



I Am Zlatan: My Story On and Off the Field

By Zlatan Ibrahimovic

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Daring, flashy, innovative, volatile—no matter what they call him, Zlatan Ibrahimovic is one of soccer’s brightest stars. A top-scoring striker and captain of the Swedish national team, he has dominated the world’s most storied teams, including Ajax, Juventus, Inter Milan, Barcelona, AC Milan, and Paris Saint-Germain. But his life wasn’t always so charmed.

Born to Balkan immigrants who divorced when he was a toddler, Zlatan learned self-reliance from his rough-and-tumble neighborhood. While his father, a Bosnian Muslim, drank to forget the war back home, his mother’s household was engulfed in chaos. Soccer was Zlatan’s release. Mixing in street moves and trick plays, Zlatan was a wild talent who rode to practice on stolen bikes and relished showing up the rich kids—opponents and teammates alike. Goal by astonishing goal, the brash young outsider grew into an unlikely prodigy and, by his early twenties, an international phenomenon.

Told as only the man himself could tell it, featuring stories of friendships and feuds with the biggest names in the sport, *I Am Zlatan* is a wrenching, uproarious, and ultimately redemptive tale for underdogs everywhere.

Praise for *I Am Zlatan*

“Terrific . . . Far more insightful than your typical jock memoir, Ibra’s book tells his story of growing up as the son of immigrants in Sweden and pulls no punches when it comes to his opinions of some of the biggest names in the game.”—*Sports Illustrated*

“The most compelling autobiography ever to appear under a footballer’s name.”—*The Guardian*

“The story of Zlatan—from his days as an immigrant kid juggling a soccer ball so he won’t get bullied to his emergence as the genius player who scored the greatest goal ever—is as compelling and fancy-footed as his game.”—**Aleksandar Hemon, National Book Award finalist and author of *The Lazarus Project***

“I love this book. I love it because it’s so much bigger than soccer. *I Am Zlatan* is

a story of hope and grit and what an immigrant kid who comes from nothing can accomplish with hard work and belief in himself. It's also a beautiful window into our new, more open, more diverse world.”—**Marcus Samuelsson, bestselling author of *Yes, Chef***

“Probably the bestselling European immigrant’s tale since Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* . . . Once you get past the obligatory snigger prompted by the phrase ‘footballer’s autobiography,’ you can see that Zlatan’s book strangely resembles an earlier immigrant’s tale: *Portnoy’s Complaint*.”—***Financial Times***

“He is skillful. He is outspoken. He is Zlatan.”—***The New York Times***

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Zlatan Ibrahimovic is a professional soccer player, one of the world’s most prolific strikers, and captain of his native Sweden. He has played for many of Europe’s top teams, including Ajax, Juventus, Inter Milan, Barcelona, AC Milan, and, currently, Paris Saint-Germain, where he is the league’s leading goalscorer. He is widely regarded as one of the best soccer players of his generation, and is the most highly valued player of all time in combined transfer fees. His bicycle kick for Sweden against England won the 2013 FIFA Award for Goal of the Year.

David Lagercrantz made his debut as an author with *Ultimate High: My Everest Odyssey*, about the Swedish mountaineer Göran Kropp, which became an international bestseller. Since then he has devoted his career to writing about geniuses and exceptional people who go against the flow and blaze their own trails. Lagercrantz achieved critical and commercial success with a novel based on the life of the computer pioneer Alan Turing. He has written several other works of fiction and nonfiction, and he also lectures on creative writing.

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Pep Guardiola, the Barcelona manager, with his gray suits and brooding expressions, came up to me, looking

a little self-conscious.

I thought he was all right in those days, not exactly another Mourinho or Capello, but an okay guy. This was long before we started to do battle with each other. It was the autumn of 2009, and I was living my boyhood dream. I was playing with the best team in the world and had been welcomed by seventy thousand people at Camp Nou. I was walking on air—well, maybe not completely. There was a certain amount of nonsense in the papers. That I was a bad boy and all that: that I was difficult to manage. Even so, I was there. Helena, my partner, and our sons liked it. We had a nice house in Esplugues de Llobregat, and I was ready. What could possibly go wrong?

“Listen,” Guardiola said. “Here at Barça, we keep our feet on the ground.”

“Sure,” I said. “Fine!”

“So we don’t turn up to training sessions in Ferraris or Porsches.”

I nodded, didn’t go ballistic on him and say things like What the hell business is it of yours what cars I drive? At the same time, though, I was thinking, What does he want? What kind of message is he sending here? Believe me, I don’t need to make a big deal of looking tough anymore and drive up in some flash car and park it on the pavement or something. That’s not what it’s about. I do love cars. They’re my passion, and I could sense something else behind what he was saying. It was like, Don’t think you’re anybody special!

I’d already gotten the impression that Barcelona was a little like school, or some sort of institution. The players were cool—nothing wrong with them—and Maxwell was there, my old friend from Ajax and Inter. To be honest, though, none of the guys acted like superstars, which was strange. Messi, Xavi, Iniesta, the whole gang—they were like schoolboys. The best soccer players in the world stood there with their heads bowed, and I didn’t understand any of it. It was ridiculous. If the coaches in Italy say, “Jump,” the stars will look at them and go, What are they nuts? Why should we jump?

Here everyone did as they were told. I didn’t fit in, not at all. I thought, Just enjoy the opportunity. Don’t confirm their prejudices. So I started to adapt and blend in. I became way too nice. It was crazy.

Mino Raiola, my agent and good friend, said to me, “What’s up with you, Zlatan? I don’t recognize you.”

Nobody recognized me—none of my friends, no one at all. I started to feel down, and here you have to know that, ever since my days at Malmö FF, I’ve had the same philosophy: I do things my way. I don’t give a damn what people think, and I’ve never enjoyed being around uptight people. I like guys who go through red lights, if you know what I mean. Now, though, I wasn’t saying what I wanted to say.

I said what I thought people wanted me to say. It was completely messed up. I drove the club’s Audi and stood there and nodded my head the way I did when I was at school, or rather the way I should have done when I was at school. I hardly even yelled at my teammates anymore. I was boring. Zlatan was no longer Zlatan, and the last time that had happened was when I went to school at the ritzy Borgarskolan, where I saw girls in Ralph Lauren sweaters for the first time and nearly shit in my pants when I tried to ask them out. Even so, I started the season off brilliantly. I scored one goal after another. We won the UEFA Super Cup. I was amazing. I dominated on the pitch. Yet I was a different person. Something had happened—nothing serious, not yet, but still. I grew quiet, and that’s dangerous—believe me. I need to be angry to play well. I need to shout and make some noise. Now I was keeping it inside. Maybe it had something to do with the press. I dunno.

I was the second-most-expensive transfer in history, and the papers wrote that I was a problem child and had a flawed character, all the crap you can imagine, and unfortunately I was feeling the pressure of everything—that here at Barça we don't make a show and stuff, and I guess I wanted to prove that I could do it too. That was the stupidest thing I've ever done. I was still awesome on the pitch. It just wasn't as much fun anymore.

I even thought about quitting soccer—not walking out on my contract, though: after all, I'm a professional. But I lost my enthusiasm, and then it was the Christmas break. We headed back to Sweden, to a ski resort up north, and I rented a snowmobile. Whenever life's at a standstill I need some action. I always drive like a maniac. I've done 325 km an hour in my Porsche Turbo and left the cops eating my dust. I've done so much crazy stuff I don't even want to think about it, and now in the mountains I was ripping it up on my snowmobile. I got frostbite and had the time of my life.

Finally an adrenaline rush! The old Zlatan was back, and I thought, Why should I stick it out? I've got money in the bank. I don't need to slave away with that idiot of a manager. I could just have fun instead, and look after my family. It was a great time. It didn't last long, though. When we returned to Spain, disaster hit—not right away, it was more like it crept up, but it was hanging in the air.

There was a massive blizzard. It was as if the Spaniards had never seen snow before, and in the hills where we lived there were cars stranded all over the place. Mino, that fat idiot—that wonderful, fat idiot, I should say, just to prevent any misunderstanding—was shivering like a dog in his street shoes and his summer jacket, and convinced me to take the Audi. That turned into a complete and utter shambles. We lost control on a downhill slope and crashed into a concrete wall, wrecking the car's entire right axle.

A lot of guys on the team had crashed their cars in the storm, but nobody did it quite as massively as I did. I won the crashing-your-car tournament, and we all had a good laugh about that, and I was still actually myself once in a while. I still felt pretty good. Then Messi started saying things. Lionel Messi is awesome. He's totally amazing. I don't know him all that well. We're very different people. He joined Barça when he was thirteen years old. He's been brought up in that culture and doesn't have a problem with that school crap. Within the team, the play centers on him, which is entirely natural—he's brilliant. But now I was there, and I was scoring more goals than him. He went up to Guardiola and told him, "I don't want to be on the right wing anymore. I want to play in the center."

I was the striker. Guardiola didn't give a damn about that, though. He changed the tactical formation. He swapped the 4-3-3 for a 4-5-1 with me at the front and Messi right behind me, and I ended up in the shadows. The balls passed through Messi, and I didn't get to play my game. On the pitch I've got to be as free as a bird. I'm the guy who wants to make a difference at every level. Guardiola sacrificed me. That's the truth. He locked me in up front. All right, I can understand his dilemma. Messi was the star.

Guardiola had to listen to him. But I mean, come on! I had scored loads of goals at Barça and I'd been pretty awesome as well. He couldn't change the whole team to suit one guy. I mean, why the hell had he bought me, anyway? Nobody pays that kind of money to strangle me as a player. Guardiola had to take both of us into consideration, and, of course, the atmosphere among the club's management grew tense. I was their biggest investment ever, and I wasn't happy in the new setup. I was too expensive to be left unhappy. Txiki Begiristain, the sports director, insisted that I had to go and speak to the manager:

"Sort it out!"

I didn't like that. I'm a player who accepts circumstances. "All right, fine, I'll do it."

One of my friends told me, “Zlatan, it’s as if Barça had bought a Ferrari and was driving it like a Fiat,” and I thought, Yeah, that’s a good way of looking at it. Guardiola had turned me into a simpler player and a worse player. It’s a loss for the whole team.

So I went over to him. It was on the pitch, during a practice session, and I was careful about one thing. I wasn’t going to get into an argument, and I told him that.

I said, “I don’t want to fight. I don’t want to have a war. I just want to discuss things,” and he nodded.

He might have looked a little scared, so I repeated what I’d said.

“If you think I want to have a fight, I’ll drop it. I just want to have a word.”

“That’s fine. I like to talk to the players.”

“Listen,” I continued, “you’re not making use of my capacity. If it was just a goal-scorer you were after, you should have bought Inzaghi or somebody else. I need space, I need to be free. I can’t just run straight up and down the pitch the whole time. I weigh two hundred pounds. I’m not built for that.”

He mulled it over. He always mulled everything right into the goddamned ground.

“I think you can play like this.”

“No, it’d be better if you put me on the bench. With all due respect, I get where you’re coming from, but you’re sacrificing me in favor of other players. This isn’t working. It’s as if you bought a Ferrari, but you’re driving it like a Fiat.”

He mulled it over a bit more.

“Okay, maybe that was a mistake. This is my problem. I’ll straighten it out.”

I was happy. He was going to straighten it out. I left with a spring in my step, but then came the cold shoulder. He hardly looked at me, and I’m not somebody who gets worked up about that sort of thing, not really, and in spite of my new position, I carried on being brilliant. I scored goals—but not as pretty as the goals I’d scored in Italy. I was too far up front. It wasn’t the same old “Ibracadabra” anymore, but even so .??. Playing against Arsenal in the Champions League over in the new Emirates Stadium, we totally outplayed them. The atmosphere was intense. The first twenty minutes were absolutely unbelievable: I scored 1–0 and 2–0, both beautiful goals again, and I thought, Who cares about Guardiola? I’m just gonna go for it!

Then I was taken out, and then Arsenal came back and made it 1–2 and 2–2, which was bullshit for us, and afterward I had an injured calf muscle. Normally, the managers are worried by something like that. An injured Zlatan is a properly serious thing for any team. But Guardiola was cold as ice. He didn’t say a word, I was out for three weeks, and not once did he come up and ask me, How are you doing, Zlatan? Will you be able to play the next match?

He didn’t even say good morning. Not a single word. He avoided eye contact with me. If I went into a room, he would leave. What’s going on? I thought. Is it something I did? Do I look wrong? Am I talking funny? All these things were buzzing around in my head. I couldn’t sleep.

Users Review

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