

Martínez prefers Ferguson to fiesta

It is party time in the Wigan manager's home town but Mark Hodgkinson finds that the Spaniard is settled in the North West

The first fiesta of the year takes place this afternoon in the Catalan town of Balaguer. Thousands will throng the streets beneath the 14th-century Santa Maria Church, many of them hoping for success in the "costume contest" (first prize: €300; second: one ham).

As floats gather in the square by the railway station, the town's most famous son, Roberto Martínez, will be here in England pacing a newly laid patch of grass imploring ever more effort from his Wigan Athletic players as they take on Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, the league leaders.

Whatever the result — and Wigan have never taken a point off United — in after-match interviews Martínez will use phrases such as "to be fair" and "in all honesty", verbal tics habitually the preserve of home-grown football folk. Push him on wider football issues and he will say "we" and "ours" when he talks of the English game. His heart may be in Balaguer but otherwise he is shin-pad deep in the soggy grass of his adopted country.

Martínez, 37, is one of the longest-serving foreigners in English football. He joined Wigan, of the bottom division at the time and with attendances routinely below 3,000, in the summer of 1995. He was one of three former Real Zaragoza players who, as the local paper put it, "swapped paella for pies". The others, Jesús Seba and Isidro Díaz, lasted only one and four seasons respectively — more than enough time to form the football legend, "The Three Amigos".

"Growing up in Spain, I had no real idea of what life was like in England," Martínez said. "I knew of the double-

'I knew about England's weather but it was the football that mattered'

decker buses and red phone boxes but that was it, really. My English isn't bad now, but at school I got my worst marks in the exam."

The trio were spotted by Paul Hodges, who was running the Spanish outlets of JJB Sports owned by Dave Whelan, the Wigan chairman. Martínez was at third division Balaguer with Díaz, while Seba, a Spain Under-21 player, was at Zaragoza. All were young, unmarried and available on free transfers because they had not made a specified number of appearances for their clubs.

"Dave Whelan had such an impact on us," Martínez said. "Everything he promised us came true. He speaks his mind and is the kind of person you can rely on. We wanted to come to England anyway because we considered it the cathedral of football. Most people in Spain see it this way."

Martínez had left home at 16 to live close to his first club, Zaragoza, for whom he made only one appearance. "To me, it was a two-hour drive to Zaragoza, while Wigan was a two-hour flight," he said. "I told myself there wasn't much difference. I knew about the weather but it was the football that mattered."

After six months in an hotel, the three moved to a semi-detached house a couple of miles from Wigan. It soon became known to fans. "We were always asking people in for cups of tea," Martínez said. "We saw it as part of our job to mix with the fans and enjoyed it."

They found a local Italian restaurant, Milano's, whose chef, Ramon, would cook them Spanish food at a



Sunny outlook: despite some gloomy times, Martínez has always looked forward positively ever since he, Díaz and Seba, the Three Amigos, below left, joined Wigan in a surprise move in 1995. The trio were reunited with Whelan, the club's chairman who signed them, on a rare clear day at the DW Stadium in 2009



time later in the evening, more akin to the Mediterranean lifestyle. "Things have changed so much since then," Martínez said. "Everywhere used to shut at 5pm and we could never find food we wanted like olive oil, Parma ham or espresso coffee."

On the field and in the dressing room, Martínez adapted quickly. "I saw a kind of 'work hard, party hard' mentality at the beginning," he said. "This is less so now, where a footballer has to be more of an athlete. It was also new to me that you could say what you were thinking inside football clubs and after-

wards there would be no hard feelings. That would never happen in a Mediterranean country."

Díaz and Seba did not cope as well as Martínez. Both are of a smaller physique and struggled in the mud and thud of lower-league football.

They also had a poorer command of English; Martínez had studied the language as a postgraduate student, after a degree in physiotherapy. After leaving Wigan, Díaz moved briefly to Rochdale before playing in Spain and Portugal. He is director of football at Barakaldo, a club based in the Basque Coun-

try. Seba returned to Zaragoza, playing mainly for their B team before a four-year spell in Portugal. During this period it was discovered that he had a serious heart condition and he underwent open-heart surgery in the United States. He was out of football for six months. He is now involved in the youth set-up at Zaragoza.

"I knew he would be OK," said Martínez, who is a close friend of both players. "He has an angel watching over him. I know this because he is such a good-natured guy. He gives to others all the time."

Seba and Díaz married Spaniards but Martínez wedded Beth Thomson in June 2009. They had met eight years earlier when he had a brief spell at Motherwell.

While today's weather for Balaguer is down as "sunny, 20C" [68F], it is expected to fall as low as 2C at nightfall in Wigan, with a forecast that could stand for almost any day of the year: "light rain/showers". At least the rain will help the grass to grow on the new turf. "Not many clubs would put down a new pitch before the visit of Manchester United," Martínez said. "We did the same last year and beat Liverpool 1-0, so you never know."

Wigan have played United 11 times in the top flight and in the Carling Cup final of 2006 and lost each time, scoring four goals and conceding 37. "We know it's going to be difficult but we have to hope for one of those great games here at the DW Stadium, like when we beat Liverpool and Chelsea," Martínez said.

As he spoke, pigeons flocked overhead in a sky clogged with cloud. His big brown eyes were shining, however and you knew instinctively he would much rather be here than in the chance of winning that "one ha sun-dappled Balaguer."