

# Fall from Grace



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You'd think losing the highest national team job your country has to offer would be the worst thing that could happen to you in a year but then you go on to manage the biggest club in your country, arguably the most sought-after job in the football world, and end up getting sacked after just 14 games following an absolutely humiliating defeat at the hands of your eternal rival.

Julen Lopetegui isn't a bad guy nor do I think he deserved any of this but there's no denying the reality: he got fired from two once-in-a-lifetime jobs in the span of 5 months and has ended up permanently staining his reputation, his credibility, and his CV. However, it's not all his fault — there's so much more to everything that happens in football and Lopetegui, just like anyone else might have been, seemed to be the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time as the crossfire started.

Lopetegui was prized for the style of play and breath of fresh air he brought to the Spanish national team. For a side struggling from the side effects of too much success coupled with Del Bosque's ever-increasing leniency and selection-bias, Lopetegui was revered for an immediate switch back to a style reminiscent of the "old days" and was being put in a bracket alongside the likes of Sarri, Tuchel, Setién, and Pochettino, the newer wave of possession-based and positional play managers.

When Fernando Hierro stepped in for Lopetegui to see through Spain's World Cup campaign, he didn't bring much to the table nor did it seem like he was particularly keen to do so. You don't overhaul or tamper with a working system, in a moment of crisis, a few days before the start of football's biggest tournament and justifiably, that's exactly what Hierro chose to do. Lopetegui's formula was working and Hierro decided to stick to the plan despite the absence of the master himself and it eventually subsided

into a second-rate copy of the original blueprint that Hierro couldn't quite keep up and resulted in Spain struggling and sauntering in Russia before eventually crashing out to the hosts.

Lopetegui knew the expectations he had to meet: filling Zidane's shoes and the precedent he had set was going to be an absolutely impossible task. He, however, knew the risks and decided to pounce on another opportunity to be a part of history. And it's ironic how, from a Spain team that people were backing to win the World Cup and the chance to immortalize himself in Spanish folklore, Lopetegui decided to test his fate with luck and gamble with his second, seemingly, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

For many, the excitement was there — just how far could this winning team go by putting Isco, Modrić, and Toni Kroos together in a possession-based system? Could Bale and Benzema step up together and match Ronaldo's annual output? The questions were there and the answers were coming, albeit in a stunted manner, with Real Madrid's 3–0 victory over Roma (where they took 30 shots at their Italian guests) the best hint at the potential Lopetegui's system had and the heights it could reach.

However, it just wasn't meant to be. The Hierro and Spain scenario repeated itself at Real Madrid this season. When a manager loses his command and grip on the philosophy he brings to every team and introduces influences

from elsewhere, resulting in an impure and contaminated original ideology, you know it's the beginning of the end. Lopetegui, instead of imposing his system and putting his principles to the test, decided to please the boardroom and his players with a somewhat possession-oriented Zidane model. And as Hierro's situation showed to us, that simply cannot work if the master of the system isn't there himself. By bouncing back and forth between his ideas and the ideas of his predecessor, that too in the middle of matches, Lopetegui gave everyone the message that he didn't really believe his system would work at Real Madrid, a team known for playing the exact opposite philosophy throughout its history, or he just feared it wouldn't work.

Without any fixed beliefs or style of play, Lopetegui's team simply lacked clarity and nothing was going right for them. Four defeats (to Sevilla, CSKA Moscow, Alavés, and Levante) out of five games just showed the waning faith in his method and team and from visible venting of frustration and pitch-side lashing out, Lopetegui's expressions just sunk with his team's form. By the time of Alavés and Levante, there was no reaction: he had given up and accepted his fate. And as if it were part of some cruel script, everything came together to a close at the Camp Nou, where an identity-less Madrid was ripped apart to shreds by a Messi-less Barcelona with Lopetegui watching from the sidelines like a man who wasn't meant to be there.

Zidane understood the boardroom and dressing room hierarchy better than anyone; he'd been at the club long enough and after all, he was considered a son by Florentino Perez. However, that very hierarchy was part of the reason why he left: "After three years, Real need another discourse, another working methodology, and that's why I took this decision. I think it's the moment to go and I also think the players need a change. There are complicated moments in the season when you ask: 'Am I still the right person?' I don't forget the hard moments too. There are lovely moments and we ended with a spectacular moment but there are hard moments that make you reflect." Zidane knew things weren't improving with each season even if they were winning — he knew the club's model wasn't sustainable and because of what he had achieved, he was able to leave on a high and on his own terms. The



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was making the ballsy moves and selecting players based on their performance over their profile. With the club, it was the exact opposite and Lopetegui was just dealing with frayed knots as he attempted to satisfy as many of the big names he could.

The blame for all this mess isn't on Lopetegui solely. He contributed to his own downfall, of course, but the way things were coming up after the CL final and how everything was handled by Florentino Perez wasn't exactly the best environment you want a new manager to do his best in. It was only

mere seconds after the CL final ended that Ronaldo indirectly told the media he would be leaving and Bale followed suit with an equally dubious answer. Before either could decide their future, it was the man at the helm who beat them to the exit. Florentino Perez called it a “sad day” (despite Zidane having the exact opposite to say) and an “unexpected decision” but it was one there was no going back on. The problem didn’t just lie in the fact that the dressing room was losing their ultimate leader and the man who kept everyone motivated and hungry, they were losing the only man who could keep Florentino Perez in check.

It’s no secret that it was always Zidane who micromanaged and contained his fits of anger, his bouts of frustration, and Zidane was the only man at liberty to talk back to Perez and tell him exactly how reckless or well-thought-out an upcoming potential decision was. Chaos needs order and Zidane provided just that. Without him now, Perez’s growing eccentricity has turned into a real problem for Madrid, especially with how poorly Ronaldo’s departure was handled and the relentless fixation with signing Neymar Jr.

Ronaldo may have been the biggest and most obvious hole Perez had to fill but 2018 was full of mismanagement and inconveniences that stained the reputation of those involved and Real Madrid as a club itself. It started with how Lopetegui was brought to Madrid. Even if he was unaware of the immediate consequences, Perez must’ve been aware of the crisis his actions

could cause. Lopetegui was contacted, a deal was struck just 3–4 days before the World Cup, the FA President sacked him, the federation was sent into a state of tension, uncertainty, and eventually ended up obstructing the potential of the country. Couldn't Lopetegui have been contacted after the World Cup, especially if he were to win, and in doing so, have avoided the crisis caused? What was the hurry to get him on board and cause an institutional crisis?

That wasn't the only thing, however. The club needed a more tactically solid system after Ronaldo left. There was no one left to bail them out in every game and to compensate for a loss that big, more output was required from all the players as a collective. In a very unlike Perez way, the summer of Ronaldo's departure was pretty poorly handled. Back in the day, Perez's response to every bit of Barcelona's success would be to sign any superstar/big name he could get his hands on. Now it just seems the hunger isn't there anymore because Perez is "too content at the top without having to properly renew the squad" and the roles have been reversed now: Barcelona are the ones throwing bags of money at any player they can find. There was absolutely no substantial plan to bring in a replacement for Ronaldo, no avenue was pursued as much as Neymar Jr. was pursued, and eventually, Mariano Diaz took on the #7 for Madrid. No pressure.



The words of Ramon Calderon, Madrid's former President, are pretty spot on in analyzing the Ronaldo situation: "Florentino was obsessed with signing Neymar. He wanted to give 350 million Euros to PSG and almost twice Ronaldo's salary. Cristiano logically decided to search for a new challenge. Neymar is Perez's ultimate goal and he will keep trying."

**Ramon Calderon:** "Unfortunately it's another of the president's whims. If he was the right man in June, only four months ago, he cannot be unfit now. He signed him just two days before the World Cup started, so damaging our national team and now he's sacking him. So that's the problem, Lopetegui is not the one to be blamed. That has been the main trouble, to transfer Cristiano in June has been a historic mistake and we are paying for that now."

**Ramon Calderon:** "It shows in Real Madrid the absence of Cristiano. In a club, when success occurs, as in this case in Real Madrid, employees expect them to voluntarily improve conditions, or ask for it. He was not heard and he was reading every day that a player was coming and they were going to pay him 350 million, and he wanted to be paid 50. There comes a moment when you realise they do not love you. Florentino is wrong. We have a system in which you sign on a whim, by impulse, there is no sports director. In this club, the president is solely responsible for the sports side and he is an engineer. He knows very well how to build bridges, tunnels and roads but building soccer teams is not the same."

However, even after everything, Lopetegui never lost his dressing room. Ramos had been his biggest advocate in the Spanish national team and continued to vouch for him when he was coming to and at Real Madrid. Dani Carjaval, even after all the personal success he had under Zidane, came out

and stated “For me, he’s been the best coach I’ve ever had, unfortunately, he lacked that hint of fortune to continue with us. His way of looking at football, his way of managing the group, of being with the players, It’s something I share, I said it before Real Madrid arrived, I keep saying it now that it’s gone and I’ll do it while I do not have another technician who does it better than him.”

Maybe things would’ve gotten better. Maybe things would’ve worked out in the end and maybe a change of guard would’ve been facilitated under Lopetegui—we’ll never know now. The amalgamation of his own mistakes and the circumstances in which he arrived spelled disaster for him and it has been a spectacular fall from grace. Lopetegui’s gone through two huge setbacks, each more consequential than the previous and what has happened to him is unlike anything we’ve seen or come across before in recent times. He’s a man who was pushed into a pit of despair and exasperation by multiple factors and who knows what he might’ve achieved if he had some luck on his side. It still remains uncertain whether or not he’ll ever make it out of the pit again.

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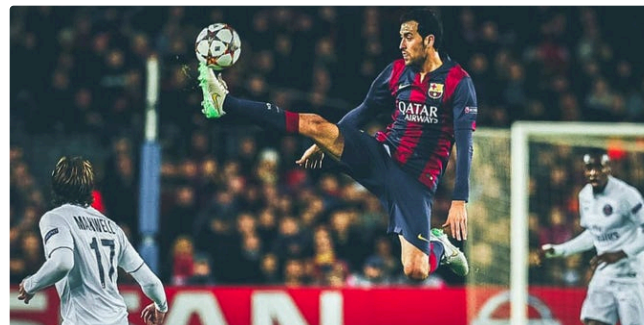
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