

'El Clasico' is the twice annual battle between Spain's two top clubs, Barcelona and Real Madrid, and can rightly claim to be most exciting league encounter in the world.

This year on the 23rd November, the 'El Clasico' had everything except goals or the kitchen sink: (whisky bottles and the head of a suckling pig, both of which ended up on the pitch, plenty of vitriolic chants, a 12 minute enforced break to calm things down, a blow up doll with the name Luis Figo on it and enough off the pitch excitement to cause headlines for weeks afterwards). The game made the front pages in Spain for the next three days, and not just in the sports papers. I was there.

To fully understand the intensity of the game, one must first comprehend the unique political configuration of the country. Spain consists of several semi- autonomous regions. Barcelona, in northwest Spain, is the capital of Catalonia, or Catalunya, one of the most powerful of the nation's several such mini-states. Its people harbour a deep resentment for the Castilians, particularly those from the capital.

Catalunya has little bullfighting (not a traditional activity) It has its own language, Catalan, and its own unique and delicious cuisine which includes the delightful Crema Catalana, a sort of lemony crême brulee, the delicious escalivada, a vegetable dish, numerous types of spicy chorizo (spelt xoric in Catalan) and the wonderfully alcoholic herbal tonic ratafia. Catalunya has its own culture and art to be proud of (including works by the city's most famous architect Gaudi, who designed the awe-inspiring Sagrada Familia, a fairytale-like temple to the holy family that is still unfinished after nearly a century, and a series of buildings without any right angles, and artists Miro, Dali, who hailed from nearby Figueres, and Picasso, who spent his formative years in Barcelona) and its own thriving economy.

After being shepherded in with another 98,000, of whom reportedly less than 1000 were fans who had been willing to make the trip (and risk their lives) from the Spanish capital, and having comfortably settled in my seat, in the rain, I awaited the spectacle to unfold before my eyes. Nothing could've prepared me for what I was about to see, or hear.

For over two hours, in the pressure cooker that is the Camp Nou, nearly a hundred thousand voices chanted in unison. A large banner unfolded at the opposite stand echoed their sentiments: though my knowledge of Catalan is infinitesimal, I can safely assume it said "Figo-traitor". Forget Sol Campbell's return to White Hart Lane, or the heated reception Rio got at Elland Road after his big-money move. Those two were like sloppy kisses by comparison. Three years on, the Catalans refuse to forget.

Luis Figo and his mother were called everything under the sun. One chant simply went "Figo, die". Figo, undeterred by the previous welcomes he had been given, insisted on taking every one of the visitor's corners. Showers of plastic cups, some still full of the lukewarm local beer that's freely available at the stadium, and scores of lighters rained down at every corner. Goalkeeper Iker Casillas kicked a plastic bottle in disgust. Some time later Figo kicked the ball angrily in the air and the game was stopped. In between these two, came the monkey noises for Roberto Carlos, and the sight of a skinhead three rows in front of me aiming his lighter, his friend's lighter, a bottle and anything he could lay his hands on at Stevie Mac as the latter stood by the sideline, ready to take a throw-in- and only just missing. The Merseyside derby was never like this. If only Sven knew the kind of danger Macca puts himself in on a regular basis, maybe he'd give him a chance. Or maybe that's why he refuses to.

And so we waited, as a long line of policemen silently, rigidly, all along the perimeter of the pitch, arms folded, watching...waiting. We waited. Then, after an eternity of chants the players reappeared. And the match continued, fizzling out to a scoreless draw, before the crowds filed slowly out of the stadium and into the street towards Les Corts tube station.

But what about the football? Well, a few dinky runs by the likes of Xavi and Overmars here and there, some quality defending from both sides, and a wrongly overruled goal aside, the football, in the words of one local newspaper was c**p.

Since then, Barcelona have been fined by the Spanish FA and pilloried in the press. Real, now that their new star Ronaldo has won yet another accolade, are preparing for the biggest display of back-slapping in world football at their grand centenary.