



**John Aldridge**  
**A Real Irishman**

**By Matthew Brown** <sup>[1]</sup>

*This article is a case study of an Irishman in Spain. It is not a conventional story - there are no Wild Geese and religion plays no part in the protagonist's travels. Instead, a Liverpoolian spends two years in San Sebastián, learns very little Spanish, scores a lot of goals, gets spat on, and goes home to play for Tranmere Rovers. It concludes by concurring with Eduardo Galeano's observation that football, travel and national identity are bound together in surprising ways, that 'el fútbol y la patria están siempre atados' (Galeano 1995: 38).*

**Who was John William Aldridge?**

He was born in Liverpool on 18 September 1958. He played football for Newport County and Oxford United, before moving to Liverpool. He won the League Championship in 1988 at the end of his first full season, though he famously became the first person to miss a penalty kick in the British F.A. Cup final, seeing his kick saved by Wimbledon goalkeeper Dave Beasant. The following season Aldridge was on the pitch during the tragic Hillsborough stadium disaster, in which ninety-six football supporters were killed. This event affected Aldridge profoundly. Within six months Aldridge had left Liverpool and signed for Real Sociedad in the Basque Country.

During this same period Aldridge established himself in the Irish national team managed by Jack Charlton. It is not the intention of this article to explore just how Irish Aldridge 'really was' in the face of his birth, accent and home. He played plenty of times for the Irish national team during its most successful period. As Galeano observes, '*somos porque ganamos. Si perdemos, dejamos de ser. La camiseta de la selección nacional se ha convertido en el más industrial símbolo de la identidad colectiva*' (Galeano 1995: 230). [2] Aldridge himself wrote in 1999 that '*having spent the last twelve years defending my right to represent Ireland at football, I have become immune to criticism. My family and closest friends know how much Ireland and the Irish people are in my affections. That is the real truth?*' (Aldridge 1999: 145). [3]

**Why did John Aldridge go to Spain?**

The immediate catalyst was the return from Italy of his Liverpool Football Club colleague Ian Rush, who had spent a year at Juventus in Italy before returning home. (Rush has since denied that he ever uttered the phrase most famously associated with him, '*I couldn't settle in Italy; it was like living in a foreign country.*') After Rush rejoined Liverpool he gradually re-established himself at the top of the Liverpool pecking order, and Aldridge saw no alternative but to leave when he was told that the club had accepted an offer from Real Sociedad.

At the same time, events in San Sebastián were making the signing of the club's first foreigner in thirty years - meaning any non-Basque, including Spaniards - a reality rather than a possibility. The need to compete with local rivals Athletic Bilbao (who were aggressively promoting themselves at the time as '*el club de Euskadi*'), the acceptance that a team of only locally-born players would struggle to compete against its cosmopolitan rivals, and the injection of considerable new funds by investors, meant that the signing of a foreign centre-forward was at last countenanced. This was a '*traumati*' decision which 'opened an important debate amongst all sections of the club - fans, media, players and directors were divided between staying loyal to the sporting policy which had served them well for so many years [recruiting only Basque players] or opening the door in exceptional fashion to foreign players to fill gaps in the side' (Iturria Martín 2001: 204-7). According to El Diario Vasco this was '*one of the most difficult decisions in the modern history of Real Sociedad*' (El Diario Vasco). In the end, the club chose to maintain its position near the pinnacle of Spanish football, and to compromise on the ideals it had held dear.

What was the official reaction at the time? Spending 200 million pesetas was a lot of money, but Aldridge was perceived as a safe investment as he was a proven goal-scorer at the highest level - '*toda una garantía*' according to Marca (Marca: 200). [4]

Aldridge stuck out like a sore thumb on the Real Sociedad team sheet, which read for most of the 1989-1990 season as follows:

González / Gorritz / Gajate / Fuentes / Larrañaga / Bengoatxea / Aldridge / Mentxaka / Billabona / Lasa / Goikoetxea (Iturria Martín 2001: 207).

Aldridge is still remembered fondly in San Sebastián. He ‘paid back the club’s investment’ by scoring twenty-two goals in his first season (Iturria Martín 2001: 206). He was so popular that a pena was established bearing his name in Andoain, the Pena Aldridge. He overturned the long-standing perception that British and Irish players could not perform to the best of their abilities in Spain, something that luminaries such as Gary Lineker and Mark Hughes were not able to do during their periods at Barcelona in the 1980s. Aldridge was spectacularly successful against Barcelona, coming to be famed as the *bête noire* of the Barcelona goalkeeper Zubizarreta (Marca: 201).

In many ways Aldridge became the personification of Real Sociedad’s ‘change of philosophy’, and of the policy of signing foreigners itself (El Diario). He opened the door to others who were rather less successful, such as Kevin Richardson and Dalian Atkinson.

John Aldridge faced four particular obstacles if he were to become a success in San Sebastián. These were culture (footballing and social), distance from home, politics and language. Aldridge was aware that he would be faced with potential cultural and personal problems from the moment he stepped off the plane after the journey from Liverpool to San Sebastián that took ‘the best part of a day’ (Aldridge 1999: 116). ‘My Spanish mission was more than just a career move. This was a whole new life’ (Aldridge 1999: 115). He was to be compensated for these difficulties in terms of money and lifestyle. In his own words, ‘football for me was more about glory than money, but if you can get both at the same time, so much the better’ (Aldridge 1999: 115). The pay was good, the hotels were ‘luxurious’, the sun set over the beach and, in Aldridge’s own words, ‘the glorious sand provided the perfect setting for the myriad people relaxing after work. As if that wasn’t enough, the promenade near the beach was magnificent. I turned to Joan [his wife] and said “I didn’t expect it to be this good”. Her smile made me realise there were many good times ahead of us’ (Aldridge 1999: 117).

Later he commented that ‘I had to pinch myself sometimes to realise this was work, not play. There were times when I felt as though I was on holiday’ (Aldridge 1999: 126). It was soon apparent that Aldridge did not envisage living in San Sebastián forever - the three-year contract was long enough for a family with two young children.

Footballing culture was the easiest to deal with. The style of play took some getting used to. ‘I remember coming off after some games wondering if I had been playing football or chess’. Aldridge’s comments on the ‘selfishness’ of Spanish players make good reading: ‘players tended to perform for themselves, a selfish attitude which meant opportunities for me to shine were rare’ (Aldridge 1999: 125). His autobiography contains several similar comments on how Spanish players were ‘braver with their mouths than their fists’, and alleges that his team were offered bribes to throw an end of season game (Aldridge 1999: 141). Alcohol provided another arena where cultural differences arose. El Diario Vasco remarked that ‘Aldridge’s capacity to ingest beer was quite startling’ (El Diario Vasco). For his part, Aldridge lamented that the opportunities for ‘serious lager’ were few and far between (Aldridge 1999: 130).

Politics was a much bigger problem than where to buy a pint. Aldridge was warned in advance that politics could overshadow his signing. At his first press conference he was told to repeat the mantra that ‘I am not a politician, I am a footballer. I am here to score goals and pay back the money Real Sociedad have spent on me. If anyone holds anything political against me, there is nothing I can do about it. Goals are the same in any language’ (Aldridge 1999: 118). Even so, he was met by graffiti, hostile comments by supporters, and jokes from his team-mates. Once he was spat on in the street, although Aldridge was left to infer the spitter’s motivation as no political message was left (Aldridge 1999: 122). In general however it seems that Aldridge’s simple philosophy served him well. Goals were the same in any language, and fans did not hold his foreign birth against him once the ball started hitting the net with regularity.

The language barriers to Aldridge’s integration into society were high. He spoke no Spanish on arrival and learned little. One of Real Sociedad’s midfielders at the time, Mentxaka, recalled his relationship with Aldridge:

‘He was key to our success. He scored lots of goals and he pushed us all on with his winning character. It was very good for us to have a forward like him. For the critics who never wanted Real Sociedad to sign a foreigner, well, he made them shut up straight away. As I was one of the few who spoke any English, I could get to know him, and we got on well’ (Mentxaka, cited in El Diario Vasco). Throughout his stay, language and cultural barriers kept Aldridge separated from his neighbours and team-mates, unless they spoke some English. In the words of the cultural historian of Spanish football, Phil Ball, ‘in purely linguistic terms, John’s stay in San Sebastian was not exactly triumphal’. [5]

Language was no doubt the principal reason that Aldridge’s time in Spain was characterised by ‘loneliness’ (Aldridge 1999: 122). There were few players who spoke English. One of them, Iñaki Alaba, who was on the fringes of the first team at the time, would chat to Aldridge and go on trips with him where they spoke in Spanish. Nevertheless, he soon picked up enough to get by (Aldridge 1999: 122).

Aldridge told a Guardian journalist that the only Spanish he had learned was the phrase ‘hijo de puta’, because it had such universal application (Ball 2003). Later he told the BBC that he was ‘fluent’ in Spanish, suggesting that he improved markedly during his last few months in San Sebastián. [6] Nevertheless for important conversations, such as contract negotiations, he retained an interpreter ‘to make sure’ (Aldridge 1999: 138). Learning Basque - the first

language of most of his colleagues - was another question. Phil Ball once asked Aldridge how he was getting on with Basque, but he shrugged and said 'Next time I come'. [7]

In no real sense could it be said that Aldridge integrated into Spanish or Basque life. The straw that broke the camel's back and made him return to England was when his children began to be bullied at school in spring 1991: 'if they could not be successfully integrated into Spanish society, the move was doomed' (Aldridge 1999: 120). He wrote that 'I *was* anxious to make sure my family were happy and if something had to give, it would have to be Sociedad' (Aldridge 1999: 132). His family was still 'too unsettled' in 1991, and so they decided to leave Spain (Aldridge 1999: 140).

Writing in 1991, Aldridge commented that 'If I was upset with the club, the opposite was the case where the people of San Sebastián were concerned. They were great to me. I didn't meet many bad people there. I made a host of friends, some of whom I still see. I miss the players too, which is a testimony to how well things went for me. I was particularly sad when I said goodbye to Alaba, who had done much to make life easier for me. Without him, I might have left San Sebastián earlier than I did' (Aldridge 1999: 143).

He has never been back. 'But I will go back' he wrote in 1999 'to meet up with my old Spanish friends, shake their hands, buy them all a drink and talk about the good old days. I am reliably told that, after eight years away, football fans in San Sebastián still remember me. Compliments don't come much higher than that' (Aldridge 1999: 144).

In conclusion, Aldridge was successful with his goal-scoring for Real Sociedad, and for this reason was accepted as the 'first foreigner' within the team despite his lack of cultural integration into either the team or society. As in other periods of the history of the Hispanic world, Irish adventurers who performed exactly what was asked of them were welcomed with open arms into the very heart of local communities. [8] For Aldridge, this was not enough.

### **What changed as a result of the trip?**

'After putting Joan and the kids through too much domestic insecurity in Spain, I now decided that professional ambition and financial considerations were minor issues compared with the happiness of my family. ... [M]oney had ceased to matter. Contentment was far more important. ... After two years in a foreign country I was going back to Merseyside, hopefully forever. I found going back to my roots an exciting prospect. We felt it when we packed our belongings and left San Sebastián for the final time. Liverpool isn't exactly the centre of the universe but to us it is home. Always has been' (Aldridge 1999: 178).

For John Aldridge, Irishman abroad, his success at work could not compensate for the linguistic, cultural and political barriers that separated him from Basque and Spanish society. Though not quite making him a Wild Goose who longed to return to an idealised Ireland, John Aldridge's spell at Real Sociedad was characterised by professional success but private unease.

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### **Notes**

[1] Many thanks to Phil Ball, Andy Brassell, Iñaki Mendoza and Igor Pérez Tostado for their help in compiling this article.

[2] 'We are because we win. If we lose, we stop being. The jersey of the national team has become the most industrial symbol of collective identity.'

[3] On the same page Aldridge records that his great-grandmother, Mary Mills, was born in the nineteenth century in Athlone, County Westmeath.

[4] 'A complete guarantee'.

[5] Email communication with the author, October 2006.

[6] Citation provided by Phil Ball in email communication with the author, October 2006, although exact provenance of the quote is uncertain.

[7] Email communication with the author, October 2006.

[8] As I show in three articles which share some themes with this one. Matthew Brown, 'Not forging nations, but foraging for them: uncertain collective identities in the Independence of Gran Colombia', *Nations and Nationalism*, 12:2 (2006), pp.223-40; Matthew Brown, 'Rebellion at Riohacha, 1820: Local and International Networks of Revolution, Cowardice and Masculinity', in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas*, 42 (2005), pp. 77-98; and Matthew Brown, 'Crusaders for Liberty or Vile Mercenaries? The Irish Legion in Colombia' in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 4:2 (March 2006, pp. 37-44), available online at <http://www.irlandeses.org/brownm01.htm>.