



# Athletic Club

## A CENTURY IN SOCCER

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**B**izkaitar guztiak bihotzean daramaten Athletic taldeak dagoeneko ehun urte bete ditu. Ospakizunak handiak izango dira, baina dudarik gabe, iraganean izandako lorpen bikainak errepikatzea litzateke ospakizunik handiena.

Bilbao, a city open to the world through the sea, kept at the end of 19th century close trade and industrial relations with Britain. Therefore, there was an important British colony in the Bizkaian capital, and at the same time, many young Basques studied in Britain. This exchanges enabled the young men from Bilbao to discover "foot-ball", a game that soon found success in a society where the only entertainment was the Euskalduna pelota court, the Campos Elíseos, the Teatro Circo del Ensanche and the popular "Salón Olímpia".



*Official poster of the centennial, painted by Basque artist Iñaki García Er-güin.*

The young boys were thrilled by this new "sport", and according to the chronicles of the time, they were brave enough to challenge a group of British. The match took place on May 3 1894,

and during the half time break the British offered the Bilbao players roast chicken, we suppose wine was included too. We don't know for sure whether that was just a display of courtesy or rather strategy (it seems they were well aware of our weaknesses). Anyway, the match was just a walkover for the inventors of "foot-ball", who won 6-0. In spite of the crushing defeat, the players did not lose heart, and the seeds of this sport found fertile soil in this land. From that moment in the circles of the Café García and in the meetings of the Sociedad Gimnástica Zamacois, the idea of creating a team like the British ones started to take form. Juan Astorkia, a "sportsman" born in Bilbao and trained in Manchester, was the main promoter of this project, and he became a player and captain of the ATHLETIC.

As rivalry is essential in this sport, three teams were created in Bilbao: the ATHLETIC, the BILBAO F.C. and THE UNION. Although the first directing board of the ATHLETIC was not organized until June 11 1901, during the first board meeting year 1898 was considered the real date of



*The city does not forget the Centennial of its team.*

the foundation of the club. Surely those keen followers of the “big ball” could hardly imagine that the ATHLETIC CLUB DE BILBAO would reach the social support and the extraordinary list of victories it has achieved during this century.

## A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

For lack of official competitions, the city teams played matches full of rivalry until in 1902 the ATHLETIC and the BILBAO decided to join their efforts in order to take part in national and international competitions. That was the beginning of the team BIZKAYA, which played this same year in May in Madrid, in a tournament organized to celebrate the coronation of King Alfonso XIII. The BIZKAYA defeated 5-1 the ESPAÑOL, 8-1 the Madrid NEW F.C. and 2-1 the BARCELONA, and so won the much coveted trophy. This was the opening of a long series of successes.

In 1903, and under the name ATHLETIC, once the BILBAO disappeared completely, they won the first official Cup. Many others came afterwards, up to 23. That is why there was

a time when people said that the final of the Cup was fought always between the ATHLETIC and another club. In this sense, as the poet said, “all times past were better”.

Apart from the mentioned 23 Cups, there were 8 league titles, and the team became the fourth of the Spanish soccer, after REAL MADRID, BARCELONA, and their subsidiary team, ATLETICO DE MADRID. They have not yet won a continental title, although they very nearly got it in 1977. That year, which was one of the most brilliant in the history of ATHLETIC, was also paradoxically the season with worst luck anyone remembers. After reaching a third position in the league, the Bilbao team reached the final of UEFA, but they were defeated by the Turin JUVENTUS, which was practically the Italian selection at the time. Moreover the defeat took place for the double of the goals in the contrary field in case of tie (1-0 and 2-1).

The ATHLETIC meant to make it up in a new Cup final, but the BETIS finally won the trophy after 120 minutes of match and after no less than 20 penalty kicks.

Fortunately the eighties started much better; there was the League Championship won in 1983, after 27 long years of drought in this competition. Next season was even better, for the “Lyons” won both the Cup and the League. When they came back they were received in due fashion. The “gabarra” sailed along the river to celebrate their success, and hundreds of thousands of supporters filled the riverbanks with red and white. It was an unforgettable scene and one that will be difficult to witness again.

## CENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS

Although the “gabarra” is anchored, the red and whites have reasons to celebrate. Few entities reach their first century showing pride in their pasts, keeping their identity signals and in good health.

The celebrations of the centennial started months ago, at the beginning of the new soccer season. However the most important acts are still to come. On April 25, the famous Italian tenor Luciano PAVAROTTI will perform in San



Mamés. At the beginning of May more than 330 groups of supporters of the ATHLETIC spread all over Spain, including the cybernetic group created through Internet, will celebrate a very special Congress in the Bizkaian capital.

On the last day of May the Brazilian selection, four times world champion, will play against ATHLETIC. This will be the first time they play against a club.

The Rolling Stones will be here in June, and there will also be many festivals, exhibitions, gigs, etc. To sum up, many acts of different descriptions, tastes, ideologies and sectors will unite to celebrate one common feeling: ATHLETIC.

To win a title would have doubtlessly been the best ending for the centennial. That is why, since the beginning of the season, lots of efforts have been placed in the direction of the King's Cup. The Bilbao players wanted to re-enact their love affair with that competition that has traditionally been favora-

ble to their interests. However the Mallorca eliminated them in quarterfinals, which was a big disappointment for the club and its supporters.

The ATHLETIC team hopes at least to have the Spanish Federation acknowledge the 1902 Coronation Trophy as the first official Cup. In that case the red and whites would have a total of 24 cups, and they would still be the Cup kings.

#### PRESENT AND FUTURE

For the last few years ATHLETIC and its city, Bilbao, are following similar paths. After overcoming a period of crisis they are busy laying the foundations of a hopeful future.

The club from Bilbao has at present a solid infrastructure. On one hand the Lezama facilities, built during the seventies, to provide both a training pitch

and a soccer school. These sport facilities, which are similar to those of a High Performance Center, are very well equipped, both from the point of view of staff and equipment.

On the other hand, we should mention the deep-rooted loyalty the club has found in the Bizkaian society, which provides an ample and faithful social support.

However, from the point of view of sport, ATHLETIC is not going through one of its best moments. For the last 13 years the club has been far for a Cup final, which is its favorite tournament. Lately the only available aim seems to be to reach a good classification in the league so as to take part in continental competitions.

The Bosman Law, which allows the free circulation of European soccer players, and the increasing number of foreign players in the Spanish League, have substantially raised the level of the rival teams. Doubtlessly, this makes it more difficult for a club that still boasts the unique feature of admitting only Basque players. This tradition, which some find admirable and others impossible to understand in a world that has become so mercantile, is a serious handicap for the ATHLETIC club, although it was described by the prestigious French newspaper L'EQUIPE as "a unique case in the soccer world".

The red and white club has two main objectives for this new century: the first one, which according to the managing board cannot be delayed any more, is the building of the new San Mamés, a bigger, more comfortable and modern stadium.

The second one, as important as the first one, is to improve the performance of the team. In the Europe that is being created a little by a little, it does not seem preposterous to foresee that the state championships may gradually give way to other competitions of a higher level. The Athletic club must take that direction, for the resources provided by a community of scarcely 3 million people, and with other clubs, is necessarily limited. Possibly the club from Bilbao will decide to open its doors to the Basque players of the Diaspora in the near future. ■