, rural Basque masculinity; a unique masculinity that was not shared by other members of the Spanish state. These contestations of identity arguably radicalized Basqueness even after Franco's death: even today, symbols of Spanish nationalism, such as the flag or the anthem, are strongly associated with fascism. One might argue that Athletic Club would not have persisted in its cantera policy if it had not been for the memory of the dictatorship and it way it invalidated Basques' identity and belonging.

Probably the most famous incident of direct political nationalism on a Basque football pitch occurred in 1976 during the Basque derby—that is, the biseasonal matches between Real Sociedad and Athletic Club. The match that year took part in Anoeta, Real Sociedad’s home stadium, and Francisco Franco had died the year before; the ikurriña was at this point still illegal. In an “historic act,” the team captains—José Ángel Iribar for Athletic and Inaxio Kortabarria for Real Sociedad—walked onto the pitch and did a lap holding the ikurriña aloft between them. This moment was, as a newspaper proclaimed in 2010, “a day that is part of the history of Basque soccer and the Basque country.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Another article credits their act with having “had certain consequences,” and that same article quotes Iribar as saying that their walk that day had been “an important step that helped to finally legalize the ikurriña…There were doubts about could happen, but it seemed somewhat impossible that they would be able to do anything to two soccer teams that had a certain renown.”[[28]](#footnote-28) That an act of such political importance—indeed, that it is remembered and honored as such—would take place at a sporting event is illuminating not only of the way that both Athletic Club and Real Sociedad were self-consciously constructing themselves as symbols of Basque nationalism, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the way that they were, and are, accepted and lauded as such. Nationalist discourse at sporting events is powerful, and it creates narratives that form part of the identity not only of those who are fans of Athletic, but that of Basques in general—note that the first article called the event important in the history of the Basque country as a whole, not just that of two soccer teams that performed an act of political dissidence.

*Modern Basque nationalism: the cantera and the politics of inclusion, 1979-2016*

While Athletic Club no longer has explicit ties with political nationalism—it is very unusual for players to become politicians in the PNV, for example, or to advocate directly for nationalist causes—it is arguably now a more effective vector for cultural nationalism than it ever has been. This is due in large part, I would argue, to a confluence of two separate phenomena: first, the policy of the cantera, which remains enormously popular among both supporters of the team and others; and second, the fact that Athletic Club and fanhood are largely seen as being outside politics—at San Mamés, the Athletic Club stadium, “the barrier between politicians ad citizens breaks down” and “you are just another fan,” noted Andoni Ortuzar, the current president of the PNV.[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, Athletic is seen as a space outside of political-ideological structures: it is a strong unifying symbol for Vizcayans of all ideologies, whether they identify as Basque nationalists or not.[[30]](#footnote-30) Thus, the cantera itself must be depoliticized: even as Athletic adopts nationalist symbols in other arenas, the cantera policy remains “beyond…appeals to nationalism”: “[it] is not a xenophobic or isolationist position, but a position of pride and belief in local values.”[[31]](#footnote-31) While this may be true at the most strictly literal level, it is also true that simply by adopting this policy, which as I have mentioned makes them “unique in the world of football,” Athletic Club is exploiting the concept of exceptional Basqueness. The key difference between this and other expressions of Basque nationalism, however, is that Athletic Club fandom offers its even its non-Basque fans a window into that exceptionalism.

The cantera and the “Basque-only” policy it enacts is undoubtedly the single most well-known fact about the team—probably because it’s the first thing fans tell those who don’t know. The policy does raise many questions, though. First of all, why? In an increasingly globalized market player’s market, why stick to a policy that drastically limits the talent pool you can choose from? Next: who is Basque? How does a soccer team identify Basqueness, and how does that affect both the players on the team and the fans of the team? How does Athletic’s policy influence fandom--in people who do consider themselves to be Basque but also in those who do not? How do people talk about the policy, and what kinds of ways do they describe it? Most importantly, does this policy have any effect on Basque identity as a whole, and if so, what is it? While the cantera has received plenty of attention from scholars, they tend to emphasize the way in which it has “relax[ed] the definition of a pure Basque”[[32]](#footnote-32) and the actual mechanics of player selection.[[33]](#footnote-33) I am more concerned with the way in which discourses surrounding the cantera not only define who is and who is not Basque by virtue of whether or not they can play for the team, they *create Basqueness.* The Basqueness of Athletic is that of the “once aldeanos” and the “Spanish fury”: masculine, rural, humble, vigorous.

The concept of a canterain itself is not radical; in fact, the vast majority of Spanish teams have canteras—though they do not hold the same kind of political and identity-laden significance that Athletic’s does.The word “cantera’in Spanish simply means quarry; in terms of soccer, it refers to each team's youth divisions: the place where they train and develop their own players for the first team. Unlike the United States, which takes the development of its elite athletes through academic institutions, professional Spanish soccer teams develop their own players from the time they are very young—thirteen or even twelve years old. Most of the time, however, those homegrown cantera players—who tend to be local—are often supplemented by players bought in the increasingly global football marketplace; often, and especially for more elite clubs, it is those outside players who make of the majority of the first teams.[[34]](#footnote-34) The point of difference, then, between Athletic and other clubs is not the simple fact of *having* a cantera; it is the style in which the cantera is used. For Athletic, that means limiting its potential player pool to only those who were either born or raised in the seven historic Basque provinces—Athletic’s players are thus “all Basque.”

While localist player recruitment policies like that of Athletic’s are extremely unique today, Athletic is not the first nor the only club to adopt such a stance. In fact, for the first forty or so years of its existence, teams with entirely local squads like Athletic’s were not particularly rare—in the 1950s, as football became increasingly professionalized and increasingly globalized, however, Athletic’s determination to field all local players became more and more noteworthy. The club also began to promote the policy more self-consciously: a new club anthem celebrated the team’s “clean tradition” (límpia tradición), and players began to be turned away because they had not been born in the province of Vizcaya.[[35]](#footnote-35) While the team would later broaden its category of Basque territory—in so doing expanding its own nationalist jurisdiction, as it were—the central concept and desire behind the development of the cantera system has not changed. “That old and beloved Athletic Club, which has once again been assembling a good team; always with people from the land [i.e. Basques], following a policy to which it was never been unfaithful”—so read a 2005 editorial celebrating Atheltic’s successes. Thus, the cantera policy, which is popular with people across the political spectrum, becomes another symbol of Basque exceptionalism, resilience, and (masculine) strength. As I have noted in discussing narratives of Basque masculinity, is precisely *because* the cantera is considered nonpolitical that it retains such strength and such appeal. Somewhat unsurprisingly, Athletic Club was not the only club to attempt fielding only those players born within the confines of Euskal Herria (Basqueland): Real Sociedad did so as well, until 1987, when it was forced to seek players beyond the national borders in order to remain competitive—the Basque country was not large enough to sustain two soccer teams in Primera, and Athletic Club was the bigger, more successful organization, thus la Real was forced to cede.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The club has an active hand in the construction of discourses surrounding the cantera, and the official website introduces it in this way:

“Athletic Club as an institution, alongside its supporters, is characterized

by its defense of a set of values that appear less and less frequently in twenty-first

century soccer and sport. Pride in what is ours, which is reflected to its greatest

extent in our cantera policy, becomes a unifying force that outweighs than the

differences in our daily lives. It marks a difference [between Athletic] and any other philosophy or way of understanding soccer in the world.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Restricting itself territorially is reframed as promoting “pride in what is ours”—the nationalist “ours,” the primordial Basque difference that has been a marker of Basque identity since it emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Clearly, for the club, the cantera policy has become an important marker; in fact, the entire identity of the team revolves around the fact that they only field players that “have been trained in our own cantera and in the soccer clubs of Euskal Herria, which encapsulates the following territories: Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa, Álava, Navarra, Lapurdi, Zuberoa, and Basse-Navarre, along with, of course, players who were born in one of those territories.”[[38]](#footnote-38) While for much of its history Athletic was content to treat hiring philosophy as customary law, in 2001 newly-elected club president Javier Uria decided to formalize these policies by officially defining and documenting them in what became known as the plan DENA. This of course goes back to the eternally powerful narrative of primordial Basque difference—especially with Spaniards. Perhaps more importantly, though, there seems to be a persistent narrative that Basqueness can become diluted—that if the club begins to sign players who were not born within the confines of Euskal Herria its Basqueness will somehow be diminished. The cantera has become more than a point of pride, it has become a point of identity: what would happen to a team that fielded foreigners after not having done so for so many years? The policy is not only an important part of the identity of the club itself, however—it is important to the identity of its fans as well: a survey done on fans in 1992 during a period where it nearly fell into Second Division, showed that the majority of them would rather go down into a lower division than abandon the cantera[[39]](#footnote-39). As the slogan goes, “Con cantera y afición, no hace falta importación”—with cantera and fandom, there is no need to import.

Athletic Club has become, in some way, the unofficial Basque National Team (there is an official Basque National Team, but it is not recognized by FIFA and only plays friendlies). In some way, then, Athletic can define who is and who is not Basque through who is chooses to call up into its ranks—constructing new narratives about Basque identifies as they go. As I have mentioned, Basque identity is based, in part, on a kind of primordial, in-born, unchanging Basqueness—one that is based on bloodlines and “ethnicity”. What happens, then, when someone who is “Basque”—someone who is a member of your national team, in fact—does not embody these characteristics? What if they are Basque out of pure happenstance? According to most definitions of Basqueness, Fernando Llorente, who for many years was the team’s star forward and even became a symbol of the team, was only Basque out of pure happenstance. Athletic’s current policy makes it so that a person only has to be born within Euskal Herria to qualify for the team—the intentionality of it is immaterial. Thus: Fernando Llorente, who was raised in Rioja (a territory just to the south) and considers himself riojano can be Basque because he was born in Pamplona—by chance. The hospital where his mother had intended to go to give birth was full and so his family had been forced to go to another one in Pamplona, in Navarra--which is part of Euskal Herria. Accidental or not, the Pamplona birth was enough for the team, and he was brought to Lezama (where the youth academy of Athletic Club is located) at age twelve. The story of Ander Herrera is similar: in terms of soccer, he had played his whole life at Zaragoza—from the very beginning—but because he had been born in Bilbao, he was eligible to play for Athletic and was bought for the hefty sum of eight million euros in 2011. Much of the rhetoric for the cantera policy comes from a desire to have “pride in what is ours”—but was Herrera truly “ours” if he was trained completely outside of Bilbao and only returned as an adult? Is he "ours" simply by the accident of his birth? Maybe not—but for Athletic, they can be *made* Basque; and, in fact, they are. Basqueness resides both in the land that makes up Euskal Herria but also in the ability of the team to redefine what it means.

Athletic Club not only creates narratives of who can be Basque, they broaden the territory that is considered Basque. Though there are seven historic provinces of Euskal Herria, only three of them (Araba, Gipuzkoa, and Bizkaia) are considered the “País Vasco” as such. Traditionally, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa are considered to be the Basquest of all the territories. Athletic, however, also claim Navarra as Basque territory—a nationalist act, for although Navarra does fall within the Basque cultural sphere, its history is separate from the three provinces. Even further removed from the traditional orbit are the three French provinces, which are often forgotten in speaking about the Basque country. This is in part due to the state border between France and Spain but also because the centralizing force of the French monarchy precluded the kind of autonomy the Spanish provinces enjoyed, so that many Basque cultural institutions were done away with much earlier. By reaffirming these territories’ historical presence within Euskal Herria, Athletic Club is making a statement about the Basqueness both of the territories and of the people who live there—whether they want it or not. Recent years have seen a precipitous leap in the number of Navarran players on the Athletic roster; their presence on the squad codes them as Basque, whether they identify themselves as such or not.[[40]](#footnote-40) Athletic has in recent years crossed the state border into France and begun partnerships with smaller clubs in Iparralde; this partnership gave rise in 2013 to the promotion of Aymeric Laporte, a young defender from Bayonne. He is only the second French person to appear on Athletic's first team, the other being Bixente Lizarazu, who played for a single season in 1996—and who became the subject of some controversy because he was French and not Spanish. Rarely, if ever, are these players asked about their national identity; the way that Athletic Club is so tied up in Basqueness and Basque identity would make it very difficult for them to be honest if they identified differently.[[41]](#footnote-41) I do not doubt, however, that they would identify as Athletic players—and being an Athletic player *makes* one Basque, if at least for as long as they wear the jersey.

The question of Basqueness, then, seems to rest both on both location and also on heritage--at least as far as Athletic is concerned, anyway. And, because Athletic Club constructs its own narratives about Basque identity, their concern matters. Recently, the category of Basqueness has been opening a little further to include those who are not white. Athletic has for most of its existence been a lily-white institution: while its cantera *policy* is not racist per se, it is certainly exclusionary, and modern large-scale international immigration into the Basque country has been a recent phenomenon. In addition, the fact that a *policy* appears anti-racist does not mean that the officials who put it into practice are. The biggest reason, however, is I think that the Basque identity has for most of its history been a *white* identity—in fact, many of the foundational myths of traditional Basque nationalism are predicated on whiteness and Basques’ ability to resist Moorish invasion. Those who are not white have historically not been able to take part in Basqueness; it would make sense that they would not want to play for a team whose identity is based in it.

It is for this reason that the promotion to the first team of first Jonás Ramalho, in 2008 and then Iñaki Williams, in 2014 attracted a great deal of both national and international attention: they have been the first Black players to play for Athletic Club's professional side.[[42]](#footnote-42) Iñaki in particular has caused quite a bit of stir, in part because he has been more successful than Jonás (he is already a fan favorite, and became a regular starter shortly after his debut), but also because his parents are Ghanaian and Liberian--immigrants. Williams operates in a particularly complex place: he plays for a team that demands Basqueness, but that very same Basqueness has been historically codified as a category of whiteness. Unlike Ramalho, whose mother is Basque, he has no blood-based "claim" to this white identity--besides the fact that he was born in Pamplona and has spent his whole life in the Basque country. The mainstream Spanish press does not help in normalizing Iñaki’s Black Basqueness: for obvious reasons he has received quite a lot of press since his debut, and much of it resonates with a kind of palpable disbelief that Black Basque people are a possibility in the universe. An article in *El País* describing Iñaki’s excellent performance in the Athletic Club victory over Real Madrid this past March, for example, ended with the smug “By the way, he’s Black.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

In going out of their way to prove how Basque Iñaki is despite his Blackness, the press have only served to Other him more. It is perhaps for this reason that he is forced to make as many claims to Basqueness as he does publicly; I have never, in my five years of fandom, seen a player discuss his Basqueness as often as Iñaki has done—no doubt because no other player’s claim to Basqueness has been as subject to scrutiny as Iñaki’s is. He is the ultimate test of Athletic’s claim that simply being born and raised in Euskal Herria is enough to produce Basqueness. "I feel Basque," he said in an interview shortly after he scored his first goal for the first team, in a match against FC Turin, during Europa league competition, "but part of me is African."[[44]](#footnote-44) Later in the interview, he continued: "I was born here. I've lived here for twenty years, but you don't forget your origins, your roots. My parents were born in Liberia, and I feel like my whole family is there." He is constantly performing his Basqueness: a recent interview with the team itself saw him call his mother amá, in the Basque manner, and he made reference to when he received his very first Athletic kit, at three years old as a Christmas present from his mother. In speaking this way, he is, whether his is conscious of it or not, creating new narratives not only for the legitimacy of his own Basque-African identity, but for all of those who have felt themselves excluded from Basqueness. While Athletic have not necessarily actively pursued a program of racial justice, the narratives about its power to define Basqueness have created a space that people like Iñaki can take advantage of.

As I have argued, the power of Athletic Club’s nationalism comes not only from the attractiveness of its cultural values, but from the possibility it offers its fans to take full advantage of the Basque exceptionalism it offers. Indeed, Athletic Club is intimately involved not only in the perpetuation of Basqueness but in its very *creation*, as its cantera policy will, by definition, only recruit players that are Basque by definition.

1. Mariann Vaczi, *Soccer, Culture and Society in Spain: An Ethnography of Basque Fandom* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015). Pg 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Mendilibar: ‘Jugar En San Mamés Es Difícil Por Athletic Y Su Afición,’” *Mundo Deportivo*, December 2, 2016, http://www.mundodeportivo.com/futbol/20161202/412358805018/mendilibar-jugar-en-san-mames-es-dificil-por-athletic-y-su-aficion.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Juan Carlos Castillo, “Play Fresh, Play Local: The Case of Athletic de Bilbao,” *Sport in Society* 10, no. 4 (July 1, 2007): 680–97, doi:10.1080/17430430701388822. pg 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Coro Rubio Pobes, *La identidad vasca en el siglo XIX: discurso y agentes sociales* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2003). Pg 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fernando Molina and Pedro J. Oiarzabal, “Basque-Atlantic Shores: Ethnicity, the Nation-State and the Diaspora in Europe and America (1808–98),” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 4 (May 1, 2009): 698–715, doi:10.1080/01419870802065903.pg 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The PNV currently holds a plurality in the Basque Parliament, holding 28 of the 75 seats. The current Basque president, Iñigo Urkullu, is also a member of the PNV. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Molina and Oiarzabal, pg 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John K. Walton, “Sport and the Basques: Constructed and Contested Identities, 1876–1936,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 451–71, doi:10.1111/j.1467-6443.2011.01414.x. pg 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *El Nervión,* cited in Vaczi, pg 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, pg 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Walton (2011) pg 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John K. Walton, “Football and Basque Identity: Real Sociedad of San Sebastián, 1909-1932,” *Memoria Y Civilización: Anuario de Historia*, no. 2 (1999): 261–89. pg 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Vaczi, pg 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Walton (2011), pg 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In Patxo Unzueta, ‘Fútbol y nacionalism vasco’, in *Futbol y pasiones políticas,* edited by Santiago Segurola (Madrid: Editorial Debate, 1999), pg 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Burns, Jimmy, *La Roja: How Soccer Conquered Spain and How Spanish Soccer Conquered the World* (New York: Nation Books, 2012), 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. José María Mateos, quoted in Vaczi, 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Relaño, Alfredo.“Athletic: caso único en el fútbol mundial,” *AS.com*, February 16, 2005, http://opinion.as.com/opinion/2005/02/16/portada/1108583755\_850215.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jeremy MacClancy, “Nationalism at Play: The Basques of Vizcaya and Athletic Bilbao,” in *Sport, Identity, and Ethnicity*, 1996, 181–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. While Sabino agreed with Carlists that secular and liberal ideas were the deepest threat to the true Basque community, he thought Basques must be completely removed from Spaniards in order to protect their Catholic virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Dr Alejandro Quiroga, *Football and National Identities in Spain: The Strange Death of Don Quixote*, 2013 edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid, pg 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Javier Díaz-Noci, “Los nacionalistas van al fútbol: Deporte, ideología y periodismo en los años 20 y 30,” *Zer: Revista de estudios de comunicación = Komunikazio ikasketen aldizkaria*, no. 9 (2000): 13., 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Vaczi, 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Quiroga, 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “El Día Que Athletic Y Real Sociedad Lucieron La Ikurriña Prohibida,” *Libertad Digital*, December 12, 2014, http://www.libertaddigital.com/deportes/futbol/2014-12-12/el-dia-que-athletic-y-real-sociedad-lucieron-la-ikurrina-prohibida-1276535756/. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Vaczi, pg 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Quiroga, 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Uria, 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Vic Duke and Liz Crolley, *Football, Nationality and the State* (Routledge, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Uria discusses this at length, as does MacClancy [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I should note that just because a player is developed in a cantera does not mean they are homegrown; Barcelona famously brought Lionel Messi (who many consider to be one of the greatest soccer players alive today) from Argentina when he was thirteen years old. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Vaczi, 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The next 35 years at Real Sociedad were marked by a very Basque policy: players from the international market could come from anywhere, but those acquired in the domestic market could only be Basque—no Spaniards. This changed in 2002 with the signing of Sergio Boris, who was born in Ávila. Since then, Real Sociedad has had less of a compuction to avoid Spanish players; at this very moment they even field two Spaniards who played for Real Madrid—the ultimate Basque enemy. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “Datos del club.” Athletic Club web. http://www.athletic-club.eus/cas/datos-del-club.html [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. MacClancy, 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Many Navarrans identify themselves simply as “Navarran”; it is its own identity category [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Curiously, the same sort of thing happens when players are called up to play on the Spanish National Team, as many Basque people do not identify themselves as Spaniards—in fact, they reject the label. How to play for a nation of which you do not feel yourself a part? When Athletic player Markel Susaeta got called up to the National Team in 2012, he famously said that the national team players represented “a…thing”; he was referring to Spain. This caused an uproar, as one would expect, and he has yet to be called up again. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Several Black players had been trained at Lezama, but none before had made it to the first team. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Rodrigálvarez, Eduardo. “Williams, de Bilbao de toda la vida.” March 10, 2015. http://deportes.elpais.com/deportes/2015/03/09/actualidad/1425925822\_131007.html [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Crespo, Íñigo. “Me siento vasco, pero una parte de mí es africana.” El Correo. February 20, 2015. http://athletic.elcorreo.com/noticias/201502/20/raices-como-estimulo-20150220162647.html [↑](#footnote-ref-44)