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The Genius of El Guaje

Yazdan Basir · [Follow](#)

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The modest mining village of Tuilla was just like any other in Spain when it came to football: dozens of kids out on the streets every single day. They'd be chasing a ball, and a dream to play for *La Roja*, from dusk till the time their mothers would drag them home. David Villa Sánchez was one of those kids with a dream to don the red jersey and play for his nation someday.

That dream, however, was broken the day a four-year-old David Villa had an older player fall on his right leg and completely fracture his femur.

The fracture was so severe that doctors told the parents that there were only two options available. One was an immediate surgery that would fix up their son's leg completely but reduce its mobility for the rest of his life. The other option was to put him in a body cast, stretching from his ankle to his hips, and have him on bedrest for an indefinite period of time until medical experts deemed it okay to remove.

It was down to the father to make the decision. For José Manuel Villa, the choice was pretty clear but he was taking a huge risk — if the body cast option didn't work out, his son would walk around with a limp for the rest of his life.

The reasoning behind his decision was understandable though. He was ready to go through anything for his son to not end up with the same fate as him, a coal-miner subjected to the worst labor conditions and someone who had gone through multiple injuries and surgeries on his knees, elbows, and nose.

Fortunately, the risk paid off. After 60 days of hell on a hospital bed, David Villa returned to the world and was ready to get back on the streets as soon as possible. With one arm against the wall to hold his weight, he'd practice with his father every day to recover his ability.

"As much pain as I was in, his back was probably in more agony after a long day in the mine. From that day on, my father was always by my side watching whenever I played. He would move his shifts in the mine so he would be home in time for my practices, even if that meant starting at 2 am. From the time I was five years old playing park football until I moved at 20, I never had to take a single bus to training. My father was always there to drive me."

It wasn't the end of the struggle for him but it was the turning point.

For every Asturian, playing for Sporting Gijón was the goal. They were the only real professional club in the region and David Villa's chance came at the age of 16 when he signed for the youth team. His father was sold on the idea of football but that wasn't the case with his mother. So, he promised her something: he'd quit football forever and become an electrician if he didn't make it to the first team within two years.

You'd bet on the man, who everyone would come to know as El Guaje (The Kid) eventually, to do good on his promise. That's exactly what he did. Exactly two years from the day he signed as a youngster, the fans greeted him at El Molinón, his two parents a part of the 16000 faithful present that day.



The rest was history. At the age of 19, David Villa would go on to play in the local derby against Real Oviedo. They had rejected him before Gijón took him, on account of his height and as if it were scripted by fate itself, he ripped them to shreds and announced himself to the world.

Due to Gijón's financial instability, he was sold to Real Zaragoza for €3 million but not without making an impression: he had scored 38 times in his two seasons in Asturia.

Life just didn't stop after that. He drove Zaragoza to an impossible Copa Del Rey final win over Real Madrid in 2004 and won his first piece of silverware with the club. Even though he had to move on from the club, he was certain a career as an electrician was not an option anymore: *La Roja* had finally come knocking on his door.



The “*illa illa illa, Villa maravilla*” chants were born during the 2006 World Cup Qualifiers by Zaragoza fans at Spain’s fixtures and David Villa was

moving up the hierarchy as Valencia, the 2004 La Liga champions, came calling.

Los Che didn't hesitate over the asking price of €12 million and what they got in return was their best ever debutant: an ambipedal striker who would score 25 by the end of the season including a brace at the Camp Nou, a game-winner at the Bernabéu, a hattrick in five minutes against Athletic, and another winner, this time against the eventual champions, Barcelona.



He scored another brace on his World Cup debut against Ukraine and in the game against France, where Spain would crash out of the tournament, the young David Villa was instructed to take the penalty over the likes of Torres, Raul, and Xabi Alonso. He calmly slotted it past Fabien Barthez and continued his form into the next season, scoring 43 goals in all competitions

alongside his strike partner Fernando Morientes, and leading the assists table that season with 12, earning some praise from Johan Cruyff himself:

“Villa is not only there to finish plays. Villa is synonymous with depth. It means always being ready to open passing lanes, to draw defenders and thus freeing space for others.”

He'd go on to win the Copa Del Rey, once again, in 2008 and took on the #7 for Spain — *Siete de España* — after Raul had been dropped from the squad. Fans were up in arms against Raul's ejection but they had no idea that El Guaje had something special in store for them. He propelled Spain to their first trophy in 44 years at EURO 2008 and finished as the competition's top scorer.

In his five years at the Mestalla, only Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o had scored more than David Villa. Things were going great but they were about to get better. His time at Valencia was coming to a close and Pep Guardiola and Barcelona came for his signature in 2010: David Villa was joining, arguably, the greatest club side in football history.

However, before he could light up the Camp Nou, international duty presented itself. The World Cup was here, again.



10 years ago, his mother had cried as he made his professional debut. It was now his father's turn as he witnessed his son lift up Spain's first ever World Cup and that too, as one of the tournament's top scorers. The Villa name would forever be etched into the history of *La Roja* now. David Villa Sánchez had immortalized himself with his country and that feat was about to be repeated with his club.

Effortlessly fitting into Guardiola's system, he scored 23 goals in all competitions as a winger/inside-forward and tore Madrid apart, once again, in the 5–0 victory at the Camp Nou, where he celebrated with one of the most iconic knee-slides of all time. Even though he was now a league champion, David Villa's masterpiece came on the grandest of his stages: Wembley. His 25-yard curler past Edwin Van Der Sar sealed the trophy for Barcelona and cemented his status as a legend of the game, despite, ironically, being one of the most underrated strikers of his generation.



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It was the end, however, of his time at the very top. He broke his tibia in December 2011 and spent 8 months out of the team. He returned to a revised edition of the Barcelona he had played for and despite being one of

Guardiola's favorites and having a knack for scoring important goals, it was time to move on, especially since Neymar Jr. was coming in.

Atletico Madrid was his next adventure. It was vintage and typical David Villa as he was at his influential best and gave his side the boost they needed to go on and claim an unexpected La Liga trophy in 2014. The very place he had known as home, the Camp Nou, was where he sealed the deal. However, luck wasn't on his side as Atletico lost the Champions League final that season and the curtains were being drawn on his illustrious career.



His mother had cried now and so had his father. It was his turn now. 9 years, 3 consecutive trophies, 97 games, and 59 goals later (including 9 in 11 World Cup games) his time with *La Roja* had come to an end. He had served his nation so well and so consistently that they haven't been able to replace him properly, even after 4 years now.

As someone with one leg shorter than the other, David Villa's career turned out to be nothing short of majestic and for the Tuilla-born kid who was once told he might not play football again, there was one last chapter overseas: the American Dream. Critics often point out that Europe's elite players come to the MLS as if it were some sort of retirement home but after joining New York City FC, David Villa was fixated on proving them wrong.

It may not have been a promise to his mother but it was one he fulfilled nonetheless. He racked up an incredible 80 goals in 124 games, becoming the 5th fastest to score 50 goals in MLS history, and even as players like Lampard and Pirlo followed him to the league, none were close in their impact on the team and league itself. Villa's words upon signing — *“I want to try and help MLS continue to grow through playing, working hard, scoring goals and at the same time try to make New York City FC become the best team in the league.”* — were considered clichéd and scripted but they've proven to be his priorities over these last 4 years. He's now put up more than 400 goals in his club career and is part of a list populated only by Messi, Ronaldo, Ibrahimović, Suárez, and Eto'o.



He was recalled to the Spanish national team this year and even made an appearance against Italy in the Qualifiers, marking his 98th appearance for his country. Unfortunately, he got injured in training and was left out of the World Cup, unable to make 100 appearances in red. However, despite the troubles, despite the setbacks, despite the early age nightmares, he was the same player wherever he went, whenever he played, no matter what color he

was wearing and no matter what number he donned, just as long as the name was the same on his back: David Villa.

He's turned 37 yesterday and is now joining his former teammate Iniesta at Vissel Kobe in Japan and looks absolutely prepared for another chapter in life — nothing else would be expected of El Guaje, forever one of the greatest of his generation, one of Spain's greatest ever, and a true warrior at heart.



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Written by Yazdan Basir

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