

*Tribute*

## Diego Maradona

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*Even now, over 30 years after he scored that incredible 'goal of the century' against the English team in the World Cup, and despite his later descent into drugs and addictions, Maradona remains an icon, and a mystery.*



Why is it that no other international football player after Pele has seduced the football loving Indian more than Diego Armando Maradona, that squat, muscular figure with prodigious skill, plucky flamboyance and heart firmly in the right (left) place.

The beginning of this tale can be traced back to the mid 1980s. India had a closer relationship with the 1986 FIFA World Cup than all others before it because it was also the time when the television set was making its appearance in middle class households and, for the first time, skills of the individual teams and their stars would be beamed live to houses. There was already a buzz around Maradona, the diminutive Latino football sensation ... who was not a Brazilian! The child prodigy from a ghetto in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina, was already showing his mettle by commanding huge transfer fees and winning the Italian championship for lowly-placed Napoli.

After spending five years at Argentinos Juniors, from 1976 to 1981, scoring 115 goals in 167 appearances Maradona got a US\$ 4 million transfer to Boca Juniors. He was bombarded with

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offers from other clubs, including River Plate which offered to make him the club's best paid player. With him Boca had a successful season, winning the league title.

After the 1982 World Cup, which was largely quiet by Diego's standard, in June, Maradona was transferred to Barcelona in Spain for a then world-record fee of £5 million (\$7.6 million) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_most\\_expensive\\_association\\_football\\_transfers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_expensive_association_football_transfers) ). In 1983, under coach César Luis Menotti, Barcelona and Maradona won the Copa del Rey (Spain's annual national cup competition), beating Real Madrid, and the Spanish Super Cup, beating Athletic Bilbao. On 26 June 1983, Barcelona won against Real Madrid in one of the world's biggest club games, *El Clásico*, a match where Maradona scored and became the first Barcelona player to be applauded by arch-rival Real Madrid fans. The Barcelona sojourn did not last longer after the infamous Copa Del Rey final with Juventus.

Maradona arrived in Naples with an even larger world record fee £5 million (\$10.48 million) and was presented to the world media as a Napoli player on 5 July 1984, where he was welcomed by 75,000 fans at his presentation at the Stadio San Paolo. Sports writer David Goldblatt commented, "They [the fans] were convinced that the saviour had arrived." A local newspaper stated that despite the lack of a "mayor, houses, schools, buses, employment and sanitation, none of this matters because we have Maradona". Prior to Maradona's arrival, Italian football was dominated by teams from the north and centre of the country, such as A.C. Milan, Juventus, Inter Milan, and Roma, and no team in the south of the Italian Peninsula had ever won a league title.

At Napoli, Maradona reached the peak of his professional career: he soon inherited the captain's armband from Napoli veteran defender Giuseppe Bruscolotti and quickly became an adored star among the club's fans; in his time there he elevated the team to the most successful era in its history. Maradona played for Napoli at a period when north-south tensions in Italy were at a peak due to a variety of issues, notably the economic differences between the two. Led by Maradona, Napoli won their first ever Serie A Italian Championship, leading to tumultuous celebration. A rolling series of impromptu street parties and festivities broke out contagiously across the city in a round-the-clock carnival which ran for over a week. The world was turned upside down. The Neapolitans held mock funerals for Juventus and Milan, burning their coffins, their death notices announcing 'May 1987, the other Italy has been defeated. A new empire is born. Murals of Maradona were painted on the city's ancient buildings, and newborn children were named after him. The following season, the team's prolific attacking trio, formed by Maradona, Bruno Giordano, and Careca, was later dubbed the "Ma-Gi-Ca" (*magical*) front-line.

Maradona would win Napoli their second league title in 1989-90, and finish runners up in the league twice, in 1987-88 and 1988-89.

In the 1986 World Cup the stage was set, the matches being telecast live to the Indian fans who till then had to remain contented hearing about the exploits of the European stars and Brazil. Maradona changed all that. His drug-filled exploits had already started being reported from Napoli. There was no doubt about his skills but to see this puny 5'5" Latino winning matches single-handedly against the fancied European football powerhouse shot the audience

into a trance. And to top it all his semi-final goals against the best defence in the tournament – one an act of base treachery and the next the sublime, from using the hand to score a goal to what is considered as the ‘goal of the century’, in the span of a few minutes.

### **Goal of the Century**

Maradona captained the Argentine national team to victory in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, winning the final in Mexico City against West Germany. Throughout the tournament, Maradona asserted his dominance and was the most dynamic player of the competition. He played every minute of every Argentina game, scoring five goals and making five assists, three of those in the opening match against South Korea at the Olímpico Universitario Stadium in Mexico City. His first goal of the tournament came against Italy in the second group game in Puebla. Argentina eliminated Uruguay in the first knockout round in Puebla, setting up a match against England at the Azteca Stadium, also in Mexico City and prevailed over the English side with two contrasting goals in the 2–1 quarter-final win against England.

Maradona followed this with two more goals in a semi-final match against Belgium at the Azteca, including another virtuoso dribbling display for the second goal. In the final match, West Germany attempted to contain him by double-marking, but he nevertheless found the space past the West German player Lothar Matthäus to give the final pass to Jorge Burruchaga for the winning goal. Argentina beat West Germany 3–2 in front of 115,000 fans at the Azteca with Maradona lifting the World Cup as captain.

During the tournament, Maradona attempted or set up more than half of Argentina's shots, attempted a tournament-best 90 dribbles – three times more than any other player – and was fouled a record 53 times, winning his team twice as many free kicks as any player. Maradona scored or assisted 10 of Argentina's 14 goals (71 per cent), including the assist for the winning goal in the final, ensuring that he would be remembered as one of the greatest names in football history. By the end of the World Cup, Maradona went on to win the Golden Ball as the best player of the tournament by unanimous vote and was widely regarded to have won the World Cup virtually single-handedly, something that he later stated he did not entirely agree with. Zinedine Zidane, watching the 1986 World Cup as a 14-year-old, remarked that Maradona "was on another level". In a tribute to him, Azteca Stadium authorities built a statue of him scoring the "Goal of the Century" and placed it at the entrance of the stadium.

Maradona's legend was perhaps cemented by his exploits against England in their quarter-final match. The majesty of his second goal and the notoriety of his first led to the French newspaper *L'Équipe* describing Maradona as "half-angel, half-devil". This match was played in the background of the Falklands War between Argentina and the United Kingdom. Replays showed that the first goal was scored by striking the ball with his hand. Maradona was coyly evasive, describing it as "a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God". It became known as the ‘Hand of God’. Maradona's second goal, just four minutes after the hotly disputed hand-goal, was later voted by FIFA as the greatest goal in the history of the World Cup. He received the ball in his own half, swivelled around and with 11 touches ran

more than half the length of the field, dribbling past five English outfield players (Peter Beardsley, Steve Hodge, Peter Reid, Terry Butcher, and Terry Fenwick) before he left goalkeeper Peter Shilton on his backside with a feint, and slotted the ball into the net. This goal was voted 'Goal of the Century' in a 2002 online poll conducted by FIFA. A 2002 Channel 4 poll in the UK ranked his performance number 6 in the list of the 100 Greatest Sporting Moments.

In 2014, Roger Bennett of *ESPN FC*, writing about Maradona's performance at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, described it as "the most virtuoso performance a World Cup has ever witnessed," while Kevin Baxter of the *Los Angeles Times* called it "one of the greatest individual performances in tournament history", with Steven Goff of *The Washington Post* dubbing his performance as "one of the finest in tournament annals". In 2002, Russell Thomas of *The Guardian* described Maradona's second goal against England in the 1986 World Cup quarter-finals as "arguably the greatest individual goal ever". In a 2009 article for *CBC Sports*, John Molinaro described the goal as "the greatest ever scored in the tournament – and, maybe, in soccer". In a 2018 article for *Sportsnet*, he added: "No other player, not even Pel[é] in 1958 nor Paolo Rossi in 1982, had dominated a single competition the way Maradona did in Mexico." He also went on to say of Maradona's performance: "The brilliant Argentine artist single-handedly delivered his country its second World Cup." Regarding his two memorable goals against England in the quarter-finals, he commented:

Yes, it was Maradona's hand, and not God's, that was responsible for the first goal against England. But while the 'Hand of God' goal remains one of the most contentious moments in World Cup history, there can be no disputing that his second goal against England ranks as the greatest ever scored in the tournament. It transcended mere sports – his goal was pure art.

In the words of Guillem Ballague:

That Sunday in Mexico City, the world saw one man single-handedly – in more than one sense of the phrase – lift the mood of a depressed and downtrodden nation into the stratosphere. With two goals in the space of four minutes, he allowed them to dare to dream that they, like him, could be the best in the world. He did it first by nefarious and then spellbindingly brilliant means. In those moments, he went from star player to legend.

Maradona himself openly stating that it was the 'hand of god' permanently made the Indians a slave to this flawed hero. Never ever, could we believe it was possible for anybody to be so wondrously unapologetic for a wrong telecast live all over the world. It was not a mere match, it was a war between imperialist England and defeated Argentina and, as we well know, all is fair in love and war. Maradona's 'hand of god' comment was a staggering act of defiance, and how we Indians loved him for it!

The goal itself has been viewed as an embodiment of the Buenos Aires shanty town Maradona was brought up in and its concept of *viveza criolla*—"cunning of the criollos". Although critical of the illegitimate first goal, England striker Gary Lineker conceded, "When Diego scored that second goal against us, I felt like applauding. I'd never felt like that before, but it's true... and not just because it was such an important game. It was impossible to score such a beautiful goal. He's the greatest player of all time, by a long way."

Latin America always holds a special place in the hearts of Indians – poverty, Che, Castro and anti-imperialism. It was like the spirit of common man's Bohemian Rhapsody being

played out in real life. And if you throw in the sense of giving it back to the crown in terms of the loss of life and prestige in the Falklands War the circle seemed complete.

### **The slide**

The gradual slide due to drugs and late night wild parties, still giving Napoli another victory and taking Argentina to the world cup finals before missing out on a controversial penalty, only added to Maradona's worldwide popularity, especially among Indians. For most part of his career, Maradona's weekly regime consisted of playing a game on Sunday, going out until Wednesday, then hitting the gym on Thursday. He would look so incredibly out of shape, but then he'd train like crazy and sweat it off by the time matchday came along. His body shape just didn't look like a footballer's, but then he had this ability and this balance.

Bavassi, Kaczer and Fernández in 'Maradona in our minds: The FIFA World Cup as a way to address collective memory properties' (*Memory & Cognition*, volume 48, 2020, pp.469–480) attributed to the popularity of the Argentinian as “a collective representation involves episodic, semantic, and implicit components such as beliefs, feelings, rituals, and knowledge of the past. According to the authors, this can be the reason for people around the globe recalling a famous sportscaster commentary about that goal, describing Maradona as a “cosmic kite”. Remarkably, this information is not learned at school, nor in any formal environment. Thus, this is a type of shared and informal knowledge that lends itself to addressing the properties of collective memory.

Although more than 30 years have passed since what was considered to be the “goal of the Century”, a goal by Maradona against the English team in the quarter-finals of the 1986 World Cup, most Argentinians still talk about it (Albareces, 2003).

Maradona, later in his life was more open about his use of drugs that led to his inevitable fall: “I tried it in Europe for the first time in 1982,” he said. “I was 22 years old; it was enough for me to feel alive. I tried drugs because there are drugs like that everywhere in football. I used to go to the bathroom with the lights off.” Baring his soul in an unprecedented interview with the weekly magazine *Gene* in Buenos Aires, the footballer said: "I was, am and always will be a drug addict." He added that cocaine "never left me free to think and act."

During his Napoli days Maradona's 'physical conditioning' regime was also incredible. Sunday: Serie A match. Sunday night to Wednesday: continuous cocaine binge, usually with Camorra. Wednesday morning to Saturday: “cleanse”, and sweat it all out. Sunday: Serie A match.

Most experts, medical professionals and journalists who have followed Maradona's life and exploits very closely have admitted that intelligence doesn't preclude people from taking drugs any more than fame does. When those who are under stress need to relax, some turn to drugs or drink as an escape from reality. Others do it because they believe it enhances their creativity or allows them to stay awake when needed. Just because you are a genius doesn't mean you're sensible.

At the time that Maradona retired from active football, he left Argentina traumatized. "Maradona was more than just a great footballer. It was a special compensation factor for a country that in a few years lived through several military dictatorships and social frustrations of all kinds." Valdano added "Maradona offered to Argentines a way out of their collective frustration, and that's why people there love him as a divine figure."

Speaking 30 years later in 2009 on the impact of Maradona's performances former FIFA President Sepp Blatter stated, "Everyone has an opinion on Diego Armando Maradona, and that's been the case since his playing days." Mr Blatter's most vivid recollection is of this incredibly gifted kid at the second FIFA U-20 World Cup in Japan in 1979. He left everyone open-mouthed every time he got on the ball." Maradona went on to win the Golden Ball at both the FIFA U-20 World Cup and FIFA World Cup.

Anybody with the kind of records or chequered career that Maradona had is sure to be talked about, during his times, after he has stopped playing and how he fared alongside other greats. Post retirement, Maradona's sympathy to left-wing ideologies, support for an independent Palestinian state and his legendary friendship with Castro, Hugo Chavez and open admiration for Che was a deadly cocktail for the football fraternity in India, which resulted in an endearing love for him.