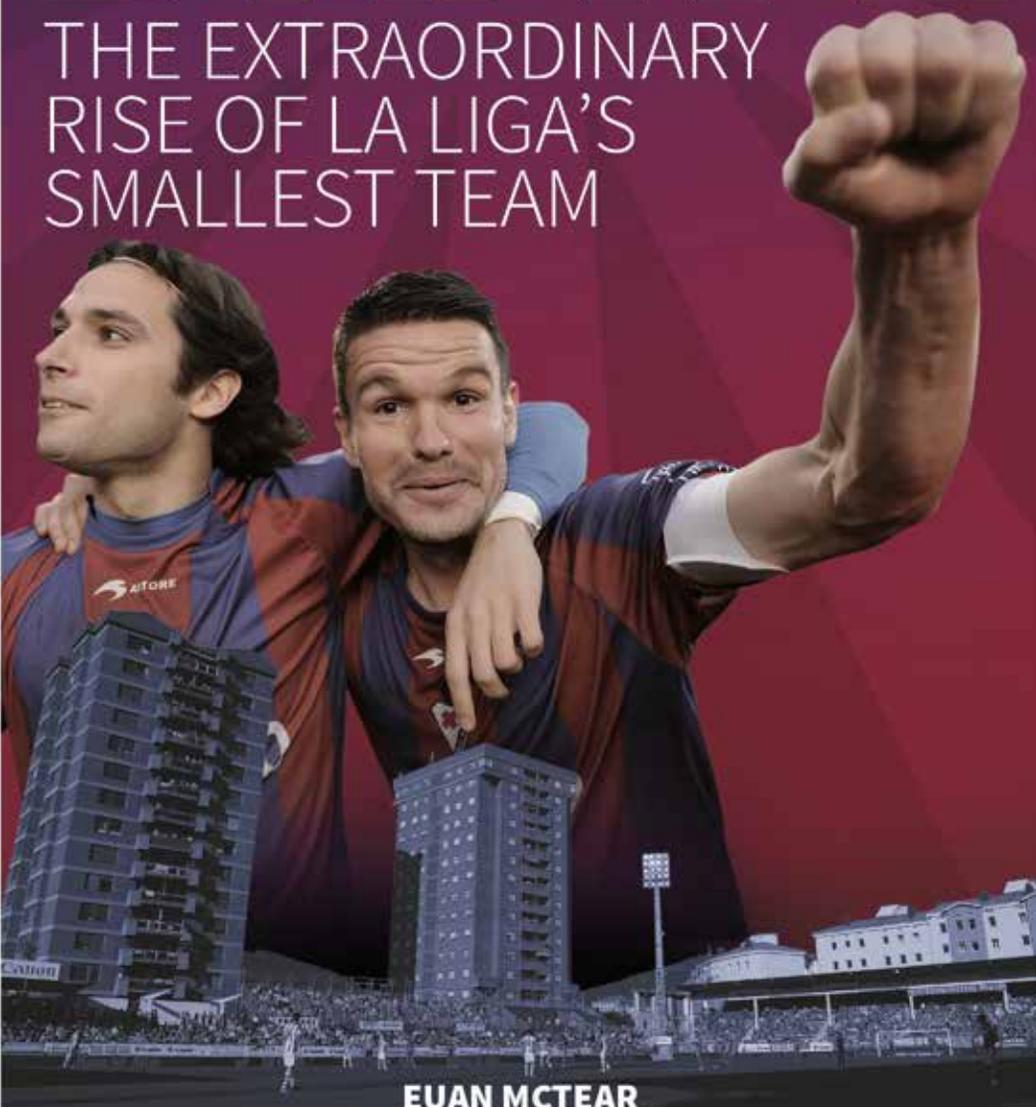


EIBAR THE BRAVE

THE EXTRAORDINARY
RISE OF LA LIGA'S
SMALLEST TEAM



EUAN MCTEAR

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Introduction

I first came across Sociedad Deportiva Eibar in Tom Shields's sports diary in *The Glasgow Herald* in 2005. I was just a teenager at the time and I'm sure I was only attracted to the piece because of the pictures, but the links between Eibar and Scotland were immediately laid out and over the next decade – particularly as my interest in Spanish football grew with a move to Barcelona – I took pleasure in fleeting glimpses of lower league Spanish football scores whenever Eibar's name popped up in the wins column.

Then, in 2014, Eibar's story escalated and I began to seriously investigate this amazing football club.

This book tells Eibar's fairytale, a story for football's frog princes, beanstalk scalers and sleeping beauties. It is a Cinderella story in which our protagonist is the ugly sister of Spanish football and was never supposed to go to the La Liga ball. That was indeed the case until a footballing miracle elevated this modest and tiny club to the heights of La Liga in 2014. In the club's very own words: 'To celebrate the 75th anniversary of the club by playing in stadiums like the Camp Nou, Bernabéu or San Mamés was not even in our wildest dreams.'

It is a tale that Hollywood script writers would discard for being too far-fetched. Thankfully, however, the footballing gods have allowed Spanish football's most extraordinary story to be told; a story that is greater than a Messi dribble, greater than *la décima* and greater than *that* night in Soccer City.

This is no Middle East oil or American sugar daddy-backed fairytale. The scene of the heroics is Ipurua, a stadium which does not carry the name of any airline or energy drink. The closest the fans get to the players is not a life-size cardboard cutout in the club megastore; rather the players meet with and know the fans by name.

Eibar's story may not generate the 'good traffic' that some modern journalists strive for and that a story about Neymar's new tattoo or Ronaldo's romances might. However, this is a story actually worth telling.

EIBAR THE BRAVE

In my research for this book, my understanding of Eibar's history and values has increased infinityfold from that Sunday afternoon reading Tom Shields's sports diary. I aim to share that insight with you through the following series of tales.

1

A Fairytale Season: *Act 1*

“We have a lot of respect for the game and for Eibar. It’s not easy to play on this pitch.”

Carlo Ancelotti

Saturday, 22nd November 2014. Ipurua Stadium, Eibar.

It is 133 days since Toni Kroos cradled the World Cup on the confetti-laden pitch of the Maracanã in Rio de Janeiro, in front of almost 75,000 people. Today, the German superstar is playing in front of another sell-out crowd, yet today’s record attendance figure won’t even reach 6,000. This is Ipurua Municipal Stadium, home of Sociedad Deportiva Eibar and La Liga’s smallest ever club.

Joining Kroos in European champions – and soon to be world champions – Real Madrid’s starting XI are seven other players who represented their country in the summer’s carnival of football in Brazil, including 2010 winners Sergio Ramos and the captain of that triumphant 2010 Spanish *La Roja* side, Iker Casillas. As if that wasn’t enough glitz to bring on the roadshow to La Liga’s tiniest stadium, this starting XI also includes the star of the World Cup, James Rodríguez, and the world’s most expensive player, Gareth Bale. And joining them up front? Yes, that’s Cristiano Ronaldo warming up.

There’s a Harlem Globetrotters-esque sense of inevitability about the visit of this star-studded Real Madrid side, on a 13-match winning run in Spain’s top division. However, there is a hugely significant league fixture to be played this Saturday evening and declaring an away win before a ball is kicked would be arrogant in the extreme.

Eibar come into this fixture, the twelfth of the 2014/15 Spanish La Liga season, in ninth place. The minnows are, at this point, the highest Basque club in the table – no mean feat given that Athletic Club de Bilbao and Real Sociedad both qualified for European competition the previous season – and it would be understandable for the club hailing from a town of just 27,000 people to be suffering from La Liga altitude

sickness. Eibar is comparable in size to the likes of Elgin, Morecambe, Fleetwood or Glossop North End, which with a population of 30,000 is the smallest town to have ever produced a top division football club in England – although it is difficult to compare that achievement with this given the Hillmen’s last top-flight appearance came in the 1899/1900 season.

The ever-articulate Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti has shown no signs of getting carried away ahead of this match, telling the media: “We have a lot of respect for the game and for Eibar. It’s not easy to play on this pitch.” The odds, however, are firmly in his side’s favour and the locals flocking up the town’s outdoor escalators towards Ipurua for the match, while hopeful, understand which outcome is most likely. The fact Cristiano Ronaldo, with his pay packet of almost €17million per year, earns more than SD Eibar’s entire annual €15.9million budget is just one of those unbelievable comparisons normally reserved for cup ties contested between clubs several divisions apart.

Think David versus Goliath, but imagine David doesn’t even get to use a slingshot because Goliath has already bought it from him. Yes, the difference between these two clubs is that vast.

Another example... In the summer of 2009 Real Madrid spent a then-record fee of €93million to bring Ronaldo to the Bernabéu, a figure Eibar could only ever dream of and likely wouldn’t even bother to. To celebrate the signing, Real staged a presentation in front of a near-capacity crowd of 80,000 fans. In contrast, over the whole of the 2013/14 season Eibar’s total aggregate attendance after 21 home league fixtures was 63,440, still thousands short of the figure that watched Ronaldo perform a few keepee-ups that summer evening in 2009.

And that €100million fee Real Madrid paid when they made Gareth Bale the world’s most expensive player? Yes, that was slightly larger than Eibar’s record transfer fee, paid when Dani Nieto signed from Barcelona in the 2014 summer; his €200,000 fee was a massive 500 times smaller.

In the end, the little hope given to Eibar is justified. Real Madrid coolly dispatch of the Primera newcomers and depart Ipurua with a 4-0 victory and the three points they have visited this Basque valley town for.

To lose by four is unfair on Eibar, with James Rodríguez’s first goal – a header from a yard out – featuring a touch from an offside Karim Benzema in its build-up. The goal stands and Eibar are behind on 23 minutes, just after they appear to be settling into the game and not long after local boy Jon Errasti – the only *eibarrés*, the only player actually from the town, in the Eibar squad – nutmegs Rodríguez, the €80million star of the World Cup and – although he doesn’t know it yet – winner of the FIFA Puskás Award for goal of the year.

Having exacted his revenge for that humiliation, Rodríguez and his team-mates lead, but things could be so different had Eibar's Manu del Moral converted a clear chance. Unfortunately, for the home crowd, he fluffs his lines and instead scuffs a powder-puff shot towards Casillas's goal. That proves even more costly when, just before the break, Ronaldo nudges a shot into the top corner from just inside the box, prompting his normally reserved manager Carlo Ancelotti to show his whimsical side, mimicking his star forward's celebration. There's something in the Eibar air that makes even the coolest of us act a little differently.

So Eibar retreat at the break two goals down despite having matched the league leaders across the pitch and already the blue and claret balloons of the home support are beginning to deflate as the result appears confirmed.

The second half fails to provide any miraculous comeback; luck again deserts Eibar when Karim Benzema scores in the 70th minute after James Rodríguez crosses a ball that had appeared to cross the chalk line at the end of the ground where Eibar's famous and lively fan group *Eskozia La Brava* – translated as 'Scotland the Brave' – sit just a couple of metres behind the goal. Having been in a much better position to see the ball cross the line than the referee, the passionate fan group very 'politely' offer their advice to the man in the middle. Unsurprisingly, they don't receive much change from the referee and the goal stands to make the score 3-0. The fourth follows shortly afterwards when a Ronaldo free kick strikes hero centre-back Raúl Albentosa on the arm and a penalty is given. The Portuguese nets his 20th goal of the season from the spot, in just the 11th week.

And that's that – Second division champions 0. European champions 4.

Despite losing by four goals, the 5,859 crowd at Ipurua – a stadium record which doesn't even take into account the hundreds more watching from the apartments which overlook the pitch – is not as distraught as one might expect. Today has been a heady day, not just thanks to the beer and cider drank in the main square along with a full kilometre of sausages and a meringue the size of a bus. Just two seasons previously, this club was playing in Spain's third tier and fantasies of Saturday night encounters with Real Madrid were exactly that: fantasies. Now Eibar have made it to Spain's top division and they will still be in the top half by the end of this weekend – a cause for a *fiesta*.

There's a Basque proverb which says; '*Dantzatu nahi ez dana, ez doala dantzara.*' It translates as; 'If you don't want to dance, don't go to a dance.' Two years ago, Eibar dreamed of dancing with the giants like Real Madrid. Now they are finally here partying with the big boys, the fans aren't going to let a 4-0 loss ruin their night. They are here for a

party, a party which began three months earlier with the first La Liga match in Eibar's history.

Sunday, 24th August 2014. Ipurua Stadium, Eibar.

The 2014/15 La Liga season begins with a Basque derby in the opening *jornada*, the word for each round of fixtures. Yet both San Mamés stadium in Bilbao and Anoeta in San Sebastián lie empty.

Where is this Basque derby being held then? The answer: almost exactly halfway between the largest two cities of the Basque Country, in little Eibar. Sociedad Deportiva Eibar is about to face Real Sociedad as an equal in Spain's Primera division, a match that no amount of tea leaf reading could ever have predicted.

For Eibar, competing against Real Sociedad, or Athletic Club de Bilbao, is in many ways like lining up against a big brother. Over the decades since the club was formed in 1940, both their Basque neighbours have taken turns to 'look out for' Eibar by being *convenido*, linked, to the Ipurua club.

As Javier Ortiz de Lazcano, a football correspondent for Basque newspaper *El Correo*, explains to me: "Right now, there is an agreement with Real Sociedad, by which I mean they loan out players to Eibar and in return Eibar gives preference to Real when selling their own players if Real can match the offers of other clubs. In other periods there have been similar agreements with Athletic Club. It's swung from club to club naturally over time."

"Eibar knows the help from Real has been key to reaching the top," Javier also points out.

There is no rule to impede two teams in the same division having such a *convenido* agreement and, as such, one Real Sociedad loanee this season is Raúl Navas; the player starts for Eibar today, as he has done for the past two seasons. Having been bought by Real in the summer, the Andalusian has been loaned back to Eibar for one further campaign. As well as discussing Navas, the Eibar fans making the procession towards this derby run the rule over the rest of their newly-assembled top-flight squad of loanees and journeymen. Unanimous opinion is that Navas's centre-back partner Raúl Albentosa is one of the most talented players in the team and that the two Raúl's will dominate the centre of defence in place of the 35-but-going-on-50 club captain and legend Txema Añibarro, who will be the oldest player to ever debut in the Primera and who is expected to content himself with the odd cameo appearance. Like Añibarro, ex-Athletic youth teamer Borja Ekiza will be an adequate stand-in when required.

The rest of the defence is also highly regarded, with keeper Irureta an obvious fan favourite having won the Zamora Award for his efforts in defending his goalposts like the most agile of Russian gymnasts

during the promotion campaign. Eneko Bóveda, the right-back and Telecommunications Engineering student who arrived in 2011 after turning down a contract at Athletic Club, deserves his chance too. Less obvious is who will win the left-back role, with Abraham – on loan from Real Zaragoza – starting today and Dídac Vilà set to sign on a year's loan from AC Milan in the coming days.

In midfield, Dani García has arrived from Real Sociedad on a permanent deal after a loan spell and there is no doubt that he and local hero Jon Errasti will form a formidable partnership in central midfield. Eibar youth product Ander Capa has impressed over the previous promotions and those around Ipurua believe he has earned his spot on the right wing, while Javi Lara will line up on the opposite flank. Although nobody is quite sure what to make of this new arrival from Ponferradina, the fans here will be singing Javi Lara's praises before the sun falls behind those mountains in the distance.

Despite the fact he won't start today, the last-minute arrival of former Ghana international defensive midfielder Derek Boateng is an excitingly intriguing one, while there are also high hopes for the two ex-Barcelona B wingers, Dani Nieto and Saúl Berjón.

The most polemic position among the fans concerns who should accompany legendary striker and all-time Eibar top goalscorer, Mikel Arruabarrena, up front, a traditional poacher with the bolt-on of outstanding technical skill and the ability to effectively hold up the ball. Free agent Ángel gets the chance to start alongside him ahead of Manu del Moral today, but the loan deal to bring Sampdoria striker Federico Piovaccari – a man with a reputation for getting both goals and bookings in roughly equal measure – is the one which appears to have attracted the most excitement. The serial loanee – as a quick glance at his Wikipedia page will make clear – is as exotic a signing as they come for Eibar fans, having just helped Steaua Bucureşti to the Romanian league title with ten goals in 25 appearances the previous season.

It is a decent squad, but unquestionably the worst in the division. If anyone can get a tune out of this group, however, it is current manager and miracle worker Gaizka Garitano, the brains behind the club's double promotion. Once again, Garitano will have to work with a new group of loanees and free signings, some of whom haven't even learned their team-mates' names yet. While not an ideal way to build a team for Spain's top tier, Eibar's sporting director Fran Garagarza is forever grateful to the loan arrangements in place with clubs like Real Sociedad.

The fact that such agreements have always been able to exist between Eibar and its Basque neighbours stems from the fact they have very rarely played in the same division and, consequently, have never been direct rivals. Eibar met Athletic in the 2012/13 *Copa del*

Rey – in fact knocking their big brother out of the tournament – while Real Sociedad and Eibar met competitively four times in Spain's second division, the Segunda, between 2007 and 2009 when the San Sebastián club was relegated from La Liga. Having spent all of their existence until today in the lower tiers of Spanish football, Eibar have much more frequently met the B teams of their neighbours – on 32 occasions – than they have met the first teams. That will begin to change today, however, in the Gipuzkoa – the region of the Basque Country that Eibar and Real Sociedad call home – derby.

As the 22 players, all of them Spaniards – this is the first La Liga match since Sporting Gijón versus Athletic Club in 2010 to feature no foreigners – and 13 of them Basque, take to the rugged Ipurua pitch for a first division match, the Eibar and Real fans alike understand the poignancy of the occasion.

It has not been at all easy to make this dream a reality for Eibar, with the club having had to jump through a series of hoops in order to comply with an absurd 1999 Spanish law which required an increase in their social capital of €1.7million. Nor was it easy for Eibar on the football pitch, having had to work extra hard to win the 2013/14 second division – the Segunda – title with the smallest budget in the division. We'll discuss that later on, but for now the only thing that matters to Eibar is being here.

Correction: two things matter to Eibar this Sunday afternoon. Yes, being here in La Liga is one but also clear once the match kicks off is that getting the three points also matters to Garitano's team. There had been a lot of chatter in the Spanish press – there is always a lot of chatter in the Spanish press, to be fair, without particularly much ever being said – before Eibar's top-flight debut on just how uncompetitive *los armeros* – the gunners as they are nicknamed – would be. Would they perform even worse than the 1997/98 Sporting Gijón team which collected La Liga's record fewest points tally – since three points for a win was introduced – of 13? Many thought they would.

After their first 90 minutes of the season, the minnows are already just ten points away from equalling Gijón's record.

The home side dominate 'big brother' Real in the first 45 minutes, nearly taking the lead twice from close-range headers. First, Raúl Navas has a crack; he heads inches wide from a seventh-minute corner. Ángel then sends another header off target minutes later.

The crowd has been excited since the early hours of the morning when the town centre was already a sea of blue and claret, referred to as *azulgrana*. Scarves, flags and replica shirts – the 2014/15 version sold out within days – were the backdrop for the singing, chanting and fireworks show which began in earnest at midday, but the locals are even more encouraged now by the way Eibar open the match. That

Real's goalkeeper Zubikarai has to make a tremendous double save from Javi Lara and Mikel Arruabarrena only adds to the growing sense that Eibar could win this match, and possibly do so comfortably. Javi Lara turns expectation into celebration just before the stroke of half-time with an incredible free kick from the tightest of angles. Just a few metres out from the corner flag, he lofts the ball beautifully into the far top corner via the post, sending his team-mates wild and the Ipurua decibel levels soaring anew.

The euphoria lasts throughout the break and beyond, only slightly dampened during a second half in which Real Sociedad finally appear to wake up from their summer slumber. Wave after wave of coherent attack flows towards Xabi Irureta's goal, but former Eibar full-back Yuri Berchiche shoots wide, as does substitute Carlos Vela, while Imanol Agirretxe's drilled effort finds Irureta in its way. Several more chances, many from set pieces, fall the visitors' way, but the match is drawing to a close.

Were there a clock in the stadium it would tell you that the 90 minutes are up, but there is little need for one given it is easily read from the anxious faces in the stands that stoppage time has arrived. The pressure and tension build without any clear chances being carved out and as soon as Irureta falls on Chory Castro's long-range bullet in the fourth minute of additional time, the result is confirmed. Eibar become the only side in history with a 100% record in Spain's top division, while Garitano is – on this August day – only the second permanent manager to boast a personal 100% winning record; the other, remarkably, is his uncle Ander.

'Unsta habiatu den lana, erdi akabirik,' as they say in the Basque Country. 'Well begun is half done.' In terms of achieving the ultimate goal of avoiding a bottom-three finish, and thus avoiding relegation in this 20-team league, Eibar have started as well as they possibly could. thirty-seven matches remain, but this has been the most moralising of victories.

Monday, 25th August 2014. Times Square, New York City.

Times Square has turned purple. Prince is set to release two new albums – hence the purple – and ABC's *Good Morning America* programme is here to see it. Prince himself hasn't joined the gathering, but has kindly sent his backing band 3rdeyegirl – yes, that is a name – to announce the new releases to the world. Guitarist Donna Grantis makes the big announcement that the *Purple Rain* artist is to release his first new material since 2010 in front of a sea of purple flags, purple banners and purple T-shirts. The centre of New York has gone full purple. Well, almost.

As well as the purple there is a little bit of *azulgrana* present in Times Square this Monday morning. As 3rdeyegirl reveal the big news

to America, the blue and claret stripes of a flag with the words 'Aupa Eibar', basically saying 'Come on Eibar', slowly rises above the purple-clothed-and-now-slightly-confused crowd in the shot's background; the flag immediately takes up over half the TV screen as the camera zooms in on the band.

As big a deal as Prince's new album releases are for Prince fans, Eibar's achievement against Real Sociedad yesterday was even bigger for fans of the club and that fanbase is now a global one. Eibar mania has even infected Times Square, perhaps the most iconic global location on the planet.

While Eibar's fanbase is extending to foreign and exotic locations, news of the club's victory appears in similarly foreign territory: the front pages of the Spanish press. It may only be in the Basque press that Eibar actually make the front page headlines – Barcelona also played the night before and Real Madrid are to play on the Monday evening so the pair dominate the headlines elsewhere – but for their result to even appear on the front page of *Marca* is unheard of for Eibar. This morning's *Diario Vasco* shouts 'Eibar Keeps Dreaming' on its front page, while *Mundo Deportivo* announces that 'Eibar Debuts In Style', albeit not until page 30 after countless column inches of Messi worship.

Eibar will again make it on to the front pages of the press the following weekend; they face reigning La Liga champions Atlético Madrid in a Saturday night showdown in the capital. Following the unbelievable situation at the end of the previous season in which Spanish Football Federation president Ángel María Villar couldn't attend the most important match of the season as Barcelona faced Atlético in a head-to-head duel for the title on the final day, Atlético have still not been presented with their La Liga trophy. Now two weeks into the following season, Diego Simeone's title-winning squad – or what remains of it – will finally be able to lift their tenth league trophy ahead of their first home match of the season against Eibar.

The three Atlético captains Gabi, Raúl García and Diego Godín collect the trophy in front of a packed Vicente Calderón Stadium before bringing it down to the pitch to march through a guard of honour performed by the Eibar team.

Usually following a trophy presentation it is time to go home, but this presentation is instead the warm-up for an important match, particularly so for the hosts who have already dropped points at Rayo Vallecano in their season opener. Receiving the trophy certainly warms Atlético Madrid up and it takes only 12 minutes for João Miranda to open the scoring with a typical Atlético goal from a corner. If Eibar hadn't realised by then that set pieces are where this Atlético team is at its most dangerous then their hosts oblige with a further schooling

another 12 minutes later when Mario Mandžukić heads home from Gabi's free kick.

The game should be over there and then, but this Eibar team is both plucky and talented, from the players on the pitch to their medic Ostaiska Egia – who bravely scolds some abusive Atlético fans who dare make sexist comments towards her. On the pitch, the players are just as prepared to stand up for themselves and defend Atlético's crosses into the box, as well as working their way up the park on the counter attack. A flash of the talent this Eibar squad possesses then shines through in the 33rd minute with an absolute *golazo*, a wonder goal. Javi Lara picks up the ball just past the halfway line on the left-hand side of the pitch and picks out left-back Abraham on the wing who jinks inside and knocks the ball through Gabi's legs to Ángel, who has already spotted the run of Arruabarrena into the box. A neat back-heel from Arruabarrena sets the ball up cleanly for Abraham, but there is still no way this lovely move is going to finish in a goal from Abraham, a player who has picked up four red cards since his last goal two years and five months ago. Surely not...

This is Eibar, remember. Expect the unexpected. They achieve the unachievable. And Abraham does indeed score that unscorable goal, curling the ball teed-up for him so perfectly by Arruabarrena into the far top corner from just outside the box. Game on.

Atlético are too good to panic and continue to pressure the Eibar defence. They find a defiant Irureta in goal and Eibar soon discover a new lease of life, breaking into the large spaces left behind every Atlético charge forward. In the second half, Mario Suárez could, but doesn't, see a second yellow card for swiping out at Eibar's Dani García. Just as worrying for the hosts is the fact that Eibar are grasping more and more control in the match. Javi Lara loops a 74th-minute free kick into the box which right-back Eneko Bóveda really should knock into the net – instead it bounces a yard wide. Bóveda's isn't to be Eibar's last or best chance. That falls to Angel, whose poked shot picks up enough of a touch from Atlético stopper Moya's fingernails to roll past the post. Two minutes later the final whistle echoes around the Vicente Calderón, as does a collective sigh of relief.

It finishes Primera champions 2. Segunda champions 1.

It is Abraham's goal that will stick in the memory – and rightly so, for it is ridiculously good – but the overall graft, grit and determination of this performance is what should impress Eibar fans most. The team's heroics will again receive plenty of attention in the following day's press, although the world-class team goal of Eibar's AAA – Abraham, Arruabarrena and Ángel – won't quite knock Real Madrid's BBC – Benzema, Bale and Cristiano – from the back pages. Hidden a little deeper in the Sunday sports papers will be the praise Eibar deserves.

The main photos of the match justifiably show Atlético players, coaches and directors parading the La Liga trophy, but a snap of Abraham's *golazo* would be just as worthy of a full-page spread.

Saturday, 27th September 2014. Somera Kalea, Bilbao.

'Somera es azulgrana. ¡Es azulgrana! Somera es azulgrana.'

So rings out the chant on Somera Kalea, a street which runs through the old town Casco Viejo area of Bilbao like a vein. It certainly looks like a vein today, with a stream of blue and a tint of claret winding its way along the whole street. It is only midday, but the fans of SD Eibar have already taken over. Today, on derby day, Somera Street is most definitely blue and claret.

Only 1,200 Eibar fans have tickets for this evening's match in the new San Mamés stadium, but with the town of Eibar just 50 kilometres and 40 minutes away, double that number have made the short trip to Bilbao to soak up the feel-good atmosphere of this gloriously sunny September afternoon. The first buses arrived at 11am and disgorged a tide of fans – a true wave of blue, claret and skin – towards their first stop of Somera, a street packed with bars and draped in the red and white colours of Athletic Club. It is soon packed with supporters of Eibar and promptly declared occupied by the famous *Eskozia La Brava* fan group.

There is certainly a party atmosphere here as *pintxos* – popular Basque snacks of meat stapled to bread by a cocktail stick – are shared, glasses of beer are toasted, games are played and old friends are reunited. The blue and claret of Eibar is eventually matched by the red and white of Athletic fans – who were not quite as punctual but who now arrive in numbers – and the two sets of fans mix amicably without any hint of trouble whatsoever. The children are kept occupied by pop-up games of 'Beat the Goalie' and the lion mascots of Athletic, while the adults move from bar to bar drinking *copa* after *copa* of beer. The barkeepers are also out and about criss-crossing Somera as they return the stacks of glasses that fans have brought with them from one bar to the next, much like the swash and backwash of sand moving along a shoreline.

This evening's match is a grand occasion for both teams and is the first-ever time Athletic and Eibar will meet in the league; Athletic, on one hand, have never been relegated from the top tier of Spanish football, while Eibar is enjoying its maiden season in the Primera.

And, enjoying it they most definitely are. After five rounds of matches, Eibar find themselves in the top half of the league table in a lofty ninth position, while Athletic find themselves in the relegation zone after picking up just three points from their first weeks of the season. Real Sociedad have thus far not fared much better, making Eibar the highest-placed Basque team ahead of this derby.

The 1-0 win against Real Sociedad kick-started Eibar's cause, while the defeat away to Atlético Madrid was not too costly and the fact that they never gave up even won the gunners many admirers. Next up for Gaizka Garitano's side was the visit of Deportivo La Coruña the following Monday and this was a match which would again end in defeat, though quite how Deportivo managed to take all three points remains a mystery. Eibar started with the same 11 players as had lined up against Real and Atlético and by the end of the match had 14 shots on goal to Deportivo's four. Despite their limited chances it was Deportivo that managed to find the back of the net; Juan Domínguez's 13th-minute strike was among the luckiest goals of the season as a Juanfran cross from the right wing fell, like manna from heaven, to Domínguez just five yards from goal, thanks to a generous ricochet off Eibar's Bóveda. Deportivo's number ten didn't pass up the opportunity and the team that Eibar pipped to the second division title the previous season led.

Eibar quickly set about correcting the scoreline and would create enough chances to reverse the deficit, but could not capitalise on a single one of them. The second period continued in the same vein with chances for Dani Nieto, Saúl Berjón and Javi Lara. It wasn't to be and, although the opponents were a fellow newly-promoted side, the match certainly taught Eibar how costly not being clinical could be in La Liga. In his post-match press conference, Garitano commented on the difference between life in the first and second divisions: "We played well for many minutes. They, with a few good minutes, have won by just the one goal. We dominated but we lacked that good pass or good move in the final third. This is the difference between the Primera and the Segunda."

Luckily for Garitano's squad, they would get the opportunity to put things right just four days later in the week's Friday night game away to Elche. And put things right they did.

For the first time since December 2013, Elche lost a home match. Eibar took the lead in the third minute with a sweet long-range effort from Dani García that pinged into the back of the net via the left upright. After diffusing a brief period of pressure from the locals in the first half, Eibar were able to add to their lead three minutes before the break to round off the first half in palindromic style. Raúl Albentosa, the ex-Elche centre-back who had until then dominated all action in his own penalty box, proved key at the other end of the pitch as he leapt to nod the corner sent in by Saúl Berjón – the only change to the starting line-up from the first three matches – into the empty net after Elche's Polish keeper Tyton had fortuitously found himself caught up in traffic. It would remain 2-0 and the impressive win saw Eibar double their points tally for the season, a tally that would again be added to the following Wednesday.

Despite playing three weekday matches in a row, it should be noted that midweek games are not, in fact, all that common in the Spanish league. Each round or fixtures, called a *jornada*, has at most two weekday matches on a Friday and Monday night, while there tend to be only a couple of full *jornadas* per season held on a Tuesday and Wednesday. One such midweek round was to follow the Elche trip as Eibar welcomed Villarreal to Ipurua for Garitano's 100th match in charge. The 'Yellow Submarine' was an opponent to be wary of and was the third opponent from Eibar's first five La Liga matches that had qualified for Europe the previous season, making Eibar's decent opening run of results all the more impressive.

As they had done the previous Friday night at Elche's Martínez Valero Stadium, Eibar would start as brightly as Villarreal's kit was yellow. It may have taken Eibar's star striker Mikel Arruabarrena five matches to grab his first goal of the season, but it only took the man from neighbouring Tolosa eight minutes of this particular match to find the back of the net. Saúl Berjón started the move with an intelligent one-two free kick that allowed him to take the ball down the left flank before lofting a cross into the centre. It fell to Borja, who made the visiting keeper save down low, but Villarreal couldn't clear and after some frantic attempts at doing so, the ball fell for Borja's defensive partner Albentosa, who squared it for captain Arruabarrena to crossbow the ball into the net like Robin Hood stealing from the rich and giving to Eibar.

Shortly afterwards, Saúl Berjón would again send a dangerous ball in from the left wing, this time aiming for goal from 30 yards out and nearly finding the net; Asenjo in the visiting goal had to be at full stretch to tip it over. Villarreal would hit the top of the Eibar crossbar, but the first 45 minutes belonged to the home side and they were given a standing ovation as they headed for the tunnel at the break. The second half would see a complete role-reversal and the fans in Ipurua's West Stand – also known as the stand of *las monjas*, of the nuns, due to its proximity to the old convent – saw all the action take place at their end once again. Those fans would have seen the ball strike the arm of Abraham in the Eibar box, but the referee failed to see it himself so Eibar escaped the punishment of a penalty. Villarreal would soon score regardless; Gerard Moreno appeared just inside the box to curl the ball around Irureta with only 20 minutes remaining.

That was how Eibar picked up a seventh point from five matches and the reason they find themselves above neighbours Athletic Club – who have only picked up three – ahead of today's late September derby. Even a defeat for the visiting minnows would see them remain ahead of Athletic in the league table, but Eibar's fans are dreaming of an even more memorable result, such as the one in the 2012/13 *Copa del Rey*

when a 1-1 draw in the old San Mamés knocked the Basque giants out on away goals. The locals are keen to avoid a repeat, while the guests are even keener to force one.

As the match approaches, it's time for the hundreds of Eibar fans to leave Somera and to head westwards towards the brand new San Mamés stadium.

"How are we getting to the stadium?" I ask the immediately-likable head of the *Eskoziá La Brava* fan group Joseba Combarro, curious as to whether we'll be walking, getting a bus or taking the underground. I certainly don't expect his reply.

"Barco," he says.

I must look confused because he switches to English.

"Boat," he repeats.

It isn't the Spanish that causes my confusion, but I'm surprised nonetheless. "Boat?!" I think to myself. What kind of a fan group travels to the match by boat?! I should know by now that *Eskoziá La Brava* is no ordinary fan group.

Sure enough, as we reach the banks of the Nervión River, there is a boat awaiting us and the members of the group quickly set about attaching banners and flags to the side of the vessel as if this is a routine journey they are performing for the thousandth time. We soon set sail – after some beers are cracked open – and it's only a matter of moments before the flares are distributed and a red mist descends over the whole boat. As we approach Bilbao's fascinatingly-shaped Guggenheim Museum, crowds of tourists begin to appear on the banks of the river cheering the boat onwards towards the stadium. Never mind the fact the majority are Athletic fans, the arrival of a team such as Eibar to San Mamés is a special event and the locals are genuinely pleased for their neighbours. So long as they don't go on to cause an upset in the match, of course.

A few beers and a few songs later, the boat docks just a couple of hundred metres from the stadium. The banners and flags are unattached and carried on to their next exhibition: Poza Lizentziatuaren Kalea.

Pozas, as the street is better known, runs through Bilbao from the city centre to the stadium, whose red glow stares down the street. This is where Athletic fans meet pre-match for a drink or three and cars know better than to try to part the sea of red and white in the hours before a big game. Today, the Eibar faithful have joined their Athletic counterparts and every type of supporter is present. The fan groups are here, young people are here, couples are here, families are here. Even the Eibar club president Álex Aranzábal is here on the streets with the fans before the match. There are few other La Liga presidents who would do likewise, though that's because there are few other La Liga presidents like Aranzábal – but more on him later.

The sun starts to set after a few friendly rounds of drinks, emphasising the red glow from the stadium, and it's time to enter. The away section of the brand new arena is on the Pozas side, tucked away in the top corner, and the Eibar fans hook out their valuable tickets – that required up to three hours of queuing on Thursday morning – as they approach the turnstiles. The banners and flags of *Eskozia La Brava* are quickly given prime position.

It is settings like these that make promotion worth it. From playing in *Segunda B* division stadiums that sometimes had only two stands, just two seasons before, to taking to the field here at San Mamés, it has been a long journey for Eibar – much longer than today's 40-minute drive along the AP-8 motorway. This is the story of the match: the fact that Eibar have finally earned the chance after 74 years of existence to face Athletic Club in a league match.

The other story of the match is one of great goalkeeping and daft finishing. Both Eibar's Xabi Irureta and Bilbao's Gorka Iraizoz – once of Eibar himself – have good games and both earn a clean sheet in a match that lacks both goals and entertainment. This doesn't stop the travelling support from making their voices heard, though, and a subdued home support makes it even easier. The biggest cheer of the night celebrates the full-time whistle, with the *azulgrana* support celebrating it like a goal; it is a very valuable point and, therefore, worth cherishing. Despite their rivals' early season troubles, this is an impressive point for Eibar and one which the fans on the buses back to Eibar hope will make a repeat of this fixture possible the following season.

Saturday, 18th October 2014. Camp Nou, Barcelona.

This is the Camp Nou, the largest club stadium in Europe, host of European Cup finals, European Championship matches, World Cup matches, more *Clásicos* than is healthy for the average human heart rate, the Olympic Games and a visit of the Pope. Nothing happens at the Camp Nou that has not already happened before.

Except today. Today's 'Category C' match is history in the making.

For the first time, FC Barcelona will play SD Eibar. The two have never met, yet these two clubs already share history despite having never played each other.

Immediately, there is one overt similarity: the colours of their home kits. Following SD Eibar's foundation in 1940, the club initially played in red and white striped shirts and black shorts, mimicking neighbouring Athletic Club. Those colours would only last until the 1943/44 season when, short of a kit to play in, the regional federation gifted the club enough Barcelona shirts to get by – this, of course, in the days before logos, badges and numbers were plastered all over them. The blue and claret stripes the club 'borrowed' have stuck to

this day and it was in blue and claret that winger José Ignacio Peleteiro Ramallo, better known as Jota – remember that name – would score the memorable goal that sealed Eibar’s promotion to La Liga and made today’s encounter with Barcelona possible.

Although both clubs now wear the same colours, there still exist marked differences between the two sets of kits. While FC Barcelona provide their players with as many as 130 shirts each over the course of a season, Eibar’s squad are given just eight to last the whole campaign and any exchanged with other players must be paid for, albeit at the discounted price the club offers them. It’s therefore rare to see any of Eibar’s players exchanging shirts after a match, not least because it may not even be a fair trade if swapping a 2014/15 season Eibar shirt with the high-tech Barcelona equivalent. Barcelona’s 2014/15 shirts include, for example, Nike Dri-Fit technology, which apparently draws sweat to the exterior of the shirts, as well as laser-cut ventilation holes to aid cooling. Eibar may have upgraded their shirt manufacturer to Hummel after 22 years with Astore – nope, I hadn’t heard of them either – but their fancy new shirts don’t contain anything like the ‘technology’ of Barcelona’s, nor are they made from an average of 18 recycled plastic bottles as each Barcelona shirt is. It’s safe to assume that the 1943 Barcelona kits gifted to Eibar were a lot less advanced. They were a lot less disposable too, but the colours have certainly endured.

At least that is how the story commonly goes, but not according to late *Diario Vasco* journalist Tomás Zubizarreta who maintained that: “It is totally false that the Gipuzkoa Football Federation or Barcelona gave us blue and claret shirts.” Instead, argued Zubizarreta, the colours were selected “to match the colours of the town’s shield.”

While it is true that the Eibar town crest contains both blue and claret, the truth behind the origin of Eibar’s home kit likely lies somewhere in the middle of the two glib stories. Although there is evidence that the Gipuzkoa Football Federation did gift Eibar those Barcelona kits back in the 1940s, the directors of the club could well have allowed the blue and claret stripes to remain having realised the gifted kits matched well with the Eibar town crest. What’s important is that the colours did indeed remain and Eibar has, over the years, become as synonymous with blue and claret as Barcelona – at least in the Basque valleys.

One other team in La Liga that wears blue and claret stripes is Valencian side Levante, the team Eibar most recently met before their Camp Nou excursion. Following the draws against Villarreal and Athletic Club, Eibar picked up a third straight point as José Luis Mendilibar – who previously managed Eibar in the 2004/05 season when a side captained by current manager Gaizka Garitano, and featuring a young David Silva, so very nearly achieved promotion to

the first division – brought his struggling Levante to Ipurua in his penultimate game before being sacked. In a match that was much more exciting than the goalless draw of San Mamés, Eibar held Levante to a 3-3 draw with a stoppage time *golazo* from Italian striker Piovaccari. Ex-Eibar hero José Morales – who had played 36 games on the wing for the Basques in the promotion-winning 2013/14 season – had opened the scoring for Levante as early as Piovaccari's equaliser was late, with a second-minute strike from outside the box. Piovaccari's late equaliser kept Eibar's accumulation of points going and only time would tell whether the moment would be enough to take anything away from the Camp Nou.

It does indeed take quite some time to tell, some sixty minutes to be exact. Eibar acquitted themselves more than admirably and treasure a 0-0 scoreline at the interval. Eibar displayed a ton of desire, if not the technical ability, to match these megastars in the first half, yet even matching Barcelona for desire is always going to be difficult considering they are fielding Javier Mascherano, a player who literally tore his anus to win a place in the World Cup Final.

In actual fact, it is Eibar who could and should be ahead at half-time. For this match, the toughest they have faced yet, Garitano has dispensed with his usual 4-2-3-1 formation and his extra-defensive 5-3-2 has worked well in the first period, particularly with Dani García playing further up the park than usual and Javi Lara and Jon Errasti effectively protecting the back five. It is a particularly proud day for Errasti as he captains his local side for the first time as a Primera player. What better setting to do so than the Camp Nou?

Barcelona have struggled to find the space they thrive on and Irureta has made a couple of decent stops from Leo Messi, but has been otherwise untroubled. At the other end, Eibar should have taken the lead before the break when Ander Capa did all the hard work in rounding Claudio Bravo in the Barcelona goal before shooting wide at an open target from, to be fair, a fairly tight angle. Regardless, the Camp Nou was, understandably, stunned and Eibar finished that first half thriving on the audible silence; their half culminated with an equally good opportunity for Saúl Berjón who found himself one-on-one with Bravo, but the Chilean was able to parry the shot. Eibar have seen two decent, but difficult, chances pass them by. Such wastefulness tends to be punished at the Camp Nou, and indeed it will be in the second period.

The introduction of Andrés Iniesta on 55 minutes is followed by the first goal just five minutes later when Messi slips a ball through to Xavi, who slots past Irureta to score Barcelona's first-ever goal against Eibar. It may have taken 74 years for the first, but the second arrives just 12 minutes later when Dani Alves chips a cross towards his Brazilian team-

mate Neymar, who duly obliges and doubles the Barcelona lead. Eibar quickly fall apart and Messi is able to score two minutes later with what looks to be a great *tiki-taka* goal, but made all too easy by some slack defending. The Argentine is permitted two more great opportunities before the game's end, but Irureta is equal to both to keep the scoreline from becoming embarrassing.

There aren't many teams that take anything from a match at Barcelona and Eibar would have been well aware their survival hopes were never going to be decided at the Camp Nou; rather, their fate will be decided at the more modest stadiums of the league, including the most modest. Their own.

Monday, 3rd November 2014. Vallecas, Madrid.

It is one of the great mysteries of this planet Earth, up there with Stonehenge, the Loch Ness Monster and the Bermuda Triangle: what are Homer Simpson and family watching when they gather around the famous purple TV set in the opening sequence of the cartoon series?

Well, it turns out it might be some La Liga football.

Faced with yet another Monday night fixture, Rayo Vallecano's wonderfully creative fan group *Los Bukaneros* decide it's time to take a stand. Of their nine fixtures before this November 3rd match-up, both Eibar and Rayo have already played once on a Monday and once on a Friday and are now facing yet another game on a weekday. Before the season's end, Eibar would play ten Monday or Friday matches while Rayo would play nine – only Getafe, with 11, would play more.

"It's inevitable that the smaller clubs get the Friday and Monday night kick-off times," explains Paul Reidy of *Diario AS*, himself a Rayo Vallecano fan. "Modern football is all about numbers and, as much as it's a kick in the teeth, clubs like Rayo or Eibar are not major box office."

Rayo and Eibar may not draw the prime-time numbers the TV channels are after, but both sets of fans are frustrated because Monday and Friday night matches are logistically a pain for the supporter who attends games. For those with jobs, away matches are virtually impossible to make, while even home matches involve a rush to the stadium. The fact fixture dates and times are rarely announced more than a few weeks in advance usually rules out taking time off work as an option.

Spanish football expert, and author of the brilliant *Fear and Loathing in La Liga*, Sid Lowe reveals his frustration to me with this short-notice approach to scheduling. "One thing, which I think is really significant, is the timing of it. Alright, so you say to a fan group or the collective fans of a club, in this case Eibar: 'Right, you're going to play Elche, for example, on a Monday night.' Okay, fine, if you're telling me this now and I'm playing Elche on a Monday night in three months'

time, but not if you're telling me it now and I'm playing them in two weeks. How do I get the time off work? How do I get a hotel? How do I get the travel? In my opinion, this all feeds in to a general sense that there is a total lack of respect for the football fan who goes to the stadium. It's all about TV. It's a bit shambolic."

Besides Monday and Friday night matches being a logistical nightmare for fans, Sid thinks there is another just as important 'emotional' problem with only moving the smaller teams' matches to the Monday and Friday slots – and it does tend to be the smaller teams like Eibar and Rayo Vallecano that suffer from this, with it almost unheard of for Barcelona or Real Madrid to play then. He tells me: "There's a bit of me that thinks in a way it's as if the reward for getting to the first division is not being allowed to participate in the first division because the Monday night and the Friday night games feel like they don't form part of the *jornada*, the weekend's matches.

"And I'll give you a very basic example," he continues. "I write a La Liga column based on what happened over the weekend on a Monday, and that Monday game is never in it. Now obviously I'm not the definition of what counts as La Liga, but the same thing happens in *Diario AS*. *AS*'s Monday wrap of the league games of the weekend ignores the Monday night game and the Friday night game feels like it's stuck out and is kind of like a game before it [the *jornada*] all happens. And the fact there are never any of the big teams also creates a mindset where you almost don't count Mondays and Fridays."

So on this Monday night, *Los Bukaneros* – with the support of the travelling Eibar fans – take a stand with one of the strangest protests ever likely to be witnessed in a football stadium.

Before the match kicks off, *Los Bukaneros* set up a scene behind the goal of their *Fondo* stand to the north-west of the stadium. A group of fans dress up as Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie in front of a TV set prop. In front of them sits a banner which demands, 'No to football on a Monday', as well as one which reads, 'More TV rights means more money in the pockets', portraying the league president Javier Tebas as the money-grabbing Montgomery Burns. Eibar's fans also take part in the protests, unveiling a banner in the away section which features *The Simpsons*' famous long-haired stoner bus driver Otto saying: "With these time slots we don't even fill one bus, man!"

The scene is set up in the area where *Los Bukaneros* normally sit, but for the first 24 minutes tonight they cede the rows to the protest before arriving in minute 25 to tidy away the props – minus the 'No to football on a Monday' banner, which remains – and to support their team for the remainder of the match.

With the scores still at 0-0 the home fans haven't missed much and return just in time for 65 minutes so exciting they'll make stag

weekends in Vegas look boring. The drama begins when Eibar take a controversial lead. As a corner flies into the Rayo penalty area, Eibar's Bóveda falls to the ground after very slight contact from home left-back Nacho. Captain Arruabarrena duly steps up to fire home the resulting spot kick, his first but not last goal of the evening.

Arruabarrena's penalty is Eibar's tenth goal of the campaign, but the captain's penalty makes him the first repeat scorer for the *armeros*. The week before this trip to Vallecas, following their 3-0 reverse in the Camp Nou, Eibar had welcomed Granada to Ipurua. An early goal from Allan Nyom gave Granada a lead, but Eneko Bóveda's wonderful strike – set up by a marvellous diving chested pass by Piovaccari, as amazing as it sounds – equalled the scores before a dull and eventless second half. Scoring the club's ninth goal of the season not only earned Eibar a 1-1 draw, but also made Bóveda their ninth different scorer, proving that Eibar's early season successes were down to collective effort rather than one free-scoring soloist. Before Bóveda, Eibar had found the back of the net thanks to – in this order – Javi Lara, Abraham, Dani García, Albentosa, Arruabarrena, an own goal from Levante's Pedro López, Saúl Berjón and Piovaccari. Ander Capa could have made Bóveda the tenth unique scorer of the season, remember, had he slotted into that open goal in the Camp Nou.

Boasting nine different scorers of their first nine La Liga goals – the next best such record was Málaga's seven – was certainly a fine record to have, but the Eibar faithful are content to see the run end when Arruabarrena becomes their first repeat scorer here in Vallecas. Tonight's captain would go on to score his third of the season just an hour later, but three more goals are to be added to the scoresheet before then.

The first of those lengthens the Eibar lead; Italian striker Piovaccari doubles his own tally for the season just minutes after the restart, converting a delightful 40-yard through ball from the outside of Saúl Berjón's right boot. Rather than seal the result for the visitors, Piovaccari's goal only inspires the Rayo Vallecano of Paco Jémez – motivating his troops from the sideline in his customary suit and scarf combo – and the Madrid outfit almost pull one back immediately, only to be denied by a double stop; first Irureta parries a shot from Licá before Bóveda clears the rebound off the line.

Piovaccari then finds himself one on one with David Cobeño – who replaced the injured Toño in the Rayo goal – but the Italian skies his shot. That looks like it will prove costly when Léo Baptistão pulls not one but two goals back for the home team to level the scores. The Brazilian home hero first heads in Licá's cross in the 67th minute before he taps Kakuta's cross past Irureta just seconds after the restart – one of those goals scored so quickly the TV replay begins with the kick-off.

Those hopes of an impressive away victory for Eibar appear to have been dashed in a flash, but Arruabarrena restores them with just five minutes remaining. He rounds off the evening's scoring by volleying Dani García's cross from the left flank into the net in front of the *Fondo* stand where *Los Bukaneros'* protest had taken place at the beginning of this wild contest.

So Eibar come out on top in this fascinating encounter that deserves the headlines as much for the play on the field as for the protest off of it. The three points lift them above Rayo but fortunes will have turned for both clubs by the return fixture at Ipurua the following April. A fixture that will be held on – you guessed it – a Friday night.

Saturday, 8th November 2014. La Rosaleda, Málaga

Already Eibar have proven they don't need a hand from anyone; in fact, this Saturday evening in Málaga they could have done with less of a hand. The hand in question belongs to Raúl Navas, in a match which comes down to fine margins as Eibar visit La Rosaleda Stadium in Málaga in their 11th La Liga match, a game that proves just how cruel the Primera can be.

The first fine margin comes just two minutes into the contest, when Navas's headed goal from a Saúl Berjón free kick is ruled out for offside. The visiting defender's arm may be offside but the rest of his body appears to be in line with the Málaga defence. Referees and linesmen often get a hard time, but when incidents like this remain unclear after a dozen viewings of the replay perhaps a little consideration for the difficulty of the job is due. Still, this is the tightest of margins and Eibar, understandably, feel aggrieved.

Raúl Navas's stray left arm costs Eibar once again, just two minutes before full-time. A Mikel Arruabarrena strike – his fourth of the season following his brace at Rayo Vallecano – had given Eibar a first-half lead that Juanmi cancelled out as he tidied up a rebound from a Samuel shot. Chances followed for both sides but with just a couple of minutes remaining, Eibar appear to be heading towards an impressive point against a Málaga team that has won four matches on the bounce. This will become five thanks to a late penalty, awarded to the hosts after Sergi Darder's ball pops up to hit Navas's arm from two yards despite the defender's best attempts to pull his limb out of the way. Navas is a split second too slow in doing so and referee Martínez Munuera awards the controversial penalty. To rub salt in the wounds, Navas picks up the double punishment of a second yellow card and so misses Nordin Amrabat slotting the spot kick into Irureta's bottom left corner and earning the hosts a fortunate 2-1 victory.

The width of Navas's left arm is the fine margin by which Eibar leave La Rosaleda with no points instead of all three.

Despite that defeat, Garitano's squad remain in the top half of the table. Few had given Eibar any chance of staying up when the season kicked off in August, but with some bravery, skill and dedicated support they have started the campaign brilliantly to take 13 points from their first 11 matches and already equal Gijón's record worst-point haul – the one which sceptics proclaimed would better Eibar's efforts. The consensus after these first 11 outings is that the club's early season mission is being met and even surpassed: to deposit as many early La Liga points in the piggy bank of survival as possible ahead of judgement day the following May when the time would come to cash them in.

Even the 4-0 home defeat to Real Madrid the following week would fail to take the shine off this impressive start. Rather than a blow, the arrival of the Spanish giants to Ipurua would be a cause for celebration. It wasn't ever going to be the matches against Real Madrid that would determine the course of Eibar's season. The next seven matches will do exactly that.

La Liga standings after *jornada 12*

#	Team	Matches Played	Matches Won	Matches Drawn	Matches Lost	Points
12	Eibar	12	3	4	5	13
16	Real Sociedad	12	2	4	6	10
17	Almería	12	2	4	6	10
18	Deportivo	12	2	4	6	10
19	Elche	12	2	4	6	10
20	Córdoba	12	0	7	5	7