

A REBEL.REBEL LETTER

The Stripe He Took Off

Johan Cruyff, the difference between belonging and being owned, and the most valuable unclaimed property in sport.

BY AUSTIN RIPMASTER

Orange shirt. Black lion. Number 14. Captain's armband. Two stripes. Not three.

In June 1974 the Netherlands walked out in Hannover to face Uruguay in their first World Cup match in thirty-six years, wearing orange jerseys with the three stripes of Adidas running down the sleeve. Every shirt but one.

The federation had signed with Adidas without consulting the players. Cruyff was under contract to Puma and had already refused to wear Adidas boots for the national side. After a standoff between two German brothers' companies, a national federation and one footballer, a compromise was reached: a stripe was removed from Cruyff's sleeves and shorts, and the captain of the Netherlands played the tournament of his life in a uniform made for him alone.

He explained it later without ornament. The KNVB had signed with Adidas without telling the players; they thought they did not need to, because the shirt was theirs. But the head sticking out of it is mine, he told them.

That is the argument, made in 1974, two decades before the industry built the vocabulary to have it.

I. The Missing Mark It was not a collaboration. No creative director proposed an exercise in asymmetry. No agency developed a campaign called Own Your Difference. Nothing was seeded to musicians and stylists. There was no limited edition and there was no launch.

It was a truce.

Which is exactly why it is good. The two-stripe shirt is not merchandise decorated with a story. The disagreement is physically present in the garment. The missing stripe is the evidence.

It is litigation, sewn into a sleeve.

II. Belonging Is Not Ownership The easy reading is rebellion. Cruyff would not conform. Cruyff protected his endorsement. Cruyff was difficult. All true, and all incomplete.

He did not refuse the Dutch shirt. He wore it. He captained the country, led the team, and became the living image of Dutch football in front of the largest audience the sport had yet assembled.

He belonged.

What he refused was the institution's belief that belonging conferred ownership of the whole man. That is why the shirt still matters. The two stripes do not stand for individualism against community. They stand for the right to remain an individual inside one.

Sameness is visual. Belonging is moral. A group that cannot survive one missing stripe is not a community. It is an ownership structure.

The greatness of that Dutch side is that it held. Eleven men on the pitch, ten in three stripes, the captain in two, and the team entirely intact. That is belonging mature enough to contain difference.

The letters are free. The record is the point.

III. The First Counterattack Cruyff's argument was ostensibly about a sponsorship contract. It was actually about jurisdiction. Who owned the surface of the player?

The federation believed selection conferred commercial control. Cruyff believed that wearing the national shirt did not require surrendering the man inside it. This was 1974: image rights, personal sponsorship portfolios, capsule collections and global athlete brands had barely begun to exist.

He understood something the industry would take thirty years to write down. The player does not merely perform inside the product. The player creates the product's value. The shirt belonged to the federation until he wore it. Then it belonged to television, then to the photograph, then to memory.

On the pitch he refused the position assigned to him. At the table he refused the value assigned to him. The two-stripe shirt is the commercial version of the Cruyff Turn: the institution moved toward the future it expected, and he planted his foot, withdrew from it, and entered another. One stripe disappeared, and the whole power structure became visible.

I V. Why It Looks Better There is a plainer reason the shirt survives. It looks better.

Three stripes are a system. Two stripes are a question. The eye catches the interruption before the mind understands it: nearly correct, nearly official,

nearly uniform. The shirt belongs to the team, but not entirely to the company that supplied it.

The perfectly resolved object is admired. The one-off object is desired. The version carrying the irregularity, the private history, the scar, holds a voltage the flawless production run cannot reach, because it bears evidence that someone had enough authority, nerve, intimacy or necessity to change the thing.

A shirt is taken from a lover's wardrobe. A bag is sketched for one woman on an aeroplane. A collar is turned up on a cold afternoon. A stripe is removed for one player.

The category can be reproduced. The difference cannot.

V. Four Alterations

Eric Cantona turned his collar up, by his own account, because it was cold. Manchester United won, superstition took over, and a minor adjustment became inseparable from the man. Umbro manufactured the shirt. The club owned the uniform. Cantona created the silhouette, and the companies caught up afterwards.

Hermès did something rarer. When Jane Birkin described the bag she needed as a young mother, Jean-Louis Dumas listened, sketched it, and gave the object her name. The house participated in the origin, and preserved the person inside the product instead of sanding her away.

Nike went further still with Michael Jordan. A dispute over basketball's uniform rules became the banned mythology around the black-and-red shoe. The precise history is messier than the legend, the Air Ship, rather than the Air Jordan 1, appears to have been the original offending shoe, but Nike recognised the cultural energy immediately and converted an obscure

uniform violation into a founding story of sneaker culture. Nike did not merely make the object. It named the conflict, and kept retelling it.

Then the fourth. The artifact exists. The photographs exist. The conflict is documented. The visual code is legible from fifty yards. Cruyff's two stripes have everything the other three had, and one thing they did not: nobody ever assembled the meaning.

VI. Who Owns the Two Stripes Not nobody. But nobody entirely.

Puma includes the moment in its corporate history. The Cruyff clothing company has told the story and sold replicas. Adidas owns and protects its three-stripe marks. The federation owned the uniform. The photographers own their frames. The public inherited the image. Cruyff owned the refusal.

Four decades later, when the replica appeared, he wrote in his newspaper column: Those two stripes belong to me.

The sentence is more interesting than a trademark claim, because it does not make one. Ownership is established by contract, registration and enforcement. Belonging is established by relationship, memory and use. Ownership is exclusive. Belonging multiplies: every person who sees the two stripes and understands the refusal enters the story without displacing him from it.

Which is also why it has stayed unassembled. Each party holds a piece and no one holds the whole. Adidas may find the story awkward, since its most important appearance in the photograph is an absence. Puma's temptation is to reduce it to brand loyalty, which flatters and diminishes at once. For the federation it is a story about accommodation. For the estate it is one chapter of a larger mythology.

A company can technically own everything and culturally possess nothing.

One letter at a time. Nothing written for reach.

VII. Fifty-Two Years Later The 2026 World Cup ended in July. The temporary stores came down and the collaborations sold through.

Deloitte's most recent annual review of football finance put the European football market above forty billion euros for the first time, €40.2 billion in 2024/25, and reported that growth is beginning to stall. The commercial apparatus now runs far past broadcast and matchday income into fashion, licensing, gaming, tourism and identity. The shirt itself has escaped the stadium: federation kits now arrive with fashion houses and streetwear labels attached, and the jersey moves between pitch, terrace, runway, airport and restaurant without asking permission from any of them.

The industry has arrived, expensively, at the argument Cruyff made for free.

The player is not an employee wearing inventory. The supporter is not a customer buying a replica. The shirt is not a surface on which sponsors purchase space. These people are participants in the object's meaning, and because they belong to it, they change it.

And in a market that size, growing slower each year, the most contemporary object in football fashion may still be the one a man wore fifty-two years ago. A national uniform altered by an athlete's commercial rights. A global sportswear contract interrupted by personal authorship. A mass-produced object made valuable by subtraction.

We spent fifty-two years building the economic system that explains why that shirt mattered. We still have not named it.

VIII. What Falls to the Houses Companies do not own culture because their products appear inside it. They participate, or they do not.

Ajax and Adidas showed what participation looks like. Supporters held in the stands after a match in Cardiff in 2008 heard a stadium DJ play Three Little Birds, sang it, and kept singing it until the song became part of the emotional life of the club. In 2021 the club, Adidas and the Marley family made a black shirt carrying three small birds. That was not a company inventing a community. It was a company recognising something supporters had already made sacred, and handing it back in material form.

Stone Island arrived by another road. It made experimental Italian outerwear, and football supporters made the compass badge into a signal across the terraces. The company now calls the badge an emblem of belonging, and treats its community as part of its own continuing authorship rather than as a demographic.

Both cases required the same uncomfortable admission: that the company is not the sole author of the value around its own product. The customer may have added something. The athlete may have removed something. The supporters may have started singing.

The work is not to invent a campaign. It is to see the thing clearly enough to name it, and then to build a body of work capable of carrying that meaning forward. Not content. A corpus.

The two-stripe shirt has every ingredient: a recognisable object, a decisive protagonist, a conflict between a person and an institution, a mark legible at fifty yards, a documented chain of custody, and a meaning that has grown more relevant rather than less. It is the founding garment of modern athlete sovereignty, and it is still lying in the open.

Whoever picks it up should do it as a custodian. There is only one way to get this one wrong, and it is to treat a refusal as merchandise.

IX. The Shirt and the Turn I have been living with the two stripes because I have written a novel about the man who wore them. It is called The Turn. It

will be published by Rebel.Rebel Press under the name A.K. Nolan, which is a pen name of this house, and it is fiction: invented in the places novels invent, about a real man who has been weighed to death in trophies and never properly read.

It has nothing to do with proving he was great. That has been done. The more interesting questions are how an idea leaves one body and enters thousands of others, how a style becomes a school and then an orthodoxy, who creates value and who captures it, and what survives when the author is gone.

The Turn itself is one material witness. The shirt is another. One was made by withdrawing a foot. The other by withdrawing a stripe.

He never confronted systems from outside them. He entered them, belonged to them, learned their geometry, and altered the available space.

Adidas owns the three stripes. Cruyff belongs to the missing one.

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