

Maradona leaves behind a legacy that changed football

I'm too young to remember Diego Armando Maradona. What I do remember is my mother, complaining about him and how he knocked Italy out of the 1990 World Cup.

For every Italian, Maradona was a villain or he was their hero. For the city of Naples, he is the greatest player to have ever played for their club and he was also one to remove all righteous judgment.

In the semi-finals of the 1990 World Cup, Italy took on Argentina in Naples.

Maradona simply convinced the Neapolitan faithful to cheer for Argentina. And that they did.

What was supposed to be a home match for the Italians became something more. Maradona and Argentina knocked Italy out and advanced to the finals. In its second consecutive World Cup finals appearance, Argentina would go on to lose to Germany 1-0.

Going back to the 1970s before the talisman announced himself to the world, Argentina was going through football reform. The country was set to host the World Cup in 1978 and they hadn't won the illustrious trophy to date. Luis Cesar Menotti became the coach and actually left Maradona off the squad because he felt he was too young.

Mario Kempes was their leading striker and with a new style of playing the game, these two galvanized the country to their first World Cup title.

Maradona continued with Argentinos Juniors as he celebrated with his nation before moving to one of the country's biggest clubs, Boca Juniors, in 1981.

He moved to Barcelona a year later and his tenure with the Blaugrana lasted two years. But his move to Napoli in 1984 saw 75,000 people attend the Stadio San Paolo for his introduction. This is where he would cement his legacy as one of the great footballers of our time.

In the 1986 World Cup, all Argentina had brought to the tournament was a star-studded footballer, a bag of soccer balls and a decent forward. And the 5'5 magician simply made it work. When you think of this tournament, more often than not, all you think about are two goals in the quarter finals against England.

The first is the goal he titled 'The Hand of God.' Maradona met Peter Shilton in the area and hoofed the ball over with his fist into the back of the net. And four minutes after this controversial goal, Maradona would score a goal dubbed the goal of the century. He ripped apart the English defence, as he as his curly locks danced and weaved through four defenders. He dummied even Shilton himself before putting the ball into the back of the net along with the 'ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, goooool!?' from iconic commentator Victor Hugo Morales.

He would lead Argentina to victory in the tournament, defeating the Germans 3-2 in the finals. He scored five goals and five assists and, a year later, led Napoli to their first ever Italian league title.

He won five trophies with Napoli including two league titles, a UEFA cup and a Coppa Italia. Still to this day, those are the only two league titles Napoli has to their name.

Yet, Maradona was subject to off field troubles. He struggled with cocaine use and missed practices due to stress. His 15-month ban due to illicit drug use earned him a ticket out of Naples and to Spain before heading back home to Argentina where he would spend the rest of his club career.

And, in the 1994 World Cup, he was removed from his final international tournament because of a positive drug test as well.

He would move on to coach. He loved the game. In 2010, he managed Argentina only to be eliminated by Germany 4-0. He went on to manage other clubs worldwide, teaching and preaching the beautiful game.

But, despite his personal challenges, it would be prudent to look at just how much of an effect he had on his country and the globe. If it ever were a country to view a man as a living God, it would be Argentina, and it would be Maradona.

He continued what the nation started. In fact, he made Argentina a lot better with his influence. Players growing up wanted his speed, his tantalizing footwork and his ability to coerce defenders to simply go the wrong way. Once he left the game, the nation saw some of the greatest attacking talents emerge into the game from his home land.

Gabriel Batistuta, Hernan Crespo, Juan Roman Riquelme, Carlos Tevez, Sergio Kun Agüero, Gonzalo Higuain, Angel Di Maria and Lautaro Martinez are some of the forwards and midfielders that have made their mark in the game. Then, of course, there is the one who he pegged as his predecessor: Lionel Messi.

Sadly, Messi could not repeat what Maradona had done. Argentina had lost to, you guessed it, Germany in the 2014 World Cup final 1-0 and the trophy alluded even Messi himself.

But when you saw what you saw this past week and felt what you felt when it was announced Maradona had passed away, it was something that was anything but ordinary.

Argentina decreed three days of mourning. Thousands of people went to see his casket in the Presidential Palace in Buenos Aires. Napoli, who had already retired his number 10, announced they will rename their stadium in his honour.

Players such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Messi sent their condolences. Even Pele, who Maradona had rivalled for the greatest of all time in their era, tweeted a heartfelt goodbye.

“I lost a great friend and the world lost a legend. One day, I hope we will play soccer together in the sky,” the 80-year-old tweeted.

He will go down as one of the greatest in Argentina's folklore both as a player and as a person.

Even for people such as myself who never saw him play, it is conventional knowledge to know what he accomplished.

Leagues around the globe have honoured him in their matches. Boca Juniors even honoured his daughter, Dalma, at a home match in Buenos Aires this past weekend, bringing Maradona's daughter to tears.

Messi honoured Maradona with a black replica of his Newell's Old Boys jersey; a team in Messi's hometown Rosario where Maradona briefly played.

Lorenzo Insigne scored a free kick to open the scoring in Napoli's 4-0 rout of Roma this past weekend and the Neapolitan born forward honoured Maradona with a shirt with his name on it. The stadium did their part too with a photo on the screen and a banner in the stands.

The rest of 2020 won't be the same for the global game with the loss of this icon. It won't stop either. Never.

By Robert Belardi