



FERENC PUSKÁS

Rebel, exile and genius

A Total Footballer before Cruyff, the Hungarian revolutionised the game in Europe. Drawing on letters, journals and secret police files, Paul Simpson explores the man behind the legend

PHOTOS OFFSIDE, THE PUSKÁS ESTATE

Ferenc Puskás didn't just play football, he invented it. So said Péter Esterházy, Hungary's football-obsessed novelist. True, the game had been around for 60 years, but any passer-by who saw the young genius and József Bozsik – future team-mates at Budapest Honvéd FC – kicking a bundle of rags around a meadow in Kispest, a suburb on the fringe of the capital, knew they were, as Esterházy put it, “witnessing one of the wonders of the world”.

Even then, long before he became world famous as the captain of Hungary and the only man to score four in a European Cup final, Puskás's football philosophy was taking shape. He would grimace as his friend kept the rag ball in mid-air with his instep. Football, he felt, was not a circus. The ball is always faster than the player.

That economy of style would make him Europe's greatest ever footballer alongside Johan Cruyff. That, plus one of the game's finest left feet, his rare vision (Hungarian full-back Jenő Buzánsky said that Puskás always saw at least five options when he had the ball), and an understanding so acute he could play in any position. He was a Total Footballer before the term existed. Somehow, the fact that he was short, squat, liked a drink and a sausage or six, and only used his right foot in emergencies makes his genius all the more compelling.

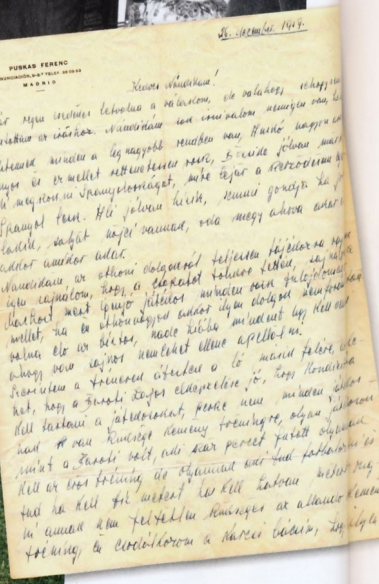
In today's YouTube age, Puskás's video highlight would be the famous goal when Hungary beat England 6-3 at Wembley. Hungary →

Key notes: Puskás's laws of football and his career stats in his own journal

Bekerítés		Korai pályafutás		Későbbi pályafutás	
Évek	Összesítés	Évek	Összesítés	Évek	Összesítés
1946-47	10	1948-49	12	1950-51	15
1947-48	15	1949-50	18	1951-52	20
1948-49	20	1950-51	25	1952-53	25
1949-50	25	1951-52	30	1953-54	30
1950-51	30	1952-53	35	1954-55	35
1951-52	35	1953-54	40	1955-56	40
1952-53	40	1954-55	45	1956-57	45
1953-54	45	1955-56	50	1957-58	50
1954-55	50	1956-57	55	1958-59	55
1955-56	55	1957-58	60	1959-60	60
1956-57	60	1958-59	65	1960-61	65
1957-58	65	1959-60	70	1961-62	70
1958-59	70	1960-61	75	1962-63	75
1959-60	75	1961-62	80	1963-64	80
1960-61	80	1962-63	85	1964-65	85
1961-62	85	1963-64	90	1965-66	90
1962-63	90	1964-65	95	1966-67	95
1963-64	95	1965-66	100	1967-68	100
1964-65	100	1966-67	105	1968-69	105
1965-66	105	1967-68	110	1969-70	110
1966-67	110	1968-69	115	1970-71	115
1967-68	115	1969-70	120	1971-72	120
1968-69	120	1970-71	125	1972-73	125
1969-70	125	1971-72	130	1973-74	130
1970-71	130	1972-73	135	1974-75	135
1971-72	135	1973-74	140	1975-76	140
1972-73	140	1974-75	145	1976-77	145
1973-74	145	1975-76	150	1977-78	150
1974-75	150	1976-77	155	1978-79	155
1975-76	155	1977-78	160	1979-80	160
1976-77	160	1978-79	165	1980-81	165
1977-78	165	1979-80	170	1981-82	170
1978-79	170	1980-81	175	1982-83	175
1979-80	175	1981-82	180	1983-84	180
1980-81	180	1982-83	185	1984-85	185
1981-82	185	1983-84	190	1985-86	190
1982-83	190	1984-85	195	1986-87	195
1983-84	195	1985-86	200	1987-88	200
1984-85	200	1986-87	205	1988-89	205
1985-86	205	1987-88	210	1989-90	210
1986-87	210	1988-89	215	1990-91	215
1987-88	215	1989-90	220	1991-92	220
1988-89	220	1990-91	225	1992-93	225
1989-90	225	1991-92	230	1993-94	230
1990-91	230	1992-93	235	1994-95	235
1991-92	235	1993-94	240	1995-96	240
1992-93	240	1994-95	245	1996-97	245
1993-94	245	1995-96	250	1997-98	250
1994-95	250	1996-97	255	1998-99	255
1995-96	255	1997-98	260	1999-00	260
1996-97	260	1998-99	265	2000-01	265
1997-98	265	1999-00	270	2001-02	270
1998-99	270	2000-01	275	2002-03	275
1999-00	275	2001-02	280	2003-04	280
2000-01	280	2002-03	285	2004-05	285
2001-02	285	2003-04	290	2005-06	290
2002-03	290	2004-05	295	2006-07	295
2003-04	295	2005-06	300	2007-08	300
2004-05	300	2006-07	305	2008-09	305
2005-06	305	2007-08	310	2009-10	310
2006-07	310	2008-09	315	2010-11	315
2007-08	315	2009-10	320	2011-12	320
2008-09	320	2010-11	325	2012-13	325
2009-10	325	2011-12	330	2013-14	330
2010-11	330	2012-13	335	2014-15	335
2011-12	335	2013-14	340	2015-16	340
2012-13	340	2014-15	345	2016-17	345
2013-14	345	2015-16	350	2017-18	350
2014-15	350	2016-17	355	2018-19	355
2015-16	355	2017-18	360	2019-20	360
2016-17	360	2018-19	365	2020-21	365
2017-18	365	2019-20	370	2021-22	370
2018-19	370	2020-21	375	2022-23	375
2019-20	375	2021-22	380	2023-24	380
2020-21	380	2022-23	385	2024-25	385
2021-22	385	2023-24	390	2025-26	390
2022-23	390	2024-25	395	2026-27	395
2023-24	395	2025-26	400	2027-28	400
2024-25	400	2026-27	405	2028-29	405
2025-26	405	2027-28	410	2029-30	410
2026-27	410	2028-29	415	2030-31	415
2027-28	415	2029-30	420	2031-32	420
2028-29	420	2030-31	425	2032-33	425
2029-30	425	2031-32	430	2033-34	430
2030-31	430	2032-33	435	2034-35	435
2031-32	435	2033-34	440	2035-36	440
2032-33	440	2034-35	445	2036-37	445
2033-34	445	2035-36	450	2037-38	450
2034-35	450	2036-37	455	2038-39	455
2035-36	455	2037-38	460	2039-40	460
2036-37	460	2038-39	465	2040-41	465
2037-38	465	2039-40	470	2041-42	470
2038-39	470	2040-41	475	2042-43	475
2039-40	475	2041-42	480	2043-44	480
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2042-43	490	2044-45	495	2046-47	495
2043-44	495	2045-46	500	2047-48	500
2044-45	500	2046-47	505	2048-49	505
2045-46	505	2047-48	510	2049-50	510
2046-47	510	2048-49	515	2050-51	515
2047-48	515	2049-50	520	2051-52	520
2048-49	520	2050-51	525	2052-53	525
2049-50	525	2051-52	530	2053-54	530
2050-51	530	2052-53	535	2054-55	535
2051-52	535	2053-54	540	2055-56	540
2052-53	540	2054-55	545	2056-57	545
2053-54	545	2055-56	550	2057-58	550
2054-55	550	2056-57	555	2058-59	555
2055-56	555	2057-58	560	2059-60	560
2056-57	560	2058-59	565	2060-61	565
2057-58	565	2059-60	570	2061-62	570
2058-59	570	2060-61	575	2062-63	575
2059-60	575	2061-62	580	2063-64	580
2060-61	580	2062-63	585	2064-65	585
2061-62	585	2063-64	590	2065-66	590
2062-63	590	2064-65	595	2066-67	595
2063-64	595	2065-66	600	2067-68	600
2064-65	600	2066-67	605	2068-69	605
2065-66	605	2067-68	610	2069-70	610
2066-67	610	2068-69	615	2070-71	615
2067-68	615	2069-70	620	2071-72	620
2068-69	620	2070-71	625	2072-73	625
2069-70	625	2071-72	630	2073-74	630
2070-71	630	2072-73	635	2074-75	635
2071-72	635	2073-74	640	2075-76	640
2072-73	640	2074-75	645	2076-77	645
2073-74	645	2075-76	650	2077-78	650
2074-75	650	2076-77	655	2078-79	655
2075-76	655	2077-78	660	2079-80	660
2076-77	660	2078-79	665	2080-81	665
2077-78	665	2079-80	670	2081-82	670
2078-79	670	2080-81	675	2082-83	675
2079-80	675	2081-82	680	2083-84	680
2080-81	680	2082-83	685	2084-85	685
2081-82	685	2083-84	690	2085-86	690
2082-83	690	2084-85	695	2086-87	695
2083-84	695	2085-86	700	2087-88	700
2084-85	700	2086-87	705	2088-89	705
2085-86	705	2087-88	710	2089-90	710
2086-87	710	2088-89	715	2090-91	715
2087-88	715	2089-90	720	2091-92	720
2088-89	720	2090-91	725	2092-93	725
2089-90	725	2091-92	730	2093-94	730
2090-91	730	2092-93	735	2094-95	735
2091-92	735	2093-94	740	2095-96	740
2092-93	740	2094-95	745	2096-97	745
2093-94	745	2095-96	750	2097-98	750
2094-95	750	2096-97	755	2098-99	755
2095-96	755	2097-98	760	2099-00	760
2096-97	760	2098-99	765	2100-01	765
2097-98	765	2099-00	770	2101-02	770
2098-99	770	2100-01	775	2102-03	775
2099-00	775	2101-02	780	2103-04	780
2100-01	780	2102-03	785	2104-05	785
2101-02	785	2103-04	790	2105-06	790
2102-03	790				



- Mementoes of a life:
- 1 A man of the match award at Real Madrid
 - 2 Puskás in his Madrid apartment
 - 3 Celebrating Panathinaikos at Wembley in the 1971 European Cup final
 - 4 A pennant from Honvéd's notorious tour of South America
 - 5 Puskás showing off a few tricks, Bozsik-style
 - 6 A letter to a friend back in Budapest



were 2-1 up when a cross from the left found him at the back post. He took the ball down and looked as if he was about to strike it with his right foot. England captain Billy Wright slid in to tackle but Puskás slipped the ball back with the sole of his left foot and, with virtually no backlift, slammed it into the net. It was, as Esterházy says in his novel *Not Art*, the kind of "devil-may-care, negligent move that one can afford in a school yard."

That Wednesday afternoon in Glasgow, a 12-year-old boy called Alex Ferguson dodged school to watch the match on TV. In his foreword to György Szöllösi's biography of Puskás, Ferguson recalls: "Great players do things you don't expect. That great goal when Ferenc pulled the ball back as Billy Wright slid in to tackle but ended up among the photographers behind the goal was nothing short of breathtaking."

"You have to think of the impact that had on a 12-year-old kid like myself in Glasgow. After the game I was out in the back practising that pull-back with my left foot and banging the ball into a net. It was a revolution of our minds."

Puskás truly was, as Ferguson says, a football revolutionary but, like millions who grew up in eastern Europe in his era, his destiny would be irrevocably altered by revolutions of a political kind. In Puskás's case, the revolution in which the Communists, backed by Soviet military might, seized power in Hungary in 1948 created the conditions that helped him to become great. Eight years on a second revolution – against Soviet rule – forced him into exile and sharpened his focus. "Before 1956, he was the boss on and off the pitch, playing cards, drinking a lot and telling jokes," Szöllösi says. "After 1956, he had to become a real professional. The bloody 1956 revolution, a tragic event in Hungarian history, was good luck for Puskás as a footballer."

Accessible idol

Football may not have been a circus but politics, Puskás came to feel, certainly was. As Esterházy says, "Puskás took nothing seriously except the ball, he respected only the game and not life because the game was his life. Out on the pitch, he understood the meaning of dignity, of infinity, of death. In life he played the starring role of 'Ferenc Puskás the legend' not the heroic, but the human version, the always facetious friend who can be trusted to take care of everyone, the guardian of orphans, the saviour of the motherland."

In Hungary in the 1950s, Puskás was an accessible idol, so affably helpful he was known as Junior. Esterházy says: "In the 1950s, there was no man alive in Hungary who didn't break out in a cold sweat at the very mention of the name of Colonel-General Mihály Farkas [head of the ÁVÓ, the secret police], but Puskás jovially referred to him as Chief or Old Man. 'Sure, Chief, suspend [Zoltán] Czibor if you want to, but then you go play left-winger yourself.'"

"Puskás," the novelist explained, "knew that there was a world outside the football pitch but he pretended he didn't."

That attitude is reflected in a letter Puskás wrote from Madrid to his old barber, Berci Benyak. "Don't be afraid that I'll write to you about politics. I never cared about politics. It's not my job. I have only one politic: that is football," he says, joking. "And how I can get a lot of money. I think there is no more beautiful politics."

That letter is one of a vast archive of souvenirs of Puskás's life stored in Felcsút, a village half an hour's drive from Budapest where they will, eventually, form the heart of a museum at the

Puskás Academy (see *Champions* 52). That archive has been swelled by 21 crates of memorabilia, furniture and clothes that had been kept in storage in Spain by Puskás's daughter Anikó, who died last year.

When I visited Hungary earlier this year, Szöllösi and I opened a handful of crates to find a treasure trove of the footballer's life. Among the more historic items were the pennant for Honvéd's 'black' tour of South America in 1956 (so called because it was organised in defiance of the Hungarian government and many players, like Puskás, fled into exile afterwards); a log book of his career which (among other things) carefully notes down his goals and games statistics when he was in his pomp at Real Madrid CF; the handwritten beginnings of several unfinished autobiographies; and his personal manifesto about football broken down into ten laws. (Number 10 reads: "Without playmakers there is no modern football. With them you can create a team that plays like a machine, scores many goals and wins.")

Secret agents

The general arc of Puskás's career is well known. Captain of the Mighty Magyars side that should have won the 1954 FIFA World Cup, he fled Hungary after the 1956 uprising was crushed by Soviet tanks, finally signed for Real Madrid in 1958, won the 1960 European Cup and, two years later, became the only man to score a hat-trick in a European Cup final and lose. After retiring in 1966, he became

a nomadic coach, enjoying most success at Panathinaikos FC whom he led to the 1971 European Cup final at his beloved Wembley, where he lost to an AFC Ajax side whose stars had grown up dreaming that they would be as good as him. He returned to Hungary in 1981 and died in 2006 at the age of 79, stricken by Alzheimer's. His state funeral, on 9 December 2006, was a day of national mourning in Hungary.

The documents in Felcsút offer new insight into Puskás's personality and shed light on some of the more mysterious episodes in his remarkable life. He was often criticised for not returning to Hungary until 1981, when he was 54, but privately he was afraid he might still be arrested for deserting the Hungarian army.

Honvéd were supported by the Ministry of Defence and its players were officially soldiers – a bureaucratic sleight of hand that partially explains Puskás's nickname, the Galloping Major. Enraged by an 18-month ban for his part in Honvéd's South American tour (he was almost 30 and feared the hiatus would end his playing career), he refused to return to Budapest and was officially regarded as a deserter. The usual punishment for this in Communist Hungary was death. Puskás soon acquired his own criminal dossier, a code name (Vandor) and, after an official declaration in May 1958 that "with his behaviour and his pronouncements he supported the counter-revolution," an entourage of secret agents who tracked him across Europe.

Deadly charade

In a scene right out of a 1960s spy comedy, one of these agents tracked Puskás to a casino in the German spa resort of Baden-Baden. The agent was such a bad gambler that Puskás, taking pity on him, gave him some cash to keep going. In his report, the agent notes: "I received a lot of money from him and I found it a bit uncomfortable."

This air of comic incompetence should not obscure the fact that, for Hungarian footballers of Puskás's generation, this tragic collision of sport and politics could prove a matter of life, death and disgrace. Even before the 1956 uprising, the national team had fallen under →

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suspicion for failing to win the World Cup. Looking for conspiracies, the regime had arrested Gyula Grosics, the Magyars' outspoken keeper, in November 1954 and, after an inconclusive but terrifying 15-month investigation into charges of espionage and treason, banished him to one of the country's smallest football clubs.

Nor could Puskás or Grosics forget the awful case of Sándor Szűcs, the 30-year-old Hungarian international defender tricked into defecting by the ÁVÓ, tried in secret and executed on 4 June 1951. The purpose of this deadly charade had been to persuade Puskás and his stellar team-mates not to defect. The ploy worked – until 1956.

Refuge in football

At one point, as many as nine agents may have investigated Puskás. The Hungarian government called off its investigation in May 1963, but he didn't know that. Complicating matters further was the fact that his mother still lived in Budapest and occasionally received menacing letters from the sports ministry asking her to pay for the flat he had left. His concern for his mother and other relatives still within the regime's grasp is why, Szöllösi says, he never responded to propagandist tales in the Hungarian media that he was a "fat, drunken smuggler".

So complete was the authorities' scorn for their defecting star that his finest 90 minutes, when he scored four as Real Madrid beat Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3 in the 1960 European Cup final, wasn't even broadcast in Hungary. Only those who lived near enough to the Austrian border to pick up that country's TV signal watched Puskás make history.

Hero to most, villain to some, Puskás sought refuge in football. Real Madrid – and his desire to out and compete with the great Alfredo Di Stéfano – was the challenge he needed to become an even greater player. He pared down his playing style and though he had been renowned for his bluntness, he acquired the diplomatic finesse to combine brilliantly with Di Stéfano. He even changed his diet for a while. When Sándor Barcs, the former head of the Hungarian FA, lunched with him in Madrid in 1958, the player ordered seafood. When Barcs asked: "What are you eating, for God's sake?" Puskás smiled and said: "I'm a professional now."

Ironic detachment

Though he became a legend, Puskás never took fame too seriously. In *Not Art*, Esterházy reproaches him for using a swear word no gentlemen would use. At which point, Puskás "laughed heartily and said: 'Who told you I was a gentleman? A *spieler*, I'm a *spieler*.'" Which literally means "I'm a player." That didn't just refer to his profession – it was also an elegant way of pointing out that unlike the aristocratic Esterházy, he had grown up in a small flat near Honvéd's ground where, he once said, his earliest memories were hearing the roar of the crowd through the kitchen window on matchdays.

That same ironic, quietly humorous detachment runs through his letters, journals and diaries. At one point, he writes: "Now I shall write about this so-called 'professional' football." His first postcard back home from the Bernabéu read: "Greetings from the new workshop." He won five league titles as a coach in Egypt and was adored by the players at the Port Said club Misri. His time there is regarded locally as a golden age, but he sums up this period in six words: "I worked for five years. Unfortunately." That period may just have reminded him that, as he writes on the same page, "it's much easier playing football than being a coach."

The handwriting is sometimes so neat it's as if he was back at school in Kispest, trying to impress the teacher. There is something touching about the care with which he notes his games and goals for Real Madrid, season-by-season and competition-by-competition.

At various times, Puskás starts to set down his thoughts about the game that became his life. He wrote to friends and former team-mates in Hungary, invariably signing the letters 'Ocsi' (which means kid brother, a nickname he acquired as a boy) to tell them how the season was going, how seriously the sending-off of fellow Hungarian Czibor in a Spanish league match was regarded, and how sad he was that MTK Budapest got knocked out in the first round of the 1958/59 European Cup ("I wanted to meet those guys").

Sometimes, his thoughts are more contemplative. "As long as there are young people in the world," he writes, "football will be top. If it's played well, it can move millions. Football is like wine – there are some years that are not vintage and some that are."

Generous spirit

Puskás's ten laws on football are remarkable for their commonplace simplicity, stressing unity, tactical preparation and the importance of honing technique while young. You get a more authentic flavour of his views when he lambasts coaches who focus on physical training. A genius who liked the good life, Puskás protests: "Not every player needs this very tough training." It is an argument he probably had with many coaches, although you wonder whether his views changed in the dugout.

Although Puskás flourished in exile – winning five La Liga titles, playing in three European Cup finals and becoming a Spanish citizen – it is painfully clear how much he missed Hungary. He muses about his old club Honvéd, comments on particular players and even jots down the lyrics of the gypsy songs he loved to hear in Budapest as a young man. In one letter he laments: "There is no place where I can

find gypsy music. If I want to listen to gypsy music I have to go to a bar that opens at 11.30 but it's too late – I have to train the next day."

Football, more than anything, kept the melancholy at bay. As a boy, he had played to win sausages from a local butcher. As a man, he played for the sheer pleasure of doing something he was so good at, knowing he would make his mark on the history of the only thing, outside his family, he took seriously.

He also understood football well enough to know you had to embrace failure as well as success. In 1962, after the Spanish national side in which he had starred had lost a World Cup match to hosts Chile, the writer Brian Glanville glimpsed him, as the streets of Santiago filled with jubilant Chile fans, "standing in a doorway, munching monkey nuts and wearing that Budapest urchin's grin that would never desert him."

Puskás's letters and journals show that maintaining that grin wasn't always easy. But they also reveal the generosity of spirit which, after his four goals in the 1960 final, prompted him to give the matchball to Erwin Stein, who had scored twice for Eintracht Frankfurt. "I thought, 'I really want this ball, but this guy's scored two and lost the match,'" Puskás said later. "So I gave it to him." The greatest Hungarian footballer of them all was being slightly disingenuous when he laughed with Esterházy about being a *spieler*. He was a player – but he was also a gentleman. ★

Puskás by György Szöllösi is published by Ringier in association with *Nemzeti Sport*.

1



1 In the dressing room at the Bernabéu (Di Stéfano is to Puskás's right)
2 Man and ball pose for the cameras
3 The poster for Puskás's Real Madrid testimonial in 1969
4 The Hungarian's much-used passport



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3



4