

'Most famous' Yank at home in Madrid

After eight years in England, goalkeeper Kasey Keller last season joined Spain's Rayo Vallecano — the capital's other team — and contributed mightily to the club's unexpected success.

Kasey Keller is recognized by many Spaniards, but Rayo players do not receive the same level of attention as those at Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid.

Rayo Vallecano's Angel Alcazar (front) shields the ball from Laurent Battles of French club Bordeaux during their UEFA Cup series. Rayo's 6-2 aggregate win sent the club to the quarterfinals.

BY SCOTT FRENCH

'WE'RE NO. 3!' "We're definitely the third team in Madrid," Kasey Keller acknowledges. "Everyone goes to see Real Madrid or Atletico [Madrid], but they like Rayo. For our game [in early February] against Osasuna, we had 6,500, 7,000. Atletico's Second Division game had 56,000."



Rayo Vallecano, which returned last season to the First Division, is in the capital's left-leaning Vallecas neighborhood. "We've got a hardcore [following of] 6,000, with a floating, say, 4,000 who [occasionally] decide to go to the game," Keller

says. "It's a very working-class crowd — they kind of pride themselves on that."

"It's a funny team, a team that is — obviously without the glory — very similar to Monaco. It doesn't necessarily get the best crowds, but it entices good players and pays well."

The fans have treated Keller well, although his introduction to the Rayo faithful was somewhat frosty. Julen Lopetegui, whom Keller replaced in the nets when he arrived from English Premier League club Leicester City in summer 1999 (and with whom Keller continues to battle for playing time), is a fan favorite. The American's performance last season swung most of *fanaticos* to his side.

Then there's Vallecas itself.

"It's basically referred to as 'Red' Vallecas — it's a Communist support area," Keller reports. "Americans are not exactly the favorites of Communist sympathizers. We're talking about something that's not a big deal. It's very underlying, very minimal, but it's there."

STADIUM. Estadio Maria Teresa Rivero Sanchez—formerly the Nuevo Vallecas, renamed for Rayo's president — seats nearly 16,000.

"It's wedged in the middle of a city block, and because of this, there's only three sides," Keller



J. BRETT WHITESEL/US

says. "Behind one of the goals is a large retaining wall, and on other side there's a road and some tall apartment buildings. When it's close to capacity, it can be very intimidating."

JUANDE RAMOS. The Rayo coach was lauded after Rayo, expected to be relegated from *La Liga* for the third time in seven years, finished ninth last season and earned a spot in the UEFA Cup. He's steered the club to seventh through late February.

"He tries to be very non-committal," Keller says. "Sometimes he leaves you wondering what's going on. But he's very knowledgeable, knows the opponents extremely well. He has a pretty good idea how he wants the team to play, how to set that up. I think he just needs, personally, to take a line and say this is how it is."

TRAINING. Keller figures he spends about half his training time working with goalkeeper coach Camelo Del Paso, whom he describes as "one of the big benefits" at Rayo.

"That was probably one of the main reasons I left Leicester — I didn't enjoy the goalkeeping aspect of it at all," he says. "Even with the little time I was out of the [Rayo] team through injury, waiting to get my chance again ... you can keep your sanity when you enjoy training day in and day out."

LA LIGA. Rayo Vallecano has modest aims. Last season, it hoped to survive in the top flight, a goal it greatly surpassed. This year's UEFA Cup run — Rayo is into the quarterfinals after eliminating French club Bordeaux — is cause for pride.

"We had three of the four semifinalists [including champion Real Madrid and runner-up Valencia] in the Champions League, and none of those teams won the league last year," Keller points out. "That tells you what the competition level is like."

CELEBRITY. "The media likes to say that I'm the most famous American living in Spain," Keller notes. "I probably am — actually living [in Spain]. You look at someone like [actress] Melanie Griffith, who's in Marbella half the time because her husband [actor Antonio Banderas] is Spanish. I'm not that famous."

Keller is recognized in Madrid, "but it's never the same level as if I were a Real player. For us [at Rayo], we get people who say hello. Once I was walking in the same area where [Real star Luis] Figo was walking down the road." Naturally, nobody noticed Keller.

TEAMMATES. Lopetegui, long-serving captain Jesus Diego Cota and young midfielder Michel are Rayo's best-loved players. "This is a very transient team: It brings players in, they're here for a year or two, then they're gone," Keller explains. "Few players have been here for long periods of time, someone fans can relate to."

His closest friend at Rayo is German midfielder Gerhard Poschner, who arrived at the club the day before Keller.



REGIS DUVIGNAU/REUTERS

LANGUAGE. Keller arrived in Madrid with some Spanish basics, but he got "a little lazy" last season. "I'm improving daily — I just don't talk [in Spanish] enough," he says. "I speak a couple hours a day, then I come home and speak English."

Kristin Keller has a stronger Spanish foundation than her husband. "She's probably more grammatically correct than I am right now," he says. "When people speak very grammatically and very proper, she understands it better than do. When people are talking more slang, I think understand a bit more."

MEDIA. Rayo receives coverage from several major daily newspapers, Madrid television and the two Madrid sports dailies; *Marca* and *As*. Real and Atletico receive far more attention.

"We get 7,000 to our game, Atletico get 56,000," Keller says. "We've gotten, for what we are, very good media coverage. Everyone still bitches about it — 'We're top-flight, Atletico is Second Division' — but, sorry, the numbers speak for themselves."

"If I'm the most recognized American in Spain, then the media coverage is not too bad."

Keller says he enjoys a good relationship, for the most part, with the press.

"It's just — it's the only sport, and every radio station is talking about it, every TV station, when they go to sports, they're talking about it. The big difference is that the Spanish press proclaims it knows everything that

happens.

"They can make general guesses, but they definitely come out with things ... the legal department at the papers must have heart attacks, some of the things they print."

MOVING TO SPAIN. "It's the easiest thing acclimating anywhere when you take your family," says Keller. "When you go home, you're in your own culture."

He, Kristin and 3-year-old twins Chloe and Cameron "do our own thing. We watch American shows on English TV. We don't eat dinner at 9:30, 10 o'clock at night — just because everyone else in Spain does, it doesn't mean we do."

MADRID. Spain's capital "is a very, very nice town. There's a lot of things I really like about it. Like it's big, but not too big. ... We have great restaurants, shopping, movies in *version originale*. All the benefits of a major city."

He says his twins' school, the American School of Madrid, "will be one of the very difficult things to leave when we do leave. ... One thing I'll be happy about leaving: Everybody smokes here. When kids become very susceptible to that, 13-, 14-year-old time — the kids here are probably stealing their parents' cigarettes. That influence I

Kasey Keller

Personal
Age: 31 **Position:** Goalkeeper **Height:** 6-2
Weight: 190 **Home-town:** Lacey, Wash.

College
Univ. of Portland

Career
Portland Timbers
YEAR GP G
 1989 10 0

Millwall
YEAR GP G
 1991-92 1 0
 1992-93 45 0
 1993-94 44 0
 1994-95 44 0
 1995-96 42 0
Totals 176 0

Leicester City
YEAR GP G
 1996-97 31 0
 1997-98 32 0
 1998-99 36 0
Totals 99 0

Rayo Vallecano
YEAR GP G
 1999-2000 28 0
 2000-01 8 0
Totals 36 0

USA
YEAR GP G
 1990 6 0
 1992 1 0
 1995 4 0
 1996 7 0
 1997 6 0
 1998 10 0
 1999 5 0
 2000 7 0
Totals 46 0

International
U.S. national team: **1999** Confederations Cup (third place). **1998** World Cup (first round), **1998** Gold Cup (runner-up). **1996** Gold Cup (third place). **1995** Copa America (fourth place). **1990** World Cup (first round). **U.S. Olympic team:** **1996** Olympics (first round). **1991** Pan-American Games (gold medal). **U.S. Under-20 team:** **1989** World Youth Championship (fourth place, Silver Ball winner). **1987** World Youth Championship (first round).

Rayo Trivia



• Rayo Vallecano de Madrid—the club's formal moniker—has been around since **1924**, but it has spent all except 10 seasons in Spain's lower divisions.

• Rayo is enjoying its first taste of European competition this season, reaching the **UEFA Cup** quarterfinals. Rayo has eliminated Andorra's Constelacio Esportiva, Norway's Molde, Denmark's Viborg, Russia's Lokomotiv Moscow and France's Bordeaux.

• Rayo owner **Jose Maria Ruiz Mateos**, formerly Spain's richest man, spent 16 years fighting a 1983 decree that the socialist government used to take control of his businesses. He'd show up for his frequent court battles dressed as Superman, cape and all.

• Rayo is run by Ruiz Mateos' wife, **Maria Teresa Rivero Sanchez**. She is the only woman to run a top Spanish club. Rivero, who is 69, has 13 children and 39 grandchildren.

• Mexican great **Hugo Sanchez**, who spent time in the NASL and MLS made his name at Atletico Madrid and Real Madrid but had a brief stopover at Rayo, playing in Vallecas in 1993-94.

• Rayo Vallecano's success has prompted Ska-P, one of Spain's most popular alternative rock bands, to dedicate a song to the club: "**Como un Rayo**" ("Like a shot").

wouldn't be too happy about."

Keller isn't into Madrid's late-night club scene, but he's an avid concertgoer. His tastes, which lean toward punk and hard rock, make him a bit of "an oddity" among European soccer players. "Most footballers are such pop fanatic's — you don't get too many who listen to what I listen to. I've seen Green Day to Queens of the Stone Age to Slipknot.... Last night we saw the Offspring."

He offers visitors two recommendations: "You'll want to go to a few games — you'll want to get to [Real's stadium Santiago] Bernabeu, no question about that. ... There's these beautiful, kind of ancient cities on the outskirts of Madrid: Toledo and Segovia, places that you should definitely plan a day-trip to."

The Kellers live about 10 miles outside Madrid, a place they could call home. "I could stay in Madrid the rest of my career, if I was at the right place," he says. "If I was at Atletico or Real, I'd stay here another 3-5 years without blinking."

(*Scott French is a senior editor at Soccer America.*)