

# Illusionista

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As the pass made its way to his feet, destiny propelled it up to the perfect height. It was a breakthrough for Spain after Robben's miss at the opposite end of the pitch.

Then came *una pausa*.

Andres Iniesta struck the ball cleanly and put it in the back of the Dutch net, the hope of 47 million souls riding on his shoulders.

It was perfect.

It was chaos.

It was a beauty behind all the madness. The hell of the past few months were suddenly a lot less traumatic now – it was only fitting that the man who had been struggling with injury and depression the whole year and had barely made the World Cup squad would be responsible for Spain's greatest ever footballing moment. And it was only fitting that this moment came on the grandest of stages in the world.



Although the high of Iniesta's career came at Soccer City in Johannesburg in front of a crowd of 84,000, empty bleachers in the 1999 Nike Cup final marked his humble beginnings. He dominated Rosario Central that day as he captained the Barça U15s to the title and as fate would have it, it was Pep Guardiola who handed him the winner's trophy after his stunning performance. Pep turned to Xavi during that match and said:

**"You'll retire me, but this kid will retire the both of us!"**

This was the same kid who was "crying rivers" as his family left him in the care of FC Barcelona at La Masia and had found it difficult to adapt in a new place, far far away from home, given his diminutive size for his age and timid disposition. He now leaves for a new adventure in Japan at Vissel Kobe (alongside a deal with the club for his family's wine company) departing Spain as one of the greatest ever to touch the ball.

A 22 year chapter with Barcelona was closed after a cup final against Sevilla and La Liga game against Real Sociedad and now, a 12 year chapter has been closed with Spain. Iniesta leaves home once again, but this time having won every trophy he could have possibly won.

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## HASTA SIEMPRE ANDRÉS

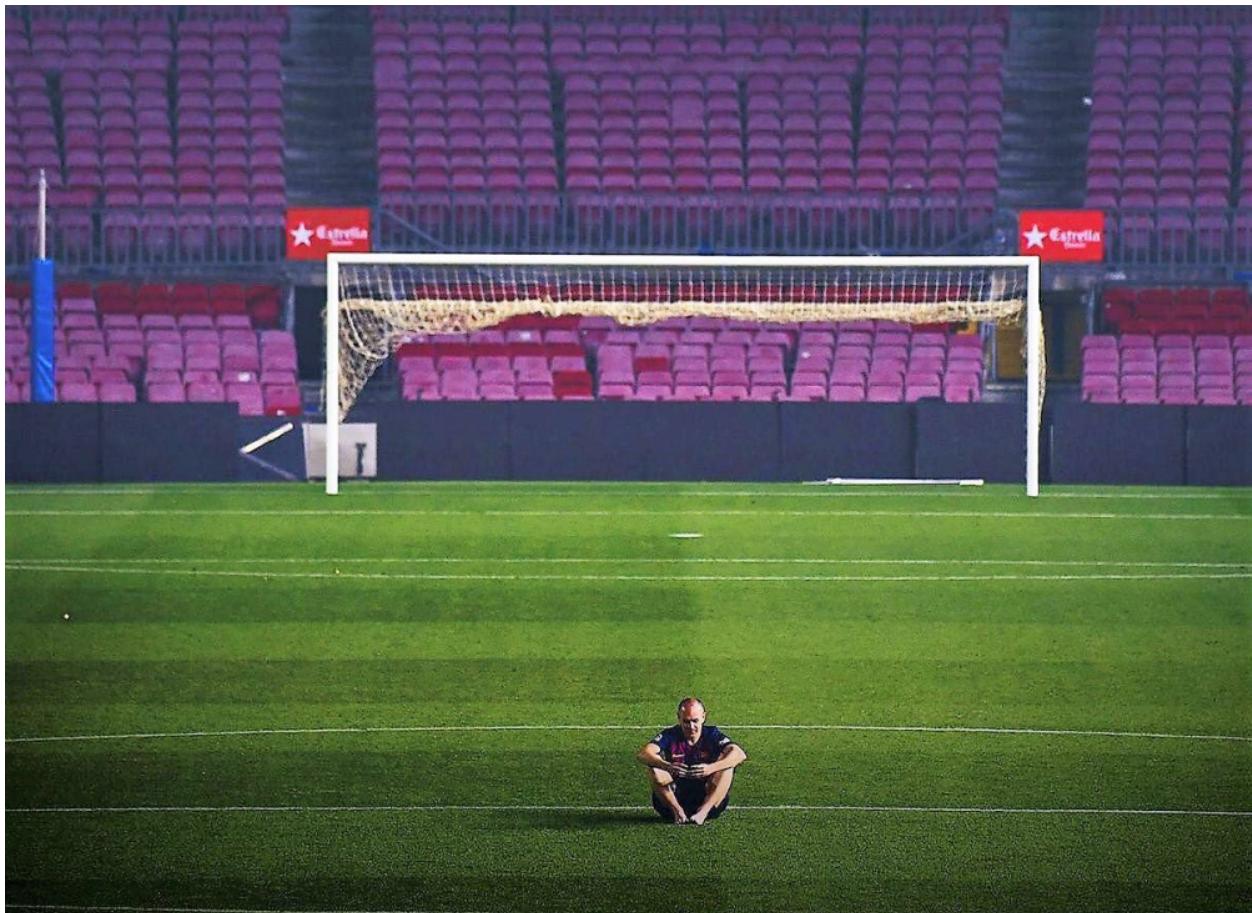
Iniesta dice hoy adiós en el Camp Nou, tras 22 años en el Barça

We'll always remember this "baby-faced assassin" whose silky first touch and control was the ultimate manifestation of his game: simplicity. We'll remember the *Iniestazo* at the Bridge that ushered in Barça's most successful era and we'll remember the World Cup final where, even at the top of the world, he chose to honor the death of his friend and rival club captain Dani Jarque. We'll remember his jaw-dropping magic, huddled against the corner flag, versus Spartak Moscow. We'll remember the 42 yard run against PSG where he managed to get past 4 players and set Neymar up, the goal against Madrid in the 0-4 rout, and the 2018 Copa Del Rey final where he was able to end his career on a high.



However, above all, we'll always remember the man revered in every stadium he set foot in. The man who was no stranger to a standing ovation, from Real Madrid to Espanyol, no matter how fierce the rivalry was. We'll remember the man who was one half of the greatest midfield duo ever and yet, still carried himself as a very humble, polite, and reserved person throughout his career. We'll remember the man who, despite achieving everything in life, never forgot his roots and saved his childhood club Albacete from bankruptcy. We'll remember this man, not known for speaking up, for the time he poked his head inside Guardiola's office, after he lost his first game as manager, and said to him:

"Don't worry, míster. We'll win it all. We're on the right path. Carry on like this, OK? We're playing brilliantly, we're enjoying training. Please, don't change anything. ¡Vamos de puta madre!"



We'll remember the kid who left Fuentealbilla as a young teenager, and now the man who has become a global superstar with over 700 appearances for club and country, the same man who sat out on the Camp Nou grass alone till 1am, on his final night with his club. We'll remember The Artist, El Cerebro, El Ilusionista, El Anti-Galáctico, El Caballero Pálido, and last but not the least, Don Andres. Forever and always.

This is, in every sense possible, truly the end of the era.

Too many goodbyes have been said this season, but this is the one we'll never get over.

#InfinitIniesta