

FORZA PADDY AGNEW ITALIA

A JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF ITALY AND ITS FOOTBALL

'I doubt there's anybody
understands Italy and their
love of the beautiful game
better' **MARK LAWRENSON**



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AGNEW
ITALIA**

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AND ITS FOOTBALL**



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CONTENTS

	Introduction: Rotterdam Reflections	1
1	Hammer in the Briefcase	17
2	Mussolini Invents Serie A	51
3	Maradona	63
4	Berlusconi: Football and Politics.....	95
5	Trevignano	133
6	Eriksson and the Media	151
7	Behind the Camera.....	169
8	Seven Minutes in Serie A.....	187
9	Juventus on Trial.....	217
10	Endgame.....	251
11	Fans	267
12	Autumn.....	281
	Coda	301
	References	304
	Index	305

INTRODUCTION

ROTTERDAM REFLECTIONS

Twenty seconds, 20 miserable seconds ... Along with the 22 million Italians gathered around their TV sets back in the *bel paese*, I am unlikely ever to forget Italy's dramatic last-gasp defeat by France in the European Championship final in Rotterdam on Sunday, 2 July 2000.

Just when Italy stood on the brink of a remarkable, not widely expected success, the redoubtable French side of Zidane, Deschamps, Thuram et al pulled it out of the fire, first with an equaliser from Sylvain Wiltord in stoppage time and then with David Trezeguet's winning golden goal.

Having lived and worked in Italy for the last 20 years, I often find myself accredited as 'Italian Media' at big tournaments. Therefore, on that mild Rotterdam night, I found myself in the Italian section of the press box. As Wiltord's equaliser went in, it met with a collective groan of despair all around me. The chorus at La Scala could not have been more in unison, with all of us immediately suspecting that from here on, there could be only one winner and it would not be Italy.

That groan was prompted by two considerations. Firstly, there was the straightforward, chauvinistic disappointment at the dawning realisation that the boys in blue, the *azzurri*, were not going to pull it off, after all. Secondly, there was the more prosaic consideration that, with newspaper deadlines looming, we journalists were in trouble.

One of the least noble of football-writing trade secrets concerns deadlines. With so many night-time games these days, the football writer is often in the awkward position of knowing that his poised, carefully reasoned match analysis needs to be filed right on the final whistle. As a result, the stressed reporter starts writing at half-time and then spends the entire second half in a schizophrenic limbo, caught between his computer screen, his observations and the ongoing match. Inevitably, this necessary business of writing a match report while the game is still in progress can be fraught with pitfalls.

That press box groan was motivated by the realisation that hundreds of carefully written, deeply analytical pieces explaining a splendid Italian triumph were now out the window. After all, the pendulum swing from 'Magnificent Italian Triumph' to 'French Fight Back to Win Title' is about as big a story turnaround as you get, and, what is more, you get it in just 20 seconds.

If you are the old dog for the hard road, then in tight matches like this one, you write two 'intros' or opening paragraphs. Thus, when the Wiltord goal went in, I was not especially worried as I already had Report B on file. The ease with which one moved from an enthusiastic celebration of the Italian triumph to laudatory admiration for the French comeback speaks volumes about the whorish nature of the sports writer's world.

For all that, I felt genuinely sorry and disappointed that Italy had not won. Italy had done pretty well throughout the tournament (drawing a veil over their absurd semi-final win against host country the Netherlands) and had certainly played better than France in the final. On football grounds, Italy would have stolen nothing in lifting the title. Then, too, I simply had wanted Italy to win, wanted Italy and Italians to have something to celebrate and feel good about, even if only for a few days.

My own sense of disappointment surprised me. At previous tournaments, I had been much more removed, feeling only a

INTRODUCTION

mild sympathy for Italy's fate. Indeed, when Roberto Baggio missed his famous penalty in the 1994 World Cup final shoot-out in Pasadena, Los Angeles, I had positively exulted, partly because I had not relished the thought of newly installed Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi laying claim to part of the success. (Berlusconi was the man who discovered Italy's coach at USA '94, Arrigo Sacchi.)

This time was different. I felt linked to Italy's fate, and not just for the obvious professional reason of being someone who lives, at least in part, by writing about Italian football. Earlier in the day, as I sat in the press centre close to the de Kuip stadium just hours before the kick-off, my wife, Dympna (Dindy), had called me on my mobile phone. She was ringing from our home in Trevignano Romano, just north of Rome.

After the usual exchange of gossip, not to mention the daily *bollettino* of 'things that have gone wrong/broken down since you left' (dishwashers, car tyre punctures, fugitive family dogs etc.), our (then) eleven-year-old daughter Róisín came on the line. Almost immediately, she nutmegged me with a question that in any other context would seem both banal and obvious: 'Do you think we can win today, Daddy?'

It was the 'we' that set me thinking. Róisín was and is, of course, entitled to use the first person plural when referring to the Italian football team. After all, even though both her parents are bona fide Irish, she was born and has lived all her life in Italy. It is, for better or for worse, her homeland, albeit one shared at a distance with her parents' native green sod.

By the standards of Italian eleven-year-olds, however, Róisín's interest in football was sporadic. Just about every Italian child picks a team at an early age, opting to become a *juventino*, *milanista*, *interista*, *laziale* or *romanista*, often before learning to read or write, and more often than not because of strictly observed family tradition.

Róisín, however, is not such a child. Furthermore, as she has moved from childhood to adolescence she has tended to feel much more Irish than Italian, for what that is worth. Her concern about how ‘we’ would get on against France, however, had reminded me that part of me, somewhere, somehow, felt intimately linked to Italy.

If you live and work in a country for 20 years, and if you get married, have a child, build a house, take out your first mortgage and buy your first car in that same country, then you have put down some roots, be they sentimental or of the reinforced concrete foundation kind. The expatriate can spend a lot of life in a never-never land, an outsider in their adopted country and a stranger in their native land. For me, watching an Italian football team play, be it a club or the national team, gets me out of never-never land and straight into the Italian mainstream. Curiously, watching the Italian national team play can tend to have the same effect on Italians themselves, since one of the oft-repeated clichés of modern Italian living is that Italy and Italians only really assume a national identity when the *azzurri* line up to do battle at either the World Cup or the European Championship.

Listening to 25,000 Italian fans sing – and for once sing passably well – ‘Fratelli d’Italia’ prior to the Rotterdam kick-off, I wanted Italy to win. Victory in a football match generates a transient emotion but one which, for all that, can be intensely positive; call it the feel-good factor, if you like. Modern Italians, too, badly need a positive and winning version of the national image to contrast with their daily diet of Mafia killings, political chicanery, traffic jams, strikes and infrastructural shortcomings. Not for nothing is a popular morning radio programme called *How To Survive in Italy Today Without Dying of Rage*.

Four days prior to the Rotterdam final, I had been sitting in the press room at the Arena Stadium in Amsterdam, minutes before the semi-final clash between the Netherlands and Italy,

when colleague Simon Kuper told me that ‘for the good of football’ (or words to that effect) the Netherlands had better win. Simon is an outstanding, thoughtful and original football writer, and his words probably reflected the feelings of many of our colleagues. Italian teams, national or club, do not always enjoy a good international press. There are many commentators who feel that the traditionally defensive Italian game is not only dull and boring but also quintessentially negative and cynical, with a tendency to the dishonest.

Even if I understand that a majority of fans would prefer to see the Netherlands or France win a tournament like Euro 2000, I still wanted – and want – Italy to win. Not for its football virtues, even if Italian football has those too. No, it is more about decent, ordinary and sometimes extraordinary Italians.

I might be thinking of Carmine Mancuso, a police inspector (later a politician) when I first met him in Palermo, Sicily in December 1986. I had gone to Palermo to write a magazine piece on the ongoing *Maxi Processo*, a collective Mafia trial in which 344 mafiosi received heavy sentences, 19 of them getting life for a variety of crimes ranging from multiple murder to drug trafficking to racketeering. On the Saturday afternoon that I talked to Carmine in his apartment, he had to cut short the interview because his wife had to go to the dentist. The point was that, if she went to the dentist, so too did he and his police escort. It is a funny world when your wife requires a police escort to the dentist. Yet, Mancuso, his wife and his family lived every day with the threat of Mafia violence. Years earlier, Carmine’s father, Lenin, also a policeman, had been killed by the Mafia while on escort duty.

I might also be thinking of Paola Passalacqua, head of an all-women team of restorers whom I met in Assisi as they set about re-assembling a thirteenth-century Cimabué fresco, which had been violently dislodged from its normal resting place when an

earthquake hit the Basilica of San Francesco on 26 September 1997. Without the help of sophisticated or computerised technology, and working in the open in front of the Basilica, the team was trying to put together 90 square metres of fresco that had collapsed into pieces as small as those in a child's jigsaw puzzle. She and her team had to examine each small piece of smashed plaster, deducing, sometimes just from the shade of blue or green, whether it belonged to the face or some other part of the original fresco. Working out in the open, she told me that the work required patience and that was why women were best at it. For their skill, dedication and professionalism, the majority of the team received miserly State salaries of less than £300 per month.

I could be thinking about Rosaria Schifani. On a blisteringly hot July day in 1992, I was again down in Palermo, this time to attend the funeral of the Mafia-investigating magistrate Paolo Borsellino, killed by Cosa Nostra just as his good friend and colleague Giovanni Falcone had been killed two months earlier, both of them 'taken out' by massive explosions. Outside the cathedral of Maria Assunta, the air was tense. Angry young Palermitans, shut out of the cathedral, refused to let reporters through and shouted furious chants of 'Justice, Justice' at the Italian Prime Minister of the day, Giuliano Amato, as he was frog-marched into the cathedral by his worried escort. Inside the cathedral, the tension and anger was, if anything, even worse. The Cardinal of Palermo, Salvatore Pappalardo, who was presiding over the ceremony, was stopped in mid-sentence as a tall, dark-haired, handsome woman in black burst up the crowded aisle and straight onto the altar. This woman was 22-year-old widow Rosaria Schifani. Her husband, Vito, had been one of three escort policemen killed in the explosion that had killed Judge Falcone two months earlier. Visibly distressed, she took the pulpit microphone from the Cardinal and reproached him. 'You should not say that, you should not talk about hope,' she said. 'There is no hope here.'

INTRODUCTION

In tears and unable to say anything else, she went back down to her seat in the church. I was standing at the top of the cathedral, close to the altar, and as she passed by me, she whimpered to herself in utter despair: '*Vito, ti voglio ... Vito mio*' (I want you, Vito, my own Vito).

Or there are those ordinary half a million Italians, mainly Romans, who, on a bright November morning in 2003, came out to honour Italy's dead, in a lavish and moving state funeral for the 19 Italians who, a week earlier, had been killed in a suicide bomb attack on an Italian military base in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriya. Unlike their US counterparts, the Italian military dead were not flown back in the dark of the night, ignored by those who had sent them out to die in the first place. Italy and Italians paid their dues to a central part of the warrior's culture, namely the ability to face death squarely and honestly, coming together to pay full and handsome tribute to their dead on a national day of mourning. All the major institutional figures in the land, led by State President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, joined the people of Rome in a dignified ceremony, held in the magnificent Basilica of St Paul Without the Walls.

Italian tricolours flew from many of the windows along streets leading to the Basilica whilst billboards displayed the faces of all 19 dead with the simple words, 'Rome Hugs You to Itself'. Inside the crowded Basilica, Monica Filippa, the young widow of 33-year-old Carabinieri Andrea Filippa, kneeled for a long moment over her husband's coffin, stretching out her hand as if for one last touch. Slowly and quietly, she bent forward, finally resting her head on the coffin as she burst into tears.

The reaction to the Nasiriya dead was not surprising, given the widespread opposition to the US-led military invasion of Iraq. In February 2003, a huge crowd, perhaps as many as three million people, had peacefully marched through Rome to protest against the forthcoming invasion. Parties from the centre-left opposition,

a variety of Catholic lay groups, hard-line party Rifondazione Comunista, trade unionists, Rome Mayor Walter Veltroni, ex-State President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, anti-globalisation activists, Palestinians, Kurds and non-EU immigrant groups joined with showbiz personalities, such as American film director Spike Lee and Italian Oscar-winning comic Roberto Benigni, as well as thousands of ordinary Italians, for a demonstration that took over the centre of the Eternal City. The peace flags and an eclectic variety of street music reflected an Italy to feel good about, for a change.

Romans again took me by surprise more recently, on the evening of 2 April 2005, the night that Pope John Paul II died. At ten o'clock that night, not long after news of the Pope's death had broken, 60,000 people stood so quietly in St Peter's Square that even from a distance you could clearly hear the water gently flowing in the square's two handsome fountains. For seven or eight minutes, after the formal announcement of the Pope's death had been greeted with a round of applause, a quasi-silence and an eerie calm descended upon the square.

Then there are the students who marched against the local Mafia, the 'Ndrangheta, in the Calabrian town of Locri in November 2005, in protest against the killing two weeks earlier of a local politician, Francesco Fortugno, doctor, husband and father of two. He had been gunned down in broad daylight in the centre of town on a Sunday afternoon, minutes after voting in Italy's first-ever centre-left primary election. As he stood chatting to two colleagues, a masked man had approached him and fired at point-blank range, hitting him five times and killing him almost immediately. The man, with the help of a waiting accomplice, then effected a speedy and unhindered getaway. Police investigators found no bullets to pull out of the wall or surrounding objects; only five had been fired and all five had hit their target. This was an 'Ndrangheta hit job.

On the day of Fortugno's funeral, young members of his

INTRODUCTION

party, La Margherita, had boldly flown a banner bearing the slogan 'And Now Kill Us All', by way of protest over the 'Ndrangheta's hold on the region. Now Italy's most powerful criminal organisation, stronger and more dangerous than Cosa Nostra in Sicily and with an estimated annual turnover of €36 billion, or 3.4 per cent of Italian GDP, the 'Ndrangheta had flexed muscle in order to intimidate those like Francesco Fortugno who were determined to fight their stranglehold on the local economy, local government and public contracts. In and around Locri itself, a town of 13,000, there were 26 Mafia murders in 2005.

I have witnessed many less dramatic, less public moments when Italians have taken me by surprise. There were the two young *Protezione Civile* guys who pulled me out of a ditch on a rainy Sunday after I skidded off the country road, as I hurried in to do TV commentary work. There were Domenica and Anna Maria, gynaecologist and obstetrician, who came round to our flat and sat up with us all night as Dindy went through labour before giving birth to Róisín. Then there was the irascible Bruno, last of the Etruscans, builder by trade but raconteur by inclination, who oversaw the building of our house even though he was dying from cancer.

Then, too, there are all those other ordinary moments – early-morning bike rides by the lake in my home of Trevignano, long hot summer days on the beach, chilly February days in the magic of Venice, evenings of food and wine and chat that are part of the Italian experience, and all things that make you feel good about Italy.

It is for those moments, for the Paolas, Rosarias and Domenicas of this Italian world, for those young Calabrians who want rid of the Mafia, for those individuals and families who, despite everything, manage to believe in the concept of service to the Italian State, that I want the Italian football team to win.

Not, mind you, that you think those thoughts at the time. There and then, I was just disappointed that Italy had lost. While most neutral commentators probably felt that France were the outstanding side at Euro 2000, even those not well disposed towards Italian soccer (and, as usual, there were a lot of them about) acknowledged that, on the night, Italy had more than matched the reigning world champions.

The architect of this near-success story was coach Dino Zoff, himself a living legend who had captained Italy's 1982 World Cup winning side. The Italian squad, although it contained world-class talent in players like Alessandro Nesta, Paolo Maldini, Fabio Cannavaro, Francesco Toldo and Francesco Totti, was probably a little short of the overall strength of the French squad. Yet Zoff maximised resources, rode his luck and very nearly went all the way.

Zoff's handling of his squad was exemplary, not only in relation to his inspired team selection (one example was the surprise choice of goalscorer Marco Delvecchio in the final) but also, and perhaps more importantly, in creating the calm, controversy-free atmosphere that had reigned at the Italian training headquarters in Geel, near Antwerp. How many coaches could have handled the potential time bomb prompted by the debate about whether to use Francesco Totti or Alessandro Del Piero without eventually seeing it go off in his face? (Zoff opted for Totti, incidentally, leaving Del Piero on the bench for most games. He brought Del Piero on as a substitute in the final, only for the striker to miss two relatively easy chances that would have swung the result in Italy's favour.)

State President Ciampi, who was present in Rotterdam for the final, accurately caught the nation's mood by visiting the Italian players in their dressing room after the game to tell them that they should return to Italy with their heads held high and 'full of pride'. Furthermore, the next day he nominated all 22 squad members 'Cavalieri Della Repubblica', an honour

INTRODUCTION

previously bestowed on the 1982 World Cup winning team by the then president Sandro Pertini.

There was, however, one significant exception to this mood of nationwide approval, namely centre-right opposition leader and AC Milan owner Silvio Berlusconi. At the very moment that the Italian football community was lavishing huge praise on Zoff and Italy, Berlusconi chose to launch an astonishing attack on the national coach. At a news conference on the day after the final, Berlusconi was asked for his opinion on Italy's close-run defeat.

'We should and could have won,' he replied. 'There were certain things happening on the pitch that you could not ignore. You cannot leave the source of their game, Zidane, free to run the show and prompt all their actions, especially in a final. Even an amateur coach would have realised what was happening and would have won the final by stopping Zidane ... It was simply unworthy.'

Some coaches might have ignored Berlusconi. Not Zoff. Perhaps emotionally stretched after the Sunday final, he found Berlusconi's comments deeply offensive. Summoning a hastily convened news conference on Tuesday morning, he told reporters that he was resigning, adding that he had been 'very upset' by the criticism and that he had been so angry he had been unable to sleep. 'I don't understand why he [Berlusconi] has to denigrate somebody else's work,' he said. 'I have been publicly denigrated and treated with huge disrespect and this really annoys me ... It is not Berlusconi's technical analysis but rather his personalised evaluations that have upset me.'

Zoff was perhaps wrong to resign but he was right to dismiss Berlusconi's 'technical analysis' regarding Zinedine Zidane. So successful was the Italian handling of Zidane that the great Frenchman had had by far his worst game of the tournament, being consistently closed down by an Italian midfield whose combative attitude to him largely contributed to a first half of tense, dramatic stalemate.

Four years later, I met Zoff on the fringe of a news conference in Rome and asked him if he did not, in hindsight, regret his decision to resign. No, he said, I could see the way things were going, the criticism that was coming my way, and felt that it was better to jump rather than be pushed.

The Rotterdam story may be a reminder that, in Italy, the good guys do not always win; indeed, they more often get hounded straight out of town. Zoff had done a brilliant job and had been rewarded with a kick in the teeth.

This was only sport, not (Bill Shankly, forgive me) a matter of life and death. By comparison with the treatment that modern Italy offered its Mafia-investigating magistrates, Zoff had got off lightly. After all, the bravery and courage shown by Falcone and Borsellino in fighting organised crime was rewarded with a campaign of isolation, jealousy and suspicion from sections of the media, the judiciary and the political classes, which left them exposed and unprotected. By the end of their days as investigators, both men felt so threatened, so closely watched by hostile forces, that the only place in Palermo's Palazzo di Giustizia they felt safe to talk was the lift.

The Rotterdam story has always struck me as emblematic, and for two reasons. Firstly, it illustrates the extent to which football in Italy is a frontline issue. It is hard to imagine England coach Sven-Göran Eriksson or German coach Juergen Klinsmann handing in their resignations just because opposition leaders David Cameron or Gerhard Schroeder had criticised them. Secondly, like just about every other significant political, financial, industrial or news story in Italy over the last decade, this one bears the formidable imprint of Silvio Berlusconi.

It would be comforting to suggest that Italian football represents an oasis of limpid transparency, rigorous administrative efficiency and total moral probity in an otherwise corrupt Italian environment. It would be nice to be able to say that, in the