

Why the Cosmic Kite Never Fell: Football and Diego Maradona

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In Argentina, beatification and canonisation can happen to living figures. Unlike the officialdom of the Catholic Church, the processes take place in accordance with an insurgent popular will. The death of various public figures – Carlos Gardel for tango; Evita Perón for politics; Diego Maradona for football – merely reassures them the status of popular saintliness. Essential in the make-up of such a figure: a flawed, distressed character; usually of humble origins; a stroke of charisma, even genius; a rascal's talent to seduce.

Diego Maradona, footballer with the No 10 shirt, had oodles of all of those traits. It was on the field where he expressed himself best, so much so that he was lauded, if not as a god of sorts, then certainly the emissary of one. As with so many figures who become premature monuments and plinth displays, the process off the field of performance is cruel, a disfiguring form of sinning saintliness. But on the field, the figure of Maradona beguiled. As he [described](#) it, "When you're on the pitch, life goes away. Problems go away. Everything goes away." His technique entailed hypnosis with feet and legs, a dynamo of deceiving genius. When he played, he moved laws and assumptions. During the 1986 World Cup tournament in Mexico, one he made his own, his performances were never just pitch-confined. In them, Argentina saw catharsis. Rivals such as England saw a bedevilling cheat.

It came in that most written and talked about of encounters. June 22, 1986. The quarter-final. England and Argentina, locked at the Estadio Azteca in Mexico City. Maradona breaks the drought with his first goal. Some confusion over the scrappy method of execution: offside? "Or was it a use of a hand that England were complaining about?" wondered Barry Davies in his BBC commentary. The Uruguayan, Victor Hugo Morales, was less equivocal and more spiritually honest in [his famous narrative](#): "handball! Goal! Goal! Goal! Goal for Argentina!" He conceded that the English had grounds to protest but knew where his allegiance lay. "The goal was scored using a hand, I celebrate it with all my soul, but I must say what I think. I hope you tell me, from Buenos Aires, if you're watching the game, if the goal was fair, though the referee has given it." He sought God's forgiveness for his remarks.

Within a few minutes, the Sky God again prevailed upon, this time to be thanked. From poacher, Maradona had turned artist, using the dribbling, bewildering seduction of the gambeta. Morales was ecstatic. "Genius! Genius! Genius! Genius! He's still going... Goooooal! Sorry, I want to cry! Good God! Long live football! ... The greatest solo goal of all time. Cosmic Kite, which planet did you come from leaving so many English players behind, and in this process turning the country into a clenched fist shouting for Argentina!" God was thanked profusely, "for football, for Maradona, for these tears and for this score line: Argentina 2 England 0."

A football chant was given birth to, [one recalled](#) by the Argentine anthropologist Eduardo Archetti. It was richly crude and unforgiving, featuring Britain's prime minister and victor over Argentina in the Falklands War of 1982. "*Thatcher, Thatcher donde estas? Maradona, Maradona te anda buscando, para metértela por detras!*" (Thatcher, Thatcher where are you? Maradona is looking for you to screw you from behind!)

In his autobiography [Yo Soy El Diego](#) (I am The Diego), Maradona recalled being a surrogate, avenging warrior for his country. "Somehow we blamed the English players for everything that had happened, for everything that the Argentinian people had suffered. I know that sounds crazy but that's the way we felt. The feeling was stronger than us: we were defending our flag, the dead kids, the survivors." An [analysis](#) published in one of Spain's leading newspapers, *El País*, went so far as to see Maradona as a hero no less significant than "the legendary liberator from colonial rule, General San Martín."

The football authorities have never stopped weighing in on the significance of the moment. The contrasting ways the goals were scored, suggested Mark Biram, were dichotomous of Argentina itself. He [quotes](#) Maradona's 1986 teammate, Jorge Valdano, who assessed the first goal as the result of characteristic deceit, creole cunning and sharpness. "Argentina is a place where deceit has more prestige than honesty." But the second goal was a product of another, flair-filled side, "one of virtue and ability."

In 1984, Maradona made the journey from silverware heavy Barcelona to silverware bereft Napoli. The fee then would not seem so eye-popping now: £5 million. He was also unduly optimistic, a [point he made](#) in Asif Kapadia's 2019 documentary. "I expected peace. The peace I didn't have in Barcelona." But things started oddly; expectations not met. "I asked for a house, I got a flat. I asked for a Ferrari, I got a Fiat." What he gave to Napoli was worth its weight in gold and, it should be said, sanity. The club won its first ever Serie A title in 1987 because of the exploits of the *Scugnizzo Napoletano*, that naughtiest of naughty rascals.

Maradona's miracles began to compete with the city's established patron saint, San Gennaro. But yet to become a fully-fledged figure of sinning saintliness, there was more room to err. At the club, things turned tempestuous. By the late 1980s, Maradona wished to leave. Napoli shut the door on such suggestions. The player took to drugs under the stifling shadow of organised crime. In 1991, he was suspended for 15 months following a test showing traces of cocaine. The Cosmic Kite suffered a gradual, health plagued decline as he fell to earth. In an interview with Argentina's Tyc Sports in 2014, [he rued](#) his fall towards addiction: "I gave my opponents a big advantage due to my illness. Do you know the player I could have been if I hadn't taken drugs?"

At his passing, the mayor of Naples, a politician sensing a moment, was keen to draw upon and imbibe the Maradona legend. "I ask," [requested](#) Luigi de Magistris, "that our stadium, which has witnessed so many of his successes, bear his name. It will be called the Diego Armando Maradona. The people want it. They spoke unanimously."

Roberto Saviano, who made his name with *Gomorrah*, a work on the Camorra crime network, was less opportunistic though [no less indulgent](#) in the memory of the Argentinean. Themes of sin pickle it: Maradona was the means of the city's redemption. "Redemption, because a southern team had never won a Scudetto, a team from the south had never won the UEFA Cup, or even been the centre of the world's attention." The greater footballer might have gone for Juventus, the star club of the Serie A galaxy; he, instead, picked Napoli.

Broadcasters, commentators and players across the globe will recount memories of the Cosmic Kite like sips of holy water and pieces of blessed bread. Sporting stars of codes beyond football will pay their respect to him as, indeed, [they already have](#). The words of Charles Baudelaire, noted in the opening of Emir Kusturica's [tribute](#) from 2008, are appropriate. "God is the only being who, in order to reign, doesn't even need to exist." Cosmically, the kite never fell.

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