

Legends are made of lies.

Marseille is a city of lies of such peculiar exaggeration that the town invented a word for them: *galéjades*.

Marseille has a knack of turning every petty memory into myth, to try to make life bigger than it really is. And its most powerful dream machine is its football club.

Olympique de Marseille, OM. It sounds and reads like the name of a strange cult which, in many ways, it is – the Stade Vélodrome, the temple to the only religion which unites rival communities in town.

Legends are made of lies and I don't know all the details.

On October 1 1969 a man was found lying dead in the streets of the city. *Le Provençal* claimed he had been discovered near their head office by one of their journalists, out of sheer chance the one covering OM. The coincidence seems too good to be true. Galéjade.

I was told by a local bard that he died in a gutter, face down, dirty water running down the street just in front of St Charles Station, at the foot of the steps leading to the derelict train shed. That sounds far more plausible to me.

The St Charles steps are part of this tale. They have been compared to the Odessa steps, the ones made famous by Eisenstein in *Potemkin*. That classic scene when a pram tumbles down the steps, that look of fear of a baby facing death.

Gunnar Andersson had a baby face when he played for Olympique de Marseille. His name itself sounded in the mouths of

fans like an incantation to the far North they all dreaded. I suppose that is why the St Charles steps are so steep. They are more like a wall against northern invaders than a staircase leading to France. Gunnar Andersson was one of those rare Viking raiders the town let in.

He died of cold, of heart failure, he choked on his own vomit. Nobody knows. Everybody knows. A heap of rags at the foot of the steps. Was he trying to leave town, to make it back home to Gothenburg? Did he realise you never leave Marseille once you have been lured there?

The day he arrived, he did not even make it to St Charles Station. Two reporters from *Le Provençal* waylaid him in Avignon and kidnapped him for an exclusive interview. An ominous start, or another legend?

He died. For years, the rumour goes, he was an alcoholic, spending all his money in trendy night clubs around Paris. But he returned to Marseille to die. To the town which had made him a hero, to the people who had loved him dearly before letting him die in the cheapest possible way.

Contemporary photographs show a handsome young guy with brown hair, who could have been Italian. Now, more than 30 years after his death, he is just a line in soccer's history books.

Marseille's top goal-scorer of all time: Gunnar Andersson
169.

They used to call him "ten to two" because his feet when he ran had that peculiar angle. The story does not say what time he died, but I'm sure some would have said 1:50. Or ten past ten.

Gunnar died just as football was becoming a big deal. He fell down the steps when George Best was at the peak of his fame. Had he lived 20 years later, he might have become a romantic figure, a rock'n roll hero like Diego Maradona. Or Éric Cantona, who travelled the other way, taking to the northern seas to claim recognition after two vain attempts to conquer the Stade Vélodrome.

This is what *Le Provençal* wrote the day after his death:

"Gunnar Andersson, an unfortunate cicada full of joy, happiness and carefreeness died of exhaustion and misery, plagued by illness, without asking anything from anybody whereas he had always given everything to everyone."

That was the way journalists wrote at the time. Bards.
Elegies.

Galéjades.

Andersson's story is a myth because it sums up the whole saga of OM, the club that reached for the sky and burnt its wings.

OM, in turn, is but the mirror image of a city which, in the 26 centuries of its existence, has gone up and down, down and up, up and down, in an endless cycle of legends and galéjades.

When, around 330 BC, the Marseille sailor and astronomer Pytheas returned from a long journey to the northern shores and told people in town he had been to places where the sea withdrew during the day to return later, he was mocked by his fellow-Greeks. Galéjade. When he claimed he had reached a country in which the sun never set, he was ridiculed. Galéjade.

Did Pytheas meet Gunnar's remote ancestor? Who knows? Why not? Did he tell him about the light of Marseille, about the rocks and the Calanques and the bouillabaisse? Did they talk football? Who knows? Why not? Did the memory of their friendly chat stay in the family, did it print in Gunnar's genes so that he felt that strange urge to play for Marseille at a time when transfers were few and far between?

And what was Cantona but a new Pytheas when, fed up with his home territory, he moved north to Leeds and Manchester to become a hero and bring back fame and booty?

"When the seagulls follow the trailer, that's because they hope to be thrown sardines," Marseille's most famous twentieth century philosopher, Cantona, said.

How come he knew, if he never made it on a boat like Pytheas? The quote made cynical sportswriters grin. If they had heard Marseille seagulls scream like hungry babies at dawn they would know what Cantona was talking about. They are called "gabians", they are huge birds and they fear no one. *On craint dégun* (we fear no one). That is what the local tough guys say. Legend has it that gabians sometimes eat small dogs. They are not the pigeons of seaside cities, but the eagles.

There are hundreds of gabians near St Charles Station. They coast around its concrete pillars, above its iron roof and the broken glass of its windows. They welcome foreigners and see Parisians off. But, above all, they spread the word in town. Their shrieks are news bulletins. They are the first to tell the tale, the ones who start the noise that will swell.

They travelled with Pytheas to the North, with Cantona. I am convinced Gunnar was found dead by a gabian. The bird landed near the former star, hopped about, fiddled around with his beak and suddenly realised who it was. For gabians are OM supporters, of course. They sport the team's white jersey, like die-hard fans in town.

OM has a motto: *Droit au but* (Straight at goal). It could not be more misleading. For Olympique Marseille never went straight anywhere. That is not the way we do things here. OM rigged matches, bribed referees, played the most brilliant football ever seen, and the worst. They once were the biggest club in Europe, hence the world, and they once slumped to near oblivion – in a 1965 second division match against Forbach.

The attendance that day was 434, including the gabians. Yet I don't know anybody who was not at the game. Some 434,434 people (women are not so keen and more subtle in their lies) claim they were there. Galéjades. And they really WERE there. Because that is what legends are for. To take you places you will never go. Half a million people believe they were there. They have no choice now. Once you have lied, there is no way back. You cannot belie yourself; it is an insult to the myth. And it is taboo.

OM has been through its ups and downs, it has gone to and fro, here and there, by and large, never straight at goal. To me, OM is the tide that has been denied us. The Mediterranean is a liar. It makes you believe in stability, in the possibility of a status quo. It seems to say that things can stay the way they are, that the world cannot change.

OM is here to remind Marseille that you can be rich one day and poor the next. Live and die. Like Gunnar.

It might be a cliché. It might be *bateau* (meaning 'boat' but also 'hackneyed' in French). But it is not. It is fact. The Stade Vélodrome is a big boat with 60,023 people on board. It is rocked by the waves and the tide that OM generates. Isn't it odd that in Marseille a *pointu* is a small fishing boat but also a shot at goal?

I watched one of the legendary Marseille classics, against AC Milan in the 1991 European Cup. We won 2-1 and Chris Waddle – another immigrant from the distant northern mists – scored the winner. He later claimed not to remember anything about it. He had scored it in a dream, as if some spirit, maybe Gunnar's ghost, had taken over. Legend. Galéjade.

That night I was sitting beside a woman in the press box, an AC Milan camp-follower. Every time the Italians moved forward she would take my hand, squeeze it, and move it to the right. Every time Marseille were attacking and threatening Milan's goal she would take my hand, squeeze it, and move it the other way. She was not conscious of what she was doing. She just needed something to touch, some flesh to cling to while her emotions poured out.

When the match was over, she did not even look at me. She left without a word. I did not care. Marseille had won. It was high tide, an orgasm she had been denied. I understand her. When OM lose, you sometimes feel like lying. I mean lying in a ditch. And dying.

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