



## **THE SPIRIT OF BARÇA**

**Speaker: Joan Laporta**

**Venue: London School of Economics**

**Date: Monday 7 March 2005**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The organisers of this act told me I could choose whether to deliver my speech in Catalan or English today.

With all due respect to our surroundings here and to you yourselves, I have chosen to speak to you in the language of my parents, brothers, friends and the people I work with, and which is also the language of FC Barcelona.

Catalan is a language with a history of more than a thousand years, spoken by nearly 10 million people in Europe, but which is, astonishingly, not recognised as an official language by the European Community, as a result of which, we Catalans are barred from addressing the European institutions in our own language.

I shall give my speech today in Catalan, as a homage to what is the national language of Catalonia.

[For those unable to follow the speech in Catalan, I have had it translated into English and Castilian Spanish, two major languages which deserve my utmost respect ]

First of all, I would like to thank you most sincerely for the privilege you have given me of speaking to an audience such as yourselves. It is at moments like these that the real importance of FC Barcelona becomes clear to us.

I'd like to begin by explaining just who exactly we are.

We go back a long way - we are at the head of a club with 105 years of history at our backs.

And indeed, we come from an even longer history, the history of Catalonia, a thousand year old country which I'm sure is well known to you all. The celebrated doctor Josep Trueta told you our story in his excellent book *The spirit of Catalonia*, written when he was in exile in England in 1946.

We come from Catalonia as representatives of FC Barcelona, a football club with a life stretching back 105 years. A life lived with intensity and always closely intertwined with the history of our country.

FC Barcelona was founded by Joan Gamper, a young Swiss salesman imbued with the Anglo-Saxon sporting spirit.

Gamper's sporting enthusiasm caught the imagination of the young Catalans at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the same way, the country enchanted him to the extent that he became a Catalan himself, in both spirit and action.

Gamper's spirit, moulded and transformed by history and the different styles of the people who followed in his footsteps, remains the guiding life force of the club.

If you take a close look at our club's coat of arms, you can see it clearly reflects the essential values which have been handed down from our founding fathers: civic dignity, pride in Catalonia and a sense of universality.

The Cross of Saint George and the four stripes of the Catalan flag representing our city and our country - civic dignity and pride in Catalonia, the pillars of the universal role of our club.

FC Barcelona was born at a moment of great sporting vitality – many clubs sprung up and just as quickly disappeared at the beginning of the last century.

FC Barcelona –we were not yet known as 'Barca' at that time –was the first legally constituted club to be formed in Barcelona, but that was not perhaps its principal merit.

Our early years were more or less the same as many other Barcelona and Catalan clubs, as the young pioneers overcame many difficulties with their effort, optimism and unselfish generosity.

Clubs at that time were only sustained by their players and a few members who supported them. Between them they did everything that was needed.

However, sport in general and football in particular grew rapidly and the clubs had to adapt themselves to the new conditions. Many failed to do so and many fell by the wayside.

Even FC Barcelona itself came very close to going out of existence. In 1908, the then president called a special assembly with the express aim of agreeing on the disbanding of the club.

It was then that Joan Gamper's true genius came to the fore. He stood up and proclaimed that 'FC Barcelona cannot and must not ever die' and if nobody else was prepared to take on the club, then he'd do so himself, which of course he did.

That was the first time that Gamper assumed the presidency of FC Barcelona and he saved the club. He'd been its founder and now he'd saved it. Two acts which deserve the undying respect of all our fans and supporters.

He founded the club and he saved it. And even more importantly, Gamper gave our club a reason to exist and a role to play.

Gamper, of course, took many decisions in the economic and sporting areas, but the most fundamental was concerning the club's social character. Gamper brought FC Barcelona to the country, and so linked the two that the club became the club of Catalonia.

FC Barcelona became the main sporting focus of the city and the country and became a social phenomena of enormous significance.

From that moment onwards, the history of Barca is the history of Catalonia. The two stories run parallel to each other: Barca shared the desire for Catalan self governance of 1918 and suffered with the rest of the country the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera. Like Catalonia, we were reborn during the second republic and later, during the transition of the 1970s. We suffered together under the repression of General Francisco Franco's dictatorship.

When I refer to Barca, I'm really talking about the people who make up the club, because it is they, the club members, the supporters and all the people at the club, who've given meaning to its existence, made it what it is today and given it the significance it has for Catalonia.

Barca has been both a refuge and the pride of the Catalans. It's been a place of refuge when the winds of history have blown against us and it's been a source of pride when those winds have been more favourable.

When the team which I had the honour of leading won the club's presidential elections in the summer of 2003, we made it clear that we wished to recover this spirit of Barca.

We felt that, for whatever reason, FC Barcelona had, over the last few years, lost a large part of its original significance and identity. We believed that this one of the reasons why the club was becoming ever more distant from its members and supporters and we wished to correct this..

We are satisfied with the job we have done. It's true that circumstances have changed. Spain and Catalonia have made irreversible changes. Democracy is consolidated in the Spanish state and Catalonia's national aspirations have found their institutional channels of expression.

In this new situation, Barca's role has also had to change: we have to put ourselves at the service of the national feeling of our country and strengthen the values which we as a club have always held dear. Barca, that is to say our players, our staff and our directors, has to be a model of good social behaviour.

But we are satisfied with the work we've done in this context. The club is again close to its people. We also believe that we have given the club back to our country. The heart of our club is again beating to the rhythm of our country's concerns. The spirit of Barca is again the spirit of Catalonia.

It hasn't been easy. Barca is a football club with three other professional sport sections (basketball, handball and roller hockey) Sport is the heart of our existence. Without sporting relevance there can be no social relevance, as the history of our club shows us all too clearly.

Barca grew and gained its social pre-eminence as its sporting prestige grew. The initial explosion of interest came at the end of the second decade of the last century and the early 1920s, coinciding with Barca's first golden age inspired by Josep Samitier. In modern terms, you could say Samitier was our first media star.

Later, with the great Barca team led by Laszlo Kubala, which famously won five cups in one year, the club was obliged to build our Nou Camp stadium to accommodate the thousands of fans who were unable to squeeze into our small Les Corts ground.

As the transition approached, Barca grew with the magic of Johan Cruyff, who a few years later returned as manager to create the 'Dream Team', who pushed us on still further; it's the era of globalisation and football as entertainment and Barca enjoy spectacular growth beyond the borders of Catalonia.

Of course you would be absolutely right to say that much of this is true of all football clubs –the big clubs are the clubs who win titles.

That is so, but the difference between us and similar clubs of our size, lies precisely in the fact that the existence of FC Barcelona - its social consequence, cannot be explained solely as a result of its sporting success. Such success cannot adequately account for the importance and transcendence of the club.

Within our club, there is a great diversity of people who have joined for a whole variety of different reasons: sporting, family, friendships, emotional commitment...and also because Barca has been seen as representing and guaranteeing a certain progressive ideal, as well as democratic values.

And the truth is that joining the club for this last reason is a valid choice, given that identifying with Barca is another way to stand up and defend the rights and freedoms of Catalonia.

However, if sporting success is not the only explanation, it is undoubtedly a vital ingredient.

For this reason, the first decisions we made after taking control in 2003, were aimed at strengthening the football team, which had gone three years without winning anything. This wasn't the only area in crisis however. As I mentioned earlier, there had been a progressive distancing between the club and its supporters and members. There were also serious economic problems, with an operating deficit of seventy million euros and an accumulated debt of 160 million euros.

Faced with this situation, we decided we had to put an end to the de-capitalisation of the sporting areas, as a first step to resolving the delicate social and economic situation we found ourselves in.

We visualised the running of a club such as Barca in terms of what we called a 'virtuous circle', whereby the three areas –social, economic and sporting – would work together as interconnected wheels within a gear which would power the club forward.

The key wheel, which gives speed to the whole engine, is football. That is why we decided to invest in a player of undoubted quality – Ronaldinho, who was this year named FIFA Player of the Year, as the world's best player and who we also knew would have tremendous media impact. In addition, we signed Marquez and Gio van Bronkhorst.

This season we have brought in Eto'o, who has just picked up the African Player of the Year award for the second time, Deco, who was voted the best player of last season's Champions League, Edmilson, a World Cup winner with Brazil, and players who are both top class footballers and excellent human beings, such as Larsson, Giuly and Sylvinho, as well as Albertini and Maxi this winter.

We were proved right on the signings and the upturn of optimism amongst our supporters was immediate. It took us a little longer to turn things round on the pitch itself, but we can now say that we have achieved our first aim and the team have regained Barca's sporting prestige. We are respected everywhere and with the winning of a title our recovery will be complete.

It will take us a few more years to reach a normal situation as far as our economic position is concerned, but we have laid the foundations and chosen the right path to take. Last year's figures showed this and our current forecasts for this year show we are on target to meet our budget.

It's often said that Catalonia is a country accustomed to resistance, that has spent its whole history resisting. Other observers have clarified this idea and come to the conclusion that in reality, it's not a matter of resistance, but rather of a constant rebirth. Catalonia is a country which, as for example Josep Trueta put it, always bounces back.

The 105 year history of our club can be seen then, as a story of continual bouncing back. This sets us a thrilling challenge: to try and position ourselves in a kind of constant spring.

The philosopher Josep Ferrater Mora has said: 'a nation can not pass its whole life constantly being reborn, without any rest'. The same applies to a club as important as ours. Our challenge is to create continuity, continuity with our past, which we wish to project into the future.

Because it is very probable, as Vicens Vivers, father of our vice-president Albert Vicens, has put it, that our most defining feature as a people is our desire to exist as such. This too is the principal characteristic of FC Barcelona.

Thank you very much.