

“NOTHING COMPARES TO ANFIELD”

Why a Spanish journalist was inspired to write a new book about the Reds under Rafael Benítez...and how Liverpool has changed his life forever

Words: David Cottrell

Twenty-four hours after Real Madrid's shock exit from the Copa del Rey at the hands of lowly Albacete from La Liga 2, all the football talk in the Spanish capital is about Álvaro Arbeloa and Xabi Alonso, the latter not long dismissed as manager of the 15-times European champions and the former not long in charge (at the time of going to press).

In one joint in town, however, the talk isn't so much about Alonso and Arbeloa now as their exploits as players two decades ago in another country, in a team which played the Liverpool way.

Cafetería Dos Passos, at the corner of Calle San Bernardo and Calle del Pez, may look a little down at heel – six tables, two dozen chairs and an aluminium bar – but like so many unassuming places in the middle of Madrid it has a provenance. Named after the American writer John Dos Passos who came here in the late 1930s to cover the Spanish Civil War, these days it's more famous for its torreznos or fried pork belly, served up from a secret recipe passed down to the owner from his mum.

It's here that sports journalist Sergio Andrés is getting goose-pimples talking about passages from his new book, Spanish Liverpool, while the guy behind the counter tunes into this curious conversation in Spanglish about the Reds and Real Madrid.

“Anfield, nothing can be compared to it,” says Sergio. “Maybe you're used to it, but I felt something when I went there for the first time last year. I was speechless when I heard You'll Never Walk Alone. Antonio Núñez told me, 'I'd been with Real Madrid to a lot of stadiums, but being at Anfield is different. You feel something strange, mystical'.”



Núñez was the first person whom Andrés interviewed for the book, which chronicles the Rafael Benítez years at LFC. The former winger was one of four Spaniards signed by Rafa in the summer of 2004, ahead of his first season in charge, the others being midfielder Alonso, forward Luis García and full-back Josemi.

More compatriots would follow on the pitch and among the manager's backroom staff as a memorable modern chapter of the club's history was written in red-and-yellow, commencing rather than culminating with the Miracle of



Istanbul. Published late last year, Spanish Liverpool is a definitive account of that time.

The book is written in Spanish but Sergio hopes it will be translated into English in the future. It covers that epic first season, 2004/05, the 2006 FA Cup final in Cardiff, the gripping rivalries with Jose Mourinho's Chelsea and Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, the net-busting partnership between Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres and, as they say, much, much more. Insights into Rafa's management style by those who knew him best, accounts of bleak British midwinters and impenetrable Scouse accents, it's all here.

At heart Sergio describes himself a fan of la Selección, the Spanish national team, while his family are all Real Madrid supporters. So why Liverpool?

"Because of the Beatles, because of the music, because of the football. And Fernando Morientes is my favourite footballer. Once he joined Liverpool [in January 2005] with Rafa, Núñez, Josemi, Alonso, Luis García, suddenly there was a team that caught my eye.

"I watched that UEFA Champions League final on the TV, you know, 21 years ago, and I thought: my God, this team is special. Since that match, that season, Liverpool is my 'other' team.

"Those six minutes in Istanbul, it's incredible. Núñez, Josemi, they thought it would go down in history as 'la final mas humillante', the most humiliating defeat in LFC history. They thought Milan were going to score five or six. But the fans sang the anthem, You'll Never Walk Alone, and suddenly the players had faith. And Gerrard scores and the commentator on TV says, 'Hello! Hello! Here we go!' and... look [points to his arms], piel de gallina [goose-pimples]."

Sergio's first book was a biography of Raúl, which can be found next to Spanish Liverpool in the sports section of the flagship Casa del Libro on nearby Gran Vía, and in another bookshop which we'll visit after our shot of caffeine in Dos Passos.

"Writing the Raúl book was a dream-come-true for me. But when I finished it, I read A Season on the Brink by Guillem Balagué, about 2004/05 at Liverpool. It was so inspiring and I thought: let's try to do a book remembering those six years with Rafa. Although I was working, I had the time and I had good contacts: former players, opponents, coaches, journalists, supporters."

Back then, in early 2023, Benítez was managing Celta Vigo in Spain's far northwest. He told Sergio that he was too busy to talk but perhaps they could hook up in the future. Undeterred, Sergio worked through a hit-list of other interviews, here in Spain and over in England.

"Step-by-step, I got them. Núñez said that even though he only played at Liverpool for one season and he was mostly a substitute, it was one of the greatest achievements of his career. He'd come from Real Madrid and their galácticos, been in the same team as Ronaldo, Zidane, Raúl, Casillas. There is that feeling in Spain, he told me, that everything is below Madrid, but for him Liverpool was at the same level."

Núñez shared some of his own photos with the author, including one of him with Josemi, García, Morientes and Alonso with the Champions League trophy after the final.

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"There's another photo in the book of some of the younger Spanish players who were in the reserves: Fran Durán, Dani Ayala, Mikel San José and Dani Pacheco – he's still playing, in Poland.

"The general public don't know them as well as the other Spanish players like Torres, Reina, Alonso and García. But they were just as much a part of Spanish Liverpool. These guys had good and bad moments and sometimes they suffered a lot. Fran Durán was such a promising player but he had three different injuries.

"Alonso is from San Sebastián in the north of Spain. He's used to the rain, that kind of weather. But Josemi, he's from Málaga. He told me, 'I couldn't believe that at five in the afternoon [in the winter] it was dark! He couldn't speak English, either.'

Among the most revealing insights came from Paco Herrera, the assistant dubbed "my advisor" by Benítez, and goalkeeping coach José Manuel Ochotorena, who died last October. "Paco and 'Ochoto' shared a place together for a year and became close friends. They told me a lot of beautiful things, a lot of funny things. Because right now this Liverpool is very different from the Liverpool of 20 years ago.

"Ochotorena, you know today is his birthday. Such a nice guy. He played for Real Madrid in the 1980s, then Valencia. He was in the Spain squad for the 1990 World Cup. Later

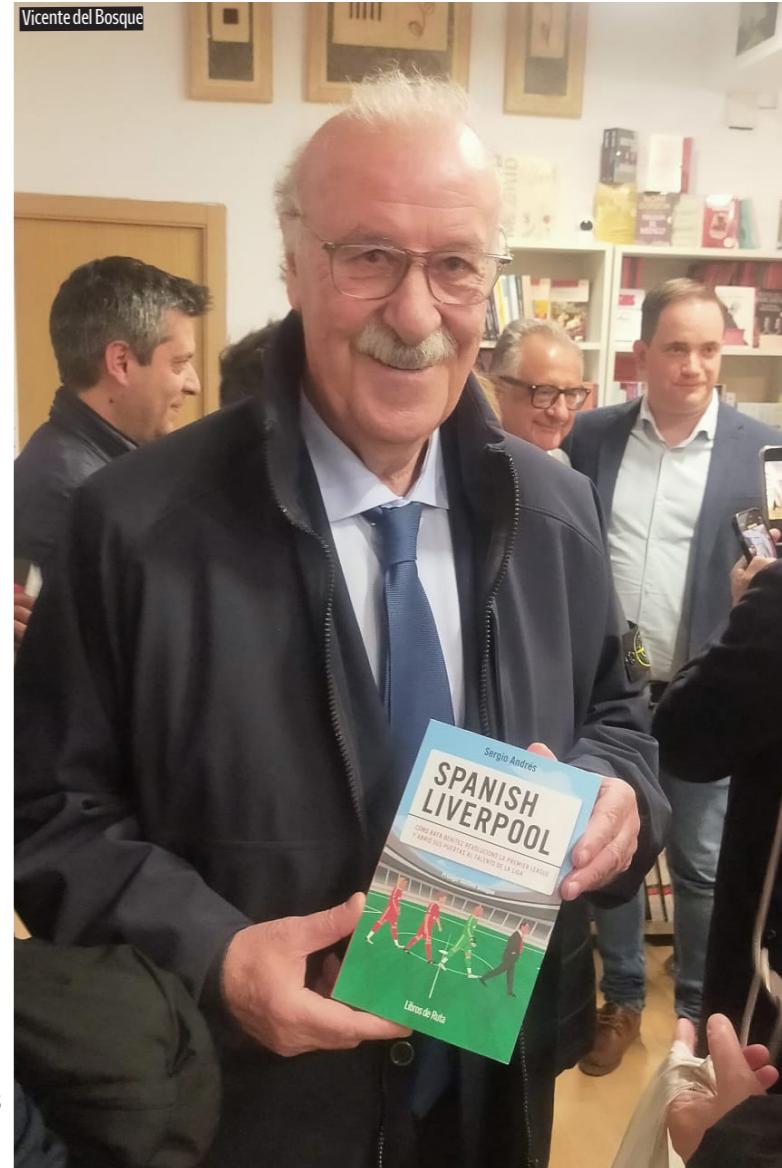
he became Rafa's goalkeeping coach at Valencia, then with Liverpool, then Spain.

"The book is a tribute to all of these people, to Rafa and the star names obviously but also the less-famous ones. They played a part as well."

Rival players and managers have also contributed, including Juande Ramos, in charge of Real Madrid when they lost 4-0 at Anfield in March 2009, and defender Iván Campo who played 12 times (and scored twice) for Bolton Wanderers against Liverpool. The latter is a close friend of Morientes, with whom he helped Real Madrid to their eighth European Cup triumph in 2000.

There is comment too from Vicente del Bosque, who coached the Spanish national side to their first-ever World Cup success in 2010 and a third European Championship two years later, with squads featuring past and present Liverpool players. "Last week I met him in person and thanked him for making us so happy. Having Del Bosque in the book was such a privilege."

Vicente del Bosque



And then, finally, Sergio got the main man. "In September 2024 I was on a cruise with my girlfriend and I received a message from Rafa's press manager telling me that he wanted to do the interview. Rafa called me from his home in Liverpool and we talked for 45 minutes.

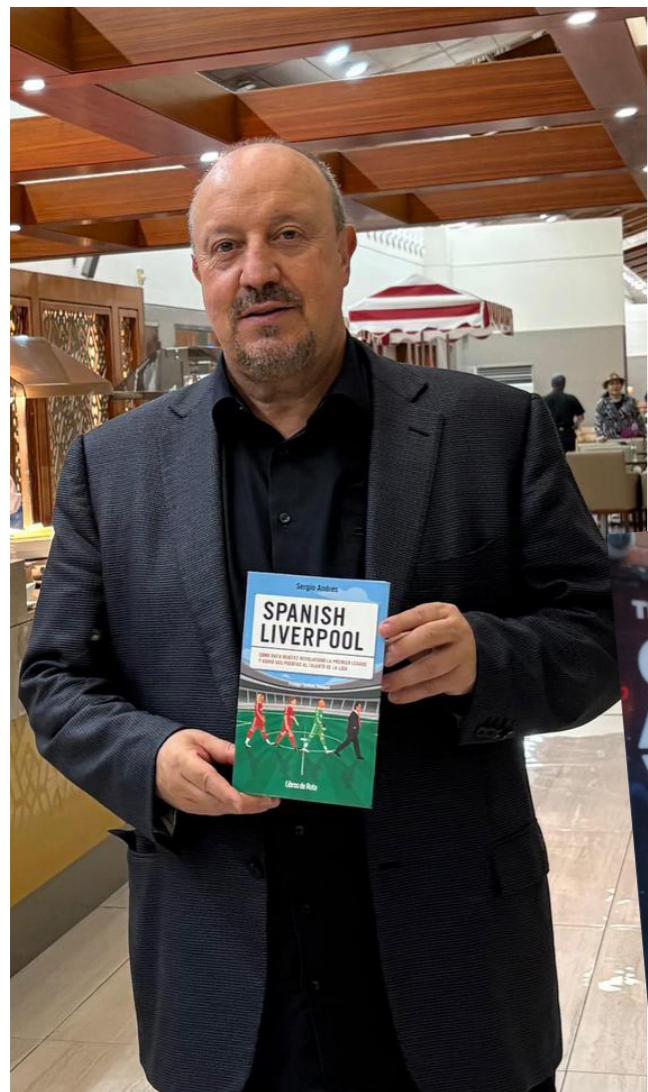
"My original idea had been to interview him face-to-face in Madrid and I had so many questions for him. He told me, 'I'm not managing at the moment but I have a lot of commitments, but we'll do another interview. I promise that we'll pick this up again'.

"In December, two months later, I was in Liverpool. His press manager told me that Rafa would be doing an interview in a hotel with Netflix, so maybe we could have lunch together and continue the interview from there. In the end we talked for an hour-and-a-half. At first he was a bit shy but later when he saw that I had a good attitude, I was polite, I was writing a book to honour his time at Liverpool, he opened up.

"I was so happy. I'd got the main interview, the top one. The boss."

Having spoken to Rafa and around 30 other people, all that remained was the right foreword. Sergio recalled how inspired he'd been by *A Season on the Brink*. He already had a number for Guillem Balagueré, whom he'd contacted regarding an interview with Quique Sánchez Flores, the former Real Madrid youth coach (and Watford manager), for his book about Raúl.

"I was so happy. I'd got the main interview, the top one. The boss"



"I sent Guillem the proposal and he said, 'Okay, let's do it'. He's such a nice guy, so well-known in England, and it's a privilege to have him write the foreword."

Job done, one more big dream to fulfil. Sergio finally made it to Anfield last November. He brought a change in fortunes for the Reds too: he was there for the wins over Aston Villa in the Premier League and Real Madrid in the Champions League.

"When Ochoto went back to Valencia in 2007, he recommended to Rafa this guy, Xavi Valero, as the next goalkeeping coach. Right now Xavi is back at Liverpool working with Arne Slot [after Taffarel's departure] and he invited me to the match against Villa.

"Then I managed to get a ticket in the Madrid end the following week. I was with a friend who supports Valencia and we had a little banner for Ochoto, in order to honour him, because it was the first match since he passed away and he'd played for Real Madrid and had been a coach at both Valencia and Liverpool.

"I'd been to the museum, done the stadium tour, and now I was lucky enough to be at two matches in a row, two victories. The best trip of my life, for sure."

Sergio's phone is full of photos from those games as well as shots of the Shankly Gates, the This is Anfield sign and,



of course, the Cavern Club on Mathew Street in the city-centre – with Spanish Liverpool proudly positioned in the foreground. As well as its presence on the shelves at Casa del Libro, the book is displayed in the window of Spain's only dedicated sports bookshop, a 15-minute walk south across town. Sergio leads the way.

Librería Esteban Sanz is named after the man who opened the shop back in 1969 and today it's run by his son Jorge with the help of assistant Sonia. Football coaches come here "to buy stuff about Pep Guardiola and Jürgen Klopp, for example, managers who innovate or revolutionise the landscape."

It's also been visited by Luis Enrique and Diego Simeone – "a very polite guy," says Jorge, "he bought quite a few books" – while former Liverpool player and much-loved Spanish TV pundit Michael Robinson once did a signing event for the shop at Madrid's annual book fair. Then there was the time Diego Maradona showed up in 2010 with fellow former Argentina international Jorge Valdano and 1986 World Cup-winning manager Carlos Bilardo.

Bilardo and Valdano bought some books but Maradona didn't take any and my father asked him why not. Diego replied that he had it all in his head."

Distinguished company indeed for Sergio, who's donating all the proceeds from sales of his book to a charity called Fundela which promotes research into Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, a progressive neurodegenerative disease known as 'La ELA' in Spanish.

A worthy cause for a labour of love, accomplished by one football writer in Madrid with a Spanish Liverpool heart.



RAFA'S BOOT ROOM

PACO HERRERA: spent two years with Rafa at Liverpool, winning the Champions League and FA Cup, before returning to Spain to coach several teams, most recently Real Valladolid, Sporting Gijón and Las Palmas.



PAKO AYESTARAN: Basque-born fitness coach who worked with Rafa for 11 years, first at Valencia then Liverpool; left in 2008 to become sporting director of Real Sociedad; now assistant to Unai Emery at Aston Villa.



JOSÉ MANUEL OCHOTORENA: former Real Madrid and national-team goalkeeper who was Rafa's goalkeeping coach from 2004 to 2007; part of the backroom staff for Spain's 2010 World Cup win and successive Euros triumphs.



XAVI VALERO: former goalie who joined LFC's coaching staff in 2007 and followed Rafa to Inter Milan, Chelsea, Napoli and Real Madrid; back at Anfield for a second spell after working with Manuel Pellegrini at West Ham.



FRANCISCO 'PACO' DE MIGUEL: recruited as the Reds' fitness coach in the 2007/08 season, he later joined Benítez at half-a-dozen other clubs and is now working at Panathinaikos, who recruited him last October.



WIN THE BOOK!

We've got one copy of Spanish Liverpool to give away courtesy of author Sergio Andrés and publisher Libros de Ruta. To be in with a chance of winning, simply answer the following question:

The cover of Spanish Liverpool features a title designed like a Liverpool street sign, but which Beatles album cover inspired the main image of Rafael Benítez, Pepe Reina, Xabi Alonso and Fernando Torres walking in line?

- (a) Rubber Soul
- (b) Abbey Road
- (c) Yellow Submarine

Send your answer, along with your name and email address, to lfcpogramme@reachsport.com. Please include 'Spanish Liverpool competition' in the subject bar. Closing date: 11 February 2026. Terms and conditions apply.

