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To cite this article: Sílvia Juventeny Berdún (2017): Much 'more than a club': Football Club Barcelona's contribution to the rise of a national consciousness in Catalonia (2003–2014), Soccer & Society, DOI: [10.1080/14660970.2016.1267624](https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2016.1267624)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2016.1267624>



Published online: 03 Jan 2017.



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## **Much ‘more than a club’: Football Club Barcelona’s contribution to the rise of a national consciousness in Catalonia (2003–2014)**

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In Catalonia, fervour for Football Club Barcelona (Barça) goes well beyond sporting success as the team supports the demands of the stateless nation. Much ‘more than a club’, Barça is a platform for the expansion of a Catalan national consciousness. At a time when Catalonia is at a critical point in its relations with the Spanish state, claiming the right to national self-determination and presenting the possibility of secession, this paper examines how Barça boosts the strength of Catalan nationalist feelings through dynamics characteristic of the football sphere, such as rituals of group belonging, fandom performances of loyalty, the dramatization of rivalries, the elevation of those achieving sporting success to national icons or the strength of feeling provided by the sports ground. Looking at the period 2003–2014, it concludes that Barça is key in advancing claims that Catalonia is a sovereign nation with the right to decide its political future.

### **Introduction**

In 2005, the Catalan parliament drafted a new Statute of Autonomy. The document was severely redrafted by the Spanish parliament; especially the use of ‘nation’ referring to Catalonia was removed. This episode caused resentment in both Spanish and Catalan nationalist sides that lingers on. The roots of tension lie in the fact that the Spanish state is a result of the unification of multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which throughout the centuries has been a matter of dispute especially around accusations of Castile’s dominance.<sup>1</sup> Such long-standing hard feelings are still present in contemporary Spain, where almost a third of the population claims a different national identity from Castilian,<sup>2</sup> for example Catalan. Thus, Spain may be best regarded as a plurinational state, although this is rejected by the Spanish Constitution and government. The dispute is on the unity of Spain, expressed in centre-periphery struggles and rival nationalities that are remarkably articulated at football-club level.

Since football serves national minorities like Catalonia to stand apart from the centralist state,<sup>3</sup> the reaction of Football Club Barcelona (FCB, FC Barcelona or Barça) was to express their full institutional support to the Statute drafted initially and to display a big banner demanding a new Statute precisely in the match played on the National Day of Catalonia. The team was asserting Catalonia as a nation against the Spanish state’s denial. Bitterness increased with the beginning of a dramatic economic recession (2008–present), austerity measures, and the Spanish state’s refusal to concede a better fiscal pact with Catalonia. All this led to a wave

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of non-binding referendums in multiple Catalan municipalities (2009–2011) on whether Catalonia should become a separate state. Barça's then president Joan Laporta gave the central speech in the campaign asking to vote for the 'yes'.

In July 2010, more than one million people, including Barça's president, took to the streets of Barcelona to assert the right of the Catalan nation to self-determination. The failure of the Spanish government to respond to Catalan demands for greater devolution catapulted a secessionist civil movement.<sup>4</sup> On the National Day of Catalonia in 2012, two million people protested in Barcelona again, this time under the straightforward banner of 'Catalonia, next state of Europe', which counted once more with the presence of FCB's by then ex-president Laporta and President Rosell.<sup>5</sup> In 2013 and 2014, the commemorations for the National Day gathered around two million people who created human chains to assert the right of Catalan people to vote on their political future in Spain. A referendum was finally scheduled for November 2014, but since the Spanish government banned it, it was turned into a non-binding citizen consultation and elections were called for 2015 meant as a plebiscite on Catalonia's future in Spain and serving as a 'de facto' referendum.<sup>6</sup>

### **Objectives and methodology**

This article aims to make explicit some of the multiple ways in which Barça has participated in the rise of a national consciousness in Catalonia in the period 2003–2014. It argues that, in the light of major socio-political events of the past decade, FCB has once again acted in accordance with its historic 'more than a club' attitude and has embodied a prominent role in Catalonia by positioning itself in favour of the nation's right to decide its own political future. This case study follows a qualitative methodology to offer an exhaustive critical analysis of the varied instances in which a football club can be mobilized to incentivize nationalism in a society. The hope is that this case study will be useful for future investigations into the facility with which sport encourages the identification with, expression and expansion of nationalist sentiments, especially in contexts of high social tension.

The first section introduces the theoretical framework for analysing the role of sport in nationalism and in stateless nations in particular, followed by a review of literature on the historical role of Barça as a symbolic institution standing by Catalanism. The following section discusses the team's involvement in nationalism between 2003 and 2014. The focus is on how this role is manifested through dynamics characteristic of the football sphere that help boost nationalist feelings, such as the elevation of pro-independence President Laporta and coach Guardiola to national icons thanks to their successful managements, the ease with which fans are encouraged to support the nation in rituals of group belonging or the dramatization of the rivalry with Madrid along nationalist lines. There are references to both well-known events as well as more subtle ones and some images are included for visual record. The last section presents the conclusions and some reflections for further thought.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical argument from which this paper springs is Bairner's claim that the world of sport can help explain the rise of nations and nationalisms.<sup>7</sup> Bairner's work follows an established understanding that sport is enmeshed in the social fabric of a

place and in the construction of social identities.<sup>8</sup> One of the most widely discussed examples of sport facilitating a sentiment of a collective identity is in relation to nationalism. Nationalism can be understood as both a political ideology and a feeling of belonging to a community, a nation, formed by a group of people with a consciousness of being part of that community, claiming a distinctive common history, culture, attachment to a delimited territory and the right to rule itself.<sup>9</sup>

A highly influential model which for the last three decades has framed many studies of the emergence and maintenance of nationalisms through sport has been Anderson's seminal work on nations as modern 'imagined communities'.<sup>10</sup> Yet Bairner warns that this thesis has been overused and misunderstood because many studies overemphasize the constructed character of nations and fail to pay attention to the emotional component of nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Hargreaves and García Ferrando assert that nations require 'a strong *pre-existing* sense in a given population that it possesses highly valued elements in common which are deeply rooted in the past'.<sup>12</sup> While nationalism involves the imagination, it also works through passionate attachments.

Similarly, emotional investments bestowed upon sport mobilize and maintain consciousness and allegiance to a community, often making the communities of the team and the nation overlap. Because sport is marketed, mediated and experienced as contests between groups of individuals it encourages fandom to develop affective attachments to the team<sup>13</sup> and to other communities, like the nation. Sports like football enable the national category of millions of people to become a concrete entity.<sup>14</sup> This identification with the nation happens not only in explicit events like matches, but, as Billig argues, it is rather 'banal'.<sup>15</sup> Following this thesis, sociologists of sport adequately expanded the initial focus on sport events as theatres that animate nationalism, to also study how nationalism is invested with meaning and reproduced as a basic category of social life through everyday experiences that significantly shape fans' identities. Hence, the importance of sports as powerful platforms for nation-building.

In their study of the reinvention of national identities in Spain, Balfour and Quiroga define nation-building as 'the formation of a collective feeling of belonging to an imagined national community based on a number of historical myths'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, nation-building is a process of promotion of national consciousness, an effort to strengthen nationalism. While nation-building is commonly analysed as a state-induced project, this paper examines how it can be developed through a football club. Jarvie identifies ten recurrent arguments underpinning academic discussions on the role of sport in nation-building, two of which this article explicitly addresses: sport contributes to the building of national consciousness and it helps to build national identity.<sup>17</sup>

The role of sport in nation-building is further complicated in stateless nations, like Catalonia. According to Giulianotti, sport acquires a highly complex socio-political significance in nations without a state as the referent for or the recipient of nationalism.<sup>18</sup> Stateless nations may use football against their host states, conveying demands for decentralization or even secession. In Catalonia, where Spanish and Catalan nationalism compete for cultural and political hegemony,<sup>19</sup> institutions like Barça tip the scales in favour of the latter to respond to the stateless nation's fear of being acculturated by the dominant Spanish culture. As Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, one of the first intellectuals to pay serious attention to the socio-political role of the club, acutely asserted, Barça is a very powerful myth for the Catalan epic

and this symbolic power will not be abandoned unless in the unlikely event that other nations also give up their myths.<sup>20</sup> His incisive description of Barça as ‘the unarmed symbolic army’ of Catalonia and as fulfilling symbolic functions that at certain times no political party was ready to assume is a brilliant testimony of the complex socio-political importance of the club for the stateless nation.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, central to our discussion is the fact that Catalonia is not only stateless but also national team-less. As Jarvie notes, there has been much commentary upon the fact that stateless nations which are denied international representation may vest great national sentiments in a particular club, like Barça.<sup>22</sup> The refusal of the Spanish state to allow Catalonia to have its own national team competing internationally is grounded on fears that this could threaten the unity of Spain and serve to internationalize secessionist aspirations. Yet, this logic can easily backfire, as it has been suggested that banning another stateless nation like Scotland from competing internationally could be a propellant towards full independence.<sup>23</sup> Indeed the refusal enhances Catalanist ideas that Spain is a repressive state and triggered the emergence of the movement Pro-Seleccions Catalanes to achieve the international status of Catalan national sports teams, to which Barça gives full institutional support.

The ban grants Barça the status of national reference, so that as the press speculates, FC Barcelona could well be called ‘FC Catalonia’.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Barça might be a more effective vehicle for engendering Catalan national aspirations and giving them a greater international legitimacy than a hypothetical official national team. This line of argument is supported by Giulianotti and Stone, who agree that allegiances are usually stronger to individual teams than national ones because the latter only play sporadically and because commitment to a sports club is part of the everyday, characterized by the regularity of matches and the affection of fans to their ‘home’ stadium.<sup>25</sup> Even the Catalan government recognizes the club as a national reference, as the Secretary of Sport praised the fact that in the absence of a Catalan national team with international status, Barça acts as such.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the government is using the team as a platform for a nation-branding strategy. Following Anholt, place branding is ‘doing something to enhance the brand image of the place ... a way of *making places famous*’.<sup>27</sup> In nation-branding strategies, nations may incorporate sports to improve their brand image by associating it with the positive values of sports teams and to project this image internationally using the clubs’ global influence and media coverage.<sup>28</sup>

However, this tight collaboration between a private club and national politics has been the object of criticism. In his extensive analysis of Barça’s long-lasting implication in politics, journalist Ramón Miravittlas condemns what he deems an instrumental use of the club by representatives who sought to expand their own secessionist aspirations ignoring the vast numbers of members and fans who do not support the cause.<sup>29</sup> Miravittlas sharply concludes that the club is suffering from an ‘overdose of political power’ because it is being used as an ‘extraparliamentarian political agent’ for a certain political option which should be defended in political institutions.<sup>30</sup>

This work contrasts with that of historians who have been part of management boards or align with their philosophies. Their research has tended to exalt the club’s historical commitment to the nation, leaving this tie largely unquestioned. In a volume dedicated to the club’s history, Sobrequés, a former member of Barça’s

management board (1993–2000), explains that Barça erected itself as a defender of Catalanism in the first decades of the twentieth century, when the club positioned itself in favour of a Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia and began using Catalan in official documents and celebrating the National Day.<sup>31</sup> Sobrequés asserts that cheering for Barça became a patriotic act for some fans, which led to problems like the temporal closure of the stadium during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923–1930) after the Spanish hymn was booed.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein, Solé i Sabaté and Finestres' study of the club during the tumultuous Civil War period (1936–1939) emphasizes the tragic consequences of the club's stance alongside Catalanism and democracy.<sup>33</sup> Special attention is paid to the symbolic relevance of events like the shooting of Barça's president and also MP for a Catalanist republican party, Josep Sunyol, by Francoist troops, or the consequences of Barça touring Mexico as an ambassador for democracy. The authors also call attention to how the posterior dictatorship (1939–1975) feared the club's symbolism and tried to 'Spanishise' it to strip any traces of what it represented.<sup>34</sup>

This narrative revering the old Catalanist attitude of the club is reproduced in Santacana's book devoted to the period in which Barça re-emerged as a vehicle for Catalanist feelings.<sup>35</sup> Santacana, former Director of Barça's Centre for Documentation and Studies, celebrates that towards the end of the dictatorship Barça recovered its social projection and the expression 'more than a club' was coined. This period is similarly invoked by Sobrequés, who proudly underscores that with the debilitation of Franco's regime, his death and the posterior restoration of democracy, the club participated in recovering the Catalan cultural heritage, through actions like using Catalan as its official language and supporting its use in schools, flying the Catalan flag in the stadium and incorporating it as the team captain's bracelet.<sup>36</sup>

The literature above seems to be a tribute to the national symbolism of the club as an agglutinating force for nation-building throughout history. This naturalizes the idea that Barça has for long been implicated in politics and might even suggest that the club is then 'naturally' participating in current secessionist claims. Indeed some of these authors overtly support this. In a recent book, Sobrequés openly invites the club to respond to citizens' demands for an independent Catalonia and to take an active role in the 'collective dream' of building a new country.<sup>37</sup> Solé i Sabaté, who spoke in 2009 at the non-binding referendums on independence, defended Barça's President Laporta going into politics arguing that his management of Barça was a magnificent tool to 'awaken' the nation and defend its secessionist interests.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Santacana justifies the club's strong ties with nationalism arguing that the Catalanist attitude of the club does not only depend on the management boards but also on the degree of support and new impulses of Catalanism on the streets.<sup>39</sup> While fans have increased their expressions of support to the nation through the club as the political tension rose, there is also evidence that Barça has not only been 'nationalized' bottom up, but top down too. Furthermore, as this paper argues, Barça does not only 'nationalize' itself by participating in Catalanist discourses, but it also 'nationalizes' the nation. Thus, one could question the extent to which the club as an institution should respond to the socio-political climate of the time because it is playing a controversial political game.

## Discussion

### *Laporta promoting nationalist feelings*

In light of the political events described above, Barça has in the last decade mobilized the escalation of Catalan nationalist feelings by engaging ‘in a nationalist discourse, actively promoting itself in *Catalanist tropes*’.<sup>40</sup> This started with Joan Laporta, who in 2003 was elected president (2003–2010) after years of management boards which downplayed the Catalanist history of the club. Laporta promised in his campaign, and indeed delivered in his presidency, a re-Catalanization of Barça by emphasizing that the club had a social responsibility, especially to Catalan society.<sup>41</sup> He defended that players must respect Catalan institutions and culture and learn ‘our’ language.<sup>42</sup> His frequent use of ‘we’ and ‘our’ referring to Catalan citizens is an example of the sort of ‘banal nationalism’ described by Billig, using language to imply and naturalize a sense of shared nationhood.<sup>43</sup> This national community that Laporta envisaged was bound by language and culture, in the fashion of civic nationalism. Hence, his management of Barça provided Catalan classes for foreign players and educated the youth in the team’s academy on Catalan culture and language.

Through speeches and policies, Laporta did not only popularize nationalist sentiments in the club but also in the nation. His management is a good example of how the world of sport can build national consciousness, as his influence largely penetrated the Catalan public sphere. Laporta’s presidency in FCB had an exceptional impact on Catalanism. He served the three functions that Hearn explains nationalism can perform: *coordinating* different agendas and bringing them to rally together under a same focus, *mobilizing* around the national cause and *legitimizing* the national project through international recognition.<sup>44</sup> The president popular for describing himself as ‘desacomplexadament catalanista’ (Catalanist without complexes) used the team’s fame to *coordinate* Catalan nationalism: he founded a Catalan separatist party, became an MP and advocated in rallies for Catalonia to claim sovereignty and become an independent state, all this while or immediately after being president of FCB, thus merging the nation’s and the team’s agendas to advance nationalism. Badia, who was Director of Communications in the period 2003–2008, explains that the president insisted that his speeches should refer to politics because he was certain that his election should be seen as a ‘Catalanist awakening’ which had had an impact on the Catalan political sphere.<sup>45</sup> This interference in politics, which was first considered to be part of Laporta’s strategy to reaffirm Barça as a key Catalanist agent, later led the president to be accused of using the club for his own personal political ambitions.<sup>46</sup>

Laporta was also very successful in *mobilizing* support for the nation: his own political website, which proclaimed that ‘the moment has come for *us* all to serve Catalonia’, received 270,000 visits the first day.<sup>47</sup> The constant use of ‘us’ in speeches interpellated different individuals as ‘the people’ of the nation that needed to organize. Laporta simultaneously sought to *legitimate* Catalan nationalism through Barça’s worldwide fame. The internationalization of sport has turned football into a potent vehicle to support claims of nationhood. With this in mind, in his official speeches abroad as president of FCB, Laporta encouraged the symbiosis between standing for the team and for the nation.<sup>48</sup> He even launched an advertising campaign aimed to increase the club’s number of members with the motto ‘What would the international projection of a country [Catalonia] which had a club with a

million members be?'.<sup>49</sup> The president understood that a team with one of the largest numbers of members in the world could help the Catalan nationalist cause to obtain international legitimization.

The consequences of Laporta's expressions of support to an independent Catalonia had a strong impact on the club's representation too. Barça was not only expected to back the nation, but also to facilitate the identification with and expansion of national consciousness. The magnitude of nationalist feelings that circulated from Laporta's (con)fusion of working for the team and for the 'country', as he called Catalonia, was impressive. In a documentary following his early days as president, some Barça fans appear praising his Catalanist politics for the club and cheer the rhyming 'Laporta president, Catalonia independent!','<sup>50</sup> as if he was governing Catalonia instead of Barça. Laporta himself appears in numerous instances shouting another rallying cry merging the team's and the nation's fate: 'Visca el Barça i visca Catalunya!' (Long live Barça, long live Catalonia!).

Laporta emphasized Barça's social commitment in Catalonia and abroad by reclaiming the 'more than a club' philosophy as what made the team stand out amidst the homogenization pushed by the globalization, mediatization and marketization of sport. In a speech to the UNESCO, Laporta prided himself on Barça's civic role and commitment to democracy, tolerance, social progress, peace and solidarity.<sup>51</sup> These foundational values of the club were further enhanced by its sponsorship of UNICEF, whose logo would be the first ever to appear in Barça's shirt. As Ginesta explains, this agreement signed in 2006 benefitted the club because it consolidated an image of Barça abroad as a socially responsible club and thus increased its popularity.<sup>52</sup> Sponsorships are part of a corporate social responsibility strategy aimed at defining and influencing positive attitudes towards the brand. Hence, the major upheaval after the following president, Sandro Rosell, announced in 2010 that Qatar Sports Investment (QSI) would be Barça's new sponsor. Although the management board insisted that QSI was a non-profit organization working for the fair causes of community development and solidarity, many Barça fans opposed to it because they deemed that their team was losing its 'more than a club' spirit by succumbing to the attractive economic offer of an organization less admirable than UNICEF. Solé i Sabaté summarized the problem: although he disliked QSI for its ties with a government that does not guarantee full social and democratic equality or freedom, values that Barça defends, he argued that a sponsor was needed to cover the team's high expenses and that that would be acceptable as long as Barça continued sponsoring UNICEF.<sup>53</sup> However, the fact is that the sponsorship was presented as an alliance that continued to promote the values of solidarity expressed by UNICEF, yet if Barça 'sold' its shirt it was basically for commercial purposes and if QSI disbursed large sums it was because this is part of a place branding strategy to project a positive image of Qatar globally.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Guardiola, the Catalan 'guru'***

If Laporta was able to accomplish this overt politicization of the team it was partly thanks to his appointment of Josep Guardiola as coach, who was widely acclaimed for leading Barça to win all six trophies possible in 2009, including the Spanish League and Cup, the European Champions League and the Club World Cup. Both president and coach achieved the status of national celebrities in Catalonia. Because sport is seen as meritocratic, sport figures occupy a place of great affection within

popular consciousness and thus easily emerge as celebrities when they represent excellence in their fields.<sup>55</sup> Laporta's and Guardiola's fruitful performances in their roles of president and coach led them to be revered as national (and male) icons. While Laporta was popularly known as the 'Catalan Kennedy', Guardiola, who had trained in and played for Barça, was considered the new 'guru' for Catalan independence.<sup>56</sup> Sport celebrities have a strong social impact as culturally and politically resonant individuals,<sup>57</sup> an influence which both president and coach exploited.

Guardiola oozed a democratic commitment to the nation by speaking Catalan in press releases and embodying the sort of educated civic nationalism through which Catalonia defines itself.<sup>58</sup> During the celebrations for triumphs, the coach often made the team form a circle to dance a 'sardana', the Catalan national dance, putting forward the idea that Barça embodies a different culture from 'flamenco' Spanish. Guardiola was an example of how sport celebrities significantly contribute to 'the normalization of particular meanings, identities and experiences within ... national cultures'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed the coach took the opportunity of being 'a perfect Catalan hero'<sup>60</sup> to, like Laporta, forge a Catalanist consciousness in both club and nation, as the following examples illustrate.

In the 2009 crowded celebration for Barça's trophies, Guardiola cried 'Ciutadans de Catalunya, ja la tornem a tenir aquí!' (citizens of Catalonia, it is here again at last!). More than alluding to winning another European Cup, he was making an intertextual reference charged with nationalist symbolism. He echoed the president of the Catalan government Josep Tarradellas when coming back from the exile he famously proclaimed 'Ciutadans de Catalunya, ja sóc aquí!' (citizens of Catalonia, I am here at last!). This marked the end of Franco's dictatorship long repression of Catalan language and culture. Similarly, Guardiola seemed to be playing with his celebrity position as a national leader to promise the club better (Catalanist) times.

Guardiola took advantage of the fact that sport celebrities are brilliant sources of national pride and contributed to raise nationalist sentiments in the larger Catalan society too. His political messages were in a different vein to 'the usual bland commentaries ... from soccer celebrities'.<sup>61</sup> When the Catalan parliament awarded him the medal of honorific citizen for being a strong symbol for Catalanism, his speech of gratitude ended with 'if we awaken early ... we are an unstoppable country. Thank you and long live Catalonia!'<sup>62</sup> in another example of banal transmission of national identity through language. Guardiola was also a protagonist in the huge 2012 self-determination demonstration, which ended with the screening of a video of the coach defending the independence of the nation, a support which he has in numerous occasions voiced. He became such an admired national icon that there was even speculation about his potential to become president of Catalonia.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Reaffirming Catalanism against Real Madrid***

Football teams and nations, as 'imagined communities', have a common inclination towards social antagonism to mark what they are against what they are not. Added to the already competitive character of sport, football is constructed on a binary mode confronting rival teams and dramatizing opposing social identities.<sup>64</sup> Looking at football rivalries can thus illuminate the growth of identity conflict not only between clubs but also between nations. This is the case of matches confronting Barça with Real Madrid, which since Franco's favouritism has been popularly regarded as the team of Spanishness.<sup>65</sup>

Barça playing Madrid symbolizes and reinforces the political clash between separatism and centralism, two opposing interpretations of Spain which the clubs themselves are deeply interested in exploiting. Team rivalry is vital to the articulation of two national discourses which rely on negatives. As Quiroga explains, Catalan nationalism sees Madrid as the ‘national other’, representing an immobile, unsophisticated and retrograde Spain appraising anti-Catalan feelings, which then strengthens the Catalanist idealization of Catalonia as a vibrant, European ‘oasis in the desert of a backward state’.<sup>66</sup> Thus, both nations need each other, as well as their club and the other nation’s club, and both clubs need one another as well as their nation and the other because it is such a complex entanglement of national and club narratives what defines and gives meaning to these communities. In other words, one cannot understand Catalan separatism booming in confrontation with Spain through sport without paying attention to how Barça has grown more like a country than a club in confrontation with Real Madrid through nationalism. Sport battles on the nation’s behalf<sup>67</sup> and, without all these associations, Barça would not be seen as ‘more than a club’.

The teams’ antagonism is exploited and further hyperbolized to serve corporate interests dangerously encouraging and perpetuating the confrontation of national stereotypes. An international commercial for headphones released just before the match against Madrid in March 2014 featured then Barça star, Cesc Fàbregas, in the team’s bus to Madrid’s stadium being abused by Madrid fans who insult Catalonia and provoke with chants of ‘Viva España!’ (Long live Spain!) while Barça fans wave Catalan flags, to which Fàbregas responds by putting on the brand’s headphones with the motto ‘Hear what you want’.<sup>68</sup> The rivalry is deliberately represented along national lines as a fight of opposites, where Madrid is hyper violent and Catalan-hating.

Barça’s managements have also been facilitating encounters with Madrid, known as *El Clásico*, to be lived as nationalist confrontations. For *El Clásico* in April 2012, FCB organized a mosaic on their stadium formed by coloured cards risen by the attendees which read ‘Som i serem’ (we are and we will be). These are the opening words of the most emblematic ‘sardana’ – the traditional Catalan dance that Guardiola enacted in the team’s celebrations – popularly regarded as the Catalan national anthem in times of repression, as it opens with ‘Som i serem gent catalana, tant si es vol com si no es vol’ (we are and we will be Catalan people, whether one likes it or not). The club was stoking up antagonism through the use of the stadium, voicing a nationalist account in front of the archenemy. The stadium, setting the atmosphere and defining the confrontation of opposites, has a powerful affective dimension as it is where fans come together to express intense emotional attachments and feelings of ‘home’ that enhance the idea of belonging to the ‘imagined community’.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, it easily becomes a place for nationalist rituals and performances where

[t]he presence of national flags, banners, anthems, and other patriotic symbols, coupled with the inherently competitive nature of sport, can transform total strangers into a unified collectivity struggling against a common adversary. It is hard to imagine a better arena for political socialization.<sup>70</sup>

In events like this, football encapsulates the strength of national identification of specific people by celebrating certain kinds of identity while excluding others.<sup>71</sup> Using populist national anthems – albeit not sung here, but projected visually – is a gesture of sentimentality that can encapsulate the mood of many.<sup>72</sup> But not of all.

That the club itself conflates team and national identity is problematic for those supporters with no such intensity of feeling for the nation, who are excluded from the club's official narrative of belonging. Football here reflects the double edge of social identities: it sets divisions as it creates communities. Those who refuse to lift the mosaic card are stamped as anti-Catalan and as 'unauthentic' Barça fans.

Only one month after the large 2012 pro-independence protest, FCB provided the safety valve of emotional energy that Jarvie claims sport offers for frustrated nations.<sup>73</sup> The club once again used the stadium to appeal to the common history and aesthetic symbols of the Catalan nation through a much more explicit mosaic. In front of a 400 million audience, the mosaic for *El Clásico* in October 2012 was fully a Catalan flag and the word 'Barça'.<sup>74</sup> While the mosaic was formed, the audience sang the team's anthem *a cappella*, an event which blurred even further allegiances to the team and the nation. While the club's anthem sung 'Una bandera ens agermana' (a flag unites us) and 'Tots units fem força' (we are strong all together), which refers to Barça's flag bringing together fans across the world, the stadium displayed Catalonia's flag. The juxtaposition came, once again, at the cost of disregarding that not everyone identifies simultaneously with the team and the nation: the flag that represents and unites all Barça fans, not just Catalan ones, is Barça's, not Catalonia's. Moreover, this mass demonstration of Catalan nationalism was also problematically read as the club defying Spain.<sup>75</sup>

Commenting on the controversy around the mosaic, Barça's then president Sandro Rosell declared that they do not do politics, but only 'reaffirm the club's roots, its Catalanist DNA'.<sup>76</sup> Catalan patriotic narratives seem to be the recent managements' hegemonic discourse and are passed as natural in FCB to a large extent without difficulty. This naturalization is used as a justification for Barça to collaborate with civil platforms that work for cultural nationalism: from hosting events for the unity and freedom of the Catalan-speaking areas to financially supporting foundations which promote Catalan language and culture to lending the stadium to hold the Concert for Freedom, aimed at internationalizing Catalonia's claim for a self-determination referendum.<sup>77</sup> Barça even intervenes in Catalanist political matters: the club issued an official statement defending the Catalan language against a law passed by the Spanish government which put an end to an education system that guaranteed that everyone schooled in Catalonia learnt Catalan as well as Spanish.

### ***Fans parading nationalist symbology***

The club makes such institutional efforts to endorse Catalanism that many see membership of the club as a form of Catalan nationalism.<sup>78</sup> Numerous fans publicly express strong attachments to the nation through the usual ritualistic displays of team and national loyalty with flags, banners or chants in matches. An example of the degree of 'emotional ecstasy'<sup>79</sup> performed by FCB fans can be seen at minute 17:14, when the stadium explodes in shouts of 'Independence!' In the Catalan national imaginary, 1714 marks the symbolic date of the end of self-government of Catalonia after Barcelona's fall during the Spanish War of Succession (1702–1715), and is thus a reminder that Catalonia was once an independent territory. Sport is being used here as a potent platform to perform and disseminate 'invented traditions', i.e. essentialist notions of national identity grounded on the past and passed down as national histories to maintain a sense of continuity and community.<sup>80</sup>

A quick look outside the stadium before *El Clásico* in October 2013 illustrated how mundane consumption amongst fans is a vehicle to simultaneously confirm team and national membership. One could find contingents of Catalan nationalist political parties handing out free Catalan flags, pop-up stalls selling all sorts of nationalist team equipment, such as Catalan flags painted with Barça's colours, and even a branch of an American doughnut company selling doughnuts glazed with Barça's and Catalonia's flags (see Figures 1–3).

Billig warns that despite the significance of such 'hot nationalist' events, attention should also be paid to the many instances of 'banal nationalism' that are part of our everyday lives and build nationalism in our environment.<sup>81</sup> The team plays a significant role in structuring the lives of fans, as football cultures are primarily experienced in everyday life, and consumer activities like attending matches or acquiring team merchandizing contribute to the sense of a community of supporters.<sup>82</sup> For many fans, consumer goods such as shirts are their primary connection with the team.<sup>83</sup> Hence, the significance of FCB stamping its Catalanist ethos by adopting explicit nationalist iconography for their merchandizing, worn and displayed by fans across the world more regularly and casually than in 'hot nationalist' matches.

If Laporta put the Catalan flag on the neck of the team's shirt, ensuring that the national flag is habitually paraded across the globe, in the season 2013–2014 Rosell's board went further and turned the away shirt exclusively into the Catalan flag. The shirt was presented in the Catalan government, whose president thanked the club for promoting the nation during the symbolic year marking the 300th anniversary of the 1714 events, and he later even gave the shirt as a gift in institutional visits abroad as president of Catalonia.<sup>84</sup> What is most surprising here is not so much the explicit adoption of a national symbol like the flag, but the banality with which a sports club launches merchandize in a government and the latter uses it as if one individual (not the official national) team represented the nation. Moreover, in 2013 Barcelona's Town Hall signed a contract with FCB to dress the



Figure 1. A stall selling a version of the Catalan independence flag with Barça's red and blue colours (right) next to the original red and yellow (left).



Figure 2. A vendor shrewdly displayed Barça's away shirt which reproduces the Catalan flag with a blue scarf with a star on top, thus transforming it into the independence flag.

city's iconic statue of Cristobal Columbus with a gigantic Barça shirt to promote the club. The use of a public space by an individual club was criticized especially by supporters of other clubs who accused the Town Hall of perpetuating the status of FCB as the symbol of Catalonia.

For sport fans, wearing their team's shirt represents 'the deepest level of symbolic identity and commitment', using 'the football club as an emblem of locality and identity'.<sup>85</sup> It is extraordinary then how Barça's away shirt urges fans to wear it beyond sporting occasions as an expression of their loyalty to the nation – not just the team. During the human chains for independence on the National Day in 2013 and 2014, the shirt provided the perfect gear and was extensively worn as a nationalist symbol (see Figure 4). Such occasions confirm the success of a strategy aimed at merging team and national belonging to raise national consciousness beyond the team's sphere of influence. The shirt presents this tie as indissoluble through displaying a simultaneous commitment to both communities.



Figure 3. A doughnut store selling doughnuts glazed with Barça's and Catalonia's flags.



Figure 4. A demonstrator participating in the human chain on the National Day of Catalonia in 2014 wearing Barça's away shirt and the traditional Catalan hat and showing a placard in support of a Catalan national team and in solidarity with Scotland as another stateless nation.

### ***Barça's success raising Catalanist collective moral***

Barça's new winning attitude under Guardiola created such euphoria that it uplifted Catalanist collective mentality to such extents that some saw the team's success as

an indication for the nation's success regarding claims for independence. Barça's much 'more than a club' attitude stimulated Catalonia's aspirations to become much more than an autonomous community of Spain, as exemplified by a message that circulated in social networks playing with the team's sponsorship of UNICEF as if the acronym stood for 'Una Nació Independent Catalana És Factible' (an independent Catalan nation is feasible). The team has an overdetermined significance that Jarvie and Walker explain is common in stateless nations.<sup>86</sup> Such is the extent of national investment in football in nations striving for recognition that they suggest that in places like Scotland the performance of the national team influences the degree of nationalist sentiments and that in Catalonia football is assigned a 'quasi-political' role.<sup>87</sup> It seems indeed that Barça's triumphs prompted Catalan national aspirations.

The team's rootedness in the place it represents brings Kuper to state that Barça, far more famous than Catalonia, is the main source of Catalan pride<sup>88</sup> – an idea that problematically posits that all Catalans support FCB. The trouble with this 'more than a club' projection of Barça over Catalonia is that such a strong place-based identity feeds a dependence of the nation on Barça to define, maintain and disseminate Catalan identity and national narratives. The team plays such a major role in the definition of Catalonia that, borrowing a term coined by Feixa, the nation is experiencing a kind of 'futbolización' (footballization).<sup>89</sup> This is especially evident in how the club is sometimes expected to be the only reason why Catalonia is known. Thus, the Tourist Board of the Catalan government pays Barça to advertise Catalonia and sends delegations with the team's tours to promote the nation abroad, believing the football team is the best channel to internationalize the nation.<sup>90</sup> This is a clear instance of nation branding, in which Catalonia seeks to enhance its brand image by associating it with the positive values of FCB and at the same time to use the club's global influence to help Catalonia be known abroad independently from Spain, in an effort to promote the nationalist cause internationally.

In the field of cultural policy, Barça's museum 'footballizes' the nation as it is the most visited museum in Catalonia and it narrates national identity and history along the team's. Even in schools Barça plays a role in defining notions of citizenship and nation: the club partakes in the Catalan national curriculum through their campaign 'Juga-la, esport i ciutadania' (Play it, sport and citizenship). In return, the Department of Culture of the Catalan government gives Catalan canonical literature books to FCB's training academy arguing that 'Barça is one of the great cultural prescriptors of our country. If it deploys good culture, all the country benefits from it'.<sup>91</sup> Abroad, the nation is even further 'footballized' by many Catalans who think of and use FCB's international fan clubs as 'embassies' for Catalonia.<sup>92</sup>

Catalonia is more than a football team and now has democratic institutions to voice national(ist) concerns, yet Barça continues to stand as a sign of common nationhood and a major platform to mobilize demands for self-sovereignty. The club itself is not willing to loosen these ties, as the last management boards stated that FCB will always be more than a club and will defend the right of nations to decide their future.<sup>93</sup> Just before the 2014 citizen consultation, Barça signed the National Pact for Self-determination, a pledge backed by multiple associations demanding Catalan peoples' right to self-determination. The club was taking yet another official step forward asserting its support to Catalan national sovereignty claims. Perhaps, as

Burns puts it, it is precisely this engagement with nationalist politics at key historical moments that has given the team its edge and its passion.<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusions

Rather than concluding that the events discussed above are beneficial or detrimental for Barça as a sports club and for its members – who after all are its owners because the club has the structure of mutual membership – this article aimed to open up to reflection some of the circumstances that in the last 10 years have made overt nationalist expressions within the club possible, informed by and informing the growth of nationalist sentiment in Catalonia. The team's key contribution to nationalism is not a rare phenomenon because it springs from the facility with which sport engenders, encapsulates and circulates nationalist affiliations thanks to some of the characteristic aspects of sport analysed above: rituals of group belonging, fandom performances of loyalty, the dramatization of rivalries, the elevation of those who achieve sporting success to national icons, the strength of feeling provided by the sports ground, or the marketing and practices of consumer culture with explicit nationalist symbolism. Such an extraordinary capacity to agglutinate collective emotions and identities has boosted Barça to become an irresistible platform for the reaffirmation, voicing and expansion of a Catalan national consciousness at a time when the political temperature is high.

Catalonia is indeed immersed in a remarkable historical period in which not only political, but also social and cultural organizations are promoting a civic movement asserting the nation's right to self-determination. Barça is showing eagerness to be a main player in this game, refusing to let go any symbolic power which history and people have bestowed upon it, constantly reiterating its projection as a Catalanist icon. However, as illustrated above, this role is as much a product of historical events in the place where it is based as of decisive policies adopted by the team's managements in support of Catalanism, of fans' expression of allegiance to the stateless nation and of the relatively uncontested public acceptance of the mainstream discourse of Barça having an inherently Catalanist 'DNA'. Yet Barça, as a club which prides itself on a strong democratic commitment, could rethink this positioning in terms of who it includes and excludes. Even if it is a thorny issue, those members who do not like seeing their club imbued in non-sportive affairs or who are against their club's official pronouncement in favour of national self-determination are owners of the club in equal terms as those members who expect their club to back the nationalist cause.

This paper unpacked a particular case of the involvement of a sports team in nationalism to show that sport can play a leading role in the construction of national identities, and that sporting institutions have great political, social and cultural impact upon the nation: Barça's team identity, managements and fandom mobilize the connection between team and nation in ways that greatly affect Catalonia. The ideas and examples discussed above demonstrate the considerable contribution of FCB in the recent rise of a Catalan national consciousness, proving what Jarvie and Walker claim about Scotland: no dialogue on the nation is complete without recognizing the social role of sport.<sup>95</sup> In Catalonia's case, Barça is a vital institution from which to examine the development of nationalism, even more so considering that the team's implication in nationalist affairs is unlikely to diminish.

## Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a thesis written to complete a Master of Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. The author would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions as well as the friends who helped in editing drafts and Hernan Lleida for giving permission to reproduce his photographs.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

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2. Gyori Szabo, 'Basque Identity and Soccer', 525.
3. Vaczi, "'The Spanish Fury'".
4. Guibernau, 'Secessionism in Catalonia', 391.
5. 'Rosell y Guardiola, unidos por la independencia de Catalunya', *Diario Gol*, September 11, 2012, [http://www.diariogol.com/es/notices/2012/09/sandro\\_rosell\\_asiste\\_a\\_la\\_manifestacion\\_independentista\\_de\\_la\\_diada\\_26709.php](http://www.diariogol.com/es/notices/2012/09/sandro_rosell_asiste_a_la_manifestacion_independentista_de_la_diada_26709.php).
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7. Bairner, 'National Sports and National Landscapes', 228.
8. See Armstrong and Giulianotti, *Football Cultures and Identities*; Cronin and Mayall, 'Sport and Ethnicity'; Harris and Parker, *Sport and Social Identities*; Hunter, 'Flying the Flag'.
9. Guibernau, 'Secessionism in Catalonia', 368–9.
10. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
11. Bairner, 'National Sports and National Landscapes', 224–6.
12. Hargreaves and García Ferrando, 'Public Opinion', 69 (my emphasis).
13. Andrews and Jackson, 'Introduction: Sport Celebrities', 7.
14. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 143.
15. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
16. Balfour and Quiroga, *The Reinvention of Spain*, 97.
17. Jarvie, 'Internationalism and Sport in the Making of Nations', 540–1.
18. Giulianotti, 'Sport and Globalisation', 447.
19. Quiroga, *Football Identities and National Identities in Spain*, 128.
20. Vázquez Montalbán, *Fútbol: una religión*, 90.
21. *Ibid.*, 112, 89.
22. Jarvie, 'Internationalism and Sport in the Making of Nations', 541.
23. Jarvie and Walker, 'Ninety Minute Patriots?', 44.
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26. Miravitllas, *La función política del Barça*, 147.
27. Anholt, 'Definitions of Place Branding', 7 (his emphasis).
28. Ginesta and San Eugenio, 'The Use of Football as a Country Branding Strategy'.
29. Miravitllas, *La función política del Barça*, 7, 123–4.
30. *Ibid.*, 260–1, 268.
31. Sobrequés, *FC Barcelona*, 256–7.
32. *Ibid.*, 257–8.
33. Solé i Sabaté and Finestres, *El Barça en guerra*.
34. *Ibid.*, 174–5.

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37. Sobrequés, *Història del FC Barcelona*, 10.
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71. Giulianotti, *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*, 32.
72. Jarvie and Walker, 'Ninety Minute Patriots?', 4.
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