



# Diego Armando Maradona: Between secular sainthood and the redemption of Southern Italy

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## ABSTRACT


This contribution examines the figure of Diego Armando Maradona as a symbolic construction and an identity-forming device in 1980s Naples. The champion's arrival at SSC Napoli in 1984 occurred during a phase of profound socio-economic crisis marked by the aftermath of the earthquake and ongoing deindustrialisation, thereby acting as a catalyst for a process of collective identification. Through a historical and sociological analysis of the urban and footballing context, the essay interprets the "secular sainthood" attributed to Maradona as an expression of Southern redemption within the framework of the persistent North–South divide. The first league title in 1987 thus acquires a metapolitical significance, configuring itself as a symbolic victory against power structures perceived as hegemonic. The player's charismatic dimension transcends the sporting sphere and consolidates into a global myth capable of fostering pride, belonging, and shared memory, notwithstanding an awareness of his biographical contradictions.

**Keywords:** Sport history, Maradona, Naples, Collective identity, Southern redemption, Sporting myth.

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## INTRODUCTION

5 July 1984: this was the day on which Diego Armando Maradona first set foot in Naples' Stadio San Paolo. At that time, the city was suffering the disastrous socio-economic consequences of the Irpinia earthquake—which, only four years earlier, had claimed approximately three thousand lives—and was simultaneously grappling with the sporting fortunes of a team that had avoided relegation to the second division by a single point just two months before. Two forms of distress, seemingly irreconcilable, nonetheless constituted fertile ground for investing the Argentine footballer's arrival with profound meaning. Two domains—the political and the sporting—merged and overlapped, fostering a shared representation of sanctity intelligible only considering the broader historical, socio-economic, and political context. The sanctification of Maradona by the Neapolitan people cannot, in fact, be understood apart from the long-standing rivalry between North and South. In this regard, the Southern Question should be interpreted not so much in terms of the post-Unification marginalisation of Southern demands, but rather as the rhetorical and mortifying prejudice imposed by the North upon the South and upon Naples in particular. It was a discriminatory phenomenon directed at a city which, in a quasi-messianic organization in the days preceding his arrival, designated Maradona as the myth capable of healing and redeeming an entire people in the face of Northern dominance.

From the outset, the footballer embodied the spirit of a prophetic leader, endowed with the capacity to “*read the hearts of men and [...] foretell what is to come*” (Vauchez, 1981, p. 445). By intuitively grasping the community's deepest aspirations, Maradona—employing a markedly political rhetoric—promised his supporters the conquest of the league title against the wealthy North. Before choosing the team, he chose the city; and he sought to become its charismatic leader.

On 10 May 1987, the miracle was fulfilled: Maradona delivered the first league title to the city of Naples. A victory secured on the football pitch soon assumed the symbolic significance of long-awaited social redemption. Supporters and citizens alike, united in a shared emotional horizon, interpreted and represented the scudetto as a triumph over the industrial, political, and sporting wealth of the North, and as the culmination of a “*battle against the powerful [that] could only be fought with the ball*” (Brancato, 2014, p. 37). A victory with one undisputed protagonist: Diego Armando Maradona.

## MARADONA IS NAPLES. NAPLES IS MARADONA

The reflections that follow are the result of a field investigation. Interviews were conducted with the generation of Neapolitans who were able to witness Maradona's performances in person, to understand the mechanisms underlying the fans' identification with the Argentine player. At the same time, the study sought to assess the extent to which the transmission of collective memory contributed to the deification of the Argentine footballer's figure.

Even today, the negotiations surrounding Maradona's transfer—at the time a player for FC Barcelona—remain one of the most controversial (and protracted) episodes in the history of football transfers. Many have sought, and continue to seek, to claim authorship of the insight that led to the removal of the world's greatest footballer from the blaugrana. The truth, however, is that a convergence of circumstances—perhaps even of fate—created the conditions whereby Maradona, who as a very young man had been welcomed to Barcelona as a hero, came to be portrayed as the sole culprit behind two deeply disappointing seasons for the entire team.

The climate of resentment toward the Argentine champion was further exacerbated by the blaugrana president himself, Josep Lluís Núñez, who repeatedly accused him in public of leading an excessive lifestyle, effectively offering him up as a scapegoat upon whom to place the blame for the failed 1983–84 season.

Thus emerged a golden opportunity, one that few immediately recognised. Among those few was Ricardo Fujica, an intermediary who contacted several Italian clubs, conveying Maradona's desire to move to Serie A. It was, indeed, a golden opportunity, notwithstanding the reputation that preceded Diego: that of an unruly, extravagantly paid player, allegedly ill-suited—both professionally and tactically—to European football. Several clubs dismissed the proposal, but SSC Napoli did not. Represented by its president Corrado Ferlaino and its long-serving executive Antonio Juliano, the club met Maradona's manager on a late-May afternoon and reached a preliminary financial agreement. What followed was more than a month of announcements (and subsequent denials), newspaper headlines, internal clashes within Barcelona's board of directors, and public statements by the player himself—on radio and in print—affirming his firm intention to join Napoli, thereby rendering his reintegration into the Spanish side virtually impossible.

In the late afternoon of 30 June 1984, in room 1715 of the Hotel Princesa Sofía, Ferlaino and Juliano shook hands with Barcelona's vice-president Joan Gaspart, sealing an overall agreement worth thirteen billion lire. On the other side of the world, in his opulent villa in the shadow of the Cross of Pedralbes, Diego followed the unfolding events until he received confirmation of his transfer from Barcelona to Napoli (Piacci, 2025).

In the city, a murmur began to circulate—soon swelling, almost taking shape in the alleyways and squares—until it became a newspaper headline: Diego Armando Maradona is a new Napoli player.

Aboard the Alitalia Boeing 727 departing from Barcelona and bound for Fiumicino, where it would land a couple of hours later, Maradona granted his first interview to a RAI journalist, stating:

*“I was fortunate that Napoli took an interest in Maradona and succeeded in signing him. Naples was in my destiny as early as 1978 Gianni Di Marzio tried to bring me to you. [...] I expect to find the tranquillity here that I did not have in Barcelona [...]. I know that football is lived here with passion, and I like that—Argentina is the same. They want to make me into a myth [...]. I will do everything I can to help Napoli win. Let us hope that God remembers Napoli and Naples [...]” (Piacci, 2025, p. 31).*

It may appear paradoxical to seek tranquillity in Naples, especially when one considers the social challenges that characterised the city in the 1980s: crippled by unemployment and organised crime, worn down by degrading stereotypes, overwhelmed by mass tourism, and diminished by speculative interests. Nevertheless, Naples—whose rhythms of sleep and awakening followed the sporting fortunes of its team—and Maradona were united in a shared promise to free the city from the role to which the media had consigned it.

On 5 July 1984, a day remembered as Naples' own Woodstock, Maradona encountered the Neapolitan people for the first time, receiving the kind of welcome ordinarily reserved for deities. The city was covered with banners of greeting. At the packed Stadio San Paolo, more than sixty thousand spectators held two-thousand-lire tickets to witness the arrival of the *Pibe de Oro*, scheduled for 6:30 p.m. At that hour, television cameras from across the globe were trained on the staircase leading from the dressing rooms to the pitch. Dressed in a sky-blue tracksuit and white T-shirt, Maradona ascended from darkness into light, step by step, before a throng of photographers jostling to capture the scene. Nowhere else in the world would he have

received such a reception, and Diego seemed to grasp this as he emerged onto the field, moving with difficulty—during his half lap of honour, accompanied by a brief display of juggling—amid photographers, club officials, and awestruck witnesses. The San Paolo erupted in an uninterrupted roar lasting two minutes and forty seconds, welcoming its new idol as though at a birth (Piacci, 2025, p. 41). Those present in the stands sensed that they were living through a decisive moment; they perceived that they themselves—the city, its alleyways and neighbourhoods, every single stone of Naples and its province—stood at a turning point. Thus began Naples' footballing *belle époque*.

In the numerous accounts of Maradona's arrival in Naples, one repeatedly encounters testimony to a widespread sense of expectation surrounding a figure whom many attributed with quasi-divine qualities, as the following passage suggests:

*"5 July 1984, a historic date. Maradona lands in Naples. It is the arrival of the Messiah of football, the one who will bring the league title to the Gulf. An entire stadium waiting for him in trembling anticipation. [...] To journalists arriving from afar, perhaps from Europe or Japan (and there was more than one), [...] the city offers itself without reserve, as always ready to display its fertile womb as mother of men and things unmatched anywhere in the world. [...] From the ever-fertile belly of a continent bounded by Vesuvius and the thousand ripples that lap in the sea of imagination, there emerged [...] in a few convulsive and festive days, a thousand keys to the authentic soul of a people capable, like no other in the world, of winning the daily wager of survival with nothing: Maradona posters, lighters bearing Maradona's likeness, T-shirts emblazoned with his face [...], caps and scarves praising Maradona, sky-blue flags with the face of the Pibe de Oro, [...] children's games named after the champion. [...] Someone even thought to imprint the unmistakable features of the Argentine star on the ankles of a new line of socks, to be launched with the slogan 'Maradona at the feet of the Neapolitans'" (Pecchinenda, 2023, pp. 35–54).*

The destinies of Naples and Maradona converge into an indivisible representation. The Argentine champion is experienced as someone who fought against the establishment, deconstructing the system and overturning the balance of power in football and in society, in the name of a vindication of southern claims. Maradona thus becomes the mirror in which Neapolitan supporters rediscover their own identity; he is the guide who delivers to the community the first triumph in its history, subverting the existing order through a winning mentality and through traits that Neapolitans themselves often attribute to their self-representation: passion, rebellious spirit, anarchic genius, and the capacity to redeem humble origins through skill and impulsiveness.

In the — evidently idealised — narrative shared by Neapolitan supporters, Maradona arrives in Naples to assume the burden of restoring the community's pride; that same community does not hesitate to extend success on the pitch to the broader territorial arena, identifying the Argentine champion as a leader capable of providing the material necessary to oppose the tangible clichés that afflict Neapolitan identity, thereby rehabilitating and redeeming the city in its socio-economic dimension.

Indeed, Diego was always distinguished by his capacity for synthesis and response. As he grew older, he increasingly took on social causes, beginning to express – at times harsh – judgments against governments, both sporting and political, and performing radical gestures while struggling with his own personal torments. His continuous metamorphosis had rebellion as its common denominator: Maradona was a rebel both on and off the field, and for this reason his story bears the marks of uniqueness.

In short, it was a phenomenon which—although complex—managed to reconcile genders and generations across time. In his relentless forays across the pitch, and in the way he expanded the horizons of the footballing imagination—until then known—through unthinkable plays and goals, his fans nurtured the hope of being able to reclaim almost everything, to redeem humiliations and insults. From this perspective, one may agree that Maradona represented— from Buenos Aires to Naples—“*dream and social raison d’être*” (Ciriello, 2018, p. 51).

10 May 1987: the day of redemption. The day of the first championship title in the history of Napoli and of Naples.

In the jubilant dressing room, Maradona declared to the press:

*“This is the most important celebration of my life. I have won everything through suffering. I won the World Cup far from my homeland, whereas in Naples I felt at home, so this is the most important victory” (Piaci, 2025, p. 95).*

These might seem like words dictated by euphoria and exaltation. Nothing of the sort; years later, in his autobiography, he added:

*“Winning the first Scudetto with Napoli in sixty years of history was, for me, a victory without comparison. Different from any other, including the title with the 1986 Selección. Because we built Napoli from the ground up, like workers. [...] It was a Scudetto for the entire city” (Maradona, 2012, p. 87).*

Through the match on the pitch, the cohesion of a community solidifies, a community that feels it belongs to the same destiny and is represented by the same idol. Whether they witnessed him live or learned of his feats through mediated memory, supporters — beyond recognising Maradona as the protagonist of victories at national and international level — found in his authenticity and sporting merits the ground on which to cultivate collective pride and self-esteem. Thus matches, which represent confrontations between irreconcilable worlds and different ways (not only of playing football but also) of living, are elevated to the status of:

*“Social rituals that foster belonging, solidarity and the social identity of those who feel they participate in a communal destiny, who share happiness and suffering around their devotion to their heroes”.* (Bifulco, 2021, p. 1).

The substance of the ideas through which new generations perceive Maradona therefore does not differ from that of those who had the privilege of experiencing him live; this highlights how the Argentine still maintains his status as a symbolic, emotional and ritual centre, catalysing processes of shared identification and serving as a mirror of Neapolitan self-representation.

The first championship, as *La Repubblica* wrote, was “*like stepping into a theatre for those who until then had had to content themselves with watching others enter it. A moment of happiness granted to many Neapolitans: both those living in their homeland and those forced to travel the world, who for a day reclaim their shared identity.*” And it had been delivered by someone who liked to define himself as the son of Naples, the son of a city in which — during the years of his stay — more than five hundred children were registered with the name that more than any other had to be bestowed: Diego (Carotenuto, 2017).

The title was celebrated as a miracle: crowds flooded the streets, car horns blared incessantly, the balconies of houses were painted in blue, and the image of Maradona was carried in procession as if he were a saint. A striking sign of the extent to which the victory was perceived in a transcendent manner was the installation, at the cemetery, of a banner that read: “*You do not know what you missed!*”, implying that the magnificence of that triumph was such that even the dead had been unfortunate not to witness it (Nardi, 2025, pp. 38–39).

When the city exploded with joy for its first national title, it certainly did not enjoy the tourist and cultural momentum that characterises it today; quite the opposite. At the time, Naples had reached the nadir of socio-economic, administrative and cultural decline and was considered among the most degraded metropolises in Europe, also due to the misleading media narrative of bloody clashes between Camorra clans, the misallocation of funds intended for post-earthquake reconstruction, and the dismantling both of the steel plant in Bagnoli and of the Alfa Romeo factory in Pomigliano d’Arco.

The discontent of the 1980s was alleviated by Maradona, who acted as a social remedy capable of restoring joy, distraction and lightness to a restless people and of repositioning a deindustrialised and stigmatised city before Europe’s other capitals. In a league that, at the time, was considered the most important in the world, Napoli was made champion by the Argentine superstar: from that moment on, Naples and Diego became inseparable.

From the moment he left the city in 1991, Maradona has been everywhere. It is impossible to walk through Naples without seeing his presence on the walls or on the shirts of children playing football in the squares; those shirts bearing the number 10 on their backs transcend the sporting sphere and represent the desire to keep history alive, with all its contradictions, revanchism and claims. His effigy now fills the city, from the Historic Centre to the Centro Direzionale, from the Sanità district to the Spanish Quarters: here, in the 1990s, a short distance from the Diego Armando Maradona Museum, a mural was created that has become one of the most visited tourist attractions in the world, celebrating every day the one who sided with the indomitable side of the world, in defence of the marginalised.

His death, on 25 November 2020, in addition to triggering collective mourning (also facilitated by new media), further propelled the magnification of a figure who will forever symbolise and embody a football-territorial community — that of those who continually strive for affirmation.

## THE MARADONA PHENOMENON

For a long time, attempts have been made — and continue to be made — to narrate the Maradona phenomenon through art, cinema, poetry, literature, journalism, and even faith. None of these numerous efforts, however, has succeeded in formulating a definition capable of encompassing Diego Armando Maradona in his entirety. This is not due to any lack of commitment on the part of those who have tried; rather, it is because he represents a figure of such irreducible complexity that any attempt to synthesise the breadth of meanings he assumed — and continues to assume postmortem — proves inadequate. Diego embodies an ideal — that of redemption — in which ordinary people, the popular classes, have been able to recognise themselves. He represents one who made it, and perhaps it is precisely this aspect — even more than his performances on the pitch — that projected him into the dimension of a phenomenon capable of generating collective aggregation despite his personal fragilities and contradictions.

His death completed that process of collective identification that had begun on the day of his presentation at the stadium, the place where his creative genius would long find expression. From 5 July 1984 onward, it

became impossible to separate Maradona from a team of which he became a genuine intangible asset, and from a city whose people he identified with to such an extent that today he is often said to possess “*the same gaze found in Neapolitan Street children*” (Bromberger et al., 1995, p. 137).

Among all the champions in the global history of sport, it is difficult to identify a personality who has received the same degree of media attention as Maradona, both in his private and professional spheres. Constantly in the spotlight of success, deeply embedded in the commercial dynamics of modern sport, frequently unconventional, and yet an idol for several generations, he offered — well beyond the playing field — points of identification so powerful that he may be described less as a celebrity of the popular classes and more as a universal cultural phenomenon.

Maradona was loved and continues to live in the memories and narratives of supporters, because he changed the image of Naples, demonstrating to Neapolitans that it was possible to compete with — and even triumph over — the wealthy North. That triumph, beginning with the first national title, triggered a chain reaction in which the city of Naples became, simultaneously and in all its dimensions, both subject and object of exaltation and glorification.

*El pibe de oro*, by writing unforgettable pages in the history of football, succeeded in weaving intense bonds with both the Neapolitan and the Argentine people. It is therefore worth asking how a figure — albeit a genius — frequently criticised for his friendships and for his drug addiction, managed to penetrate so viscerally the heart and soul of Argentines. The answer may lie in the conditions that characterised Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century, marked by profound socio-economic imbalances. While Buenos Aires enjoyed development of an almost European character, moving away from the capital revealed degraded contexts dominated by precariousness, poverty, and social inequality. The country was literally divided between two contrasting scenarios, separated by a deep fracture within which Maradona positioned himself as a unifying force, restoring — through football — hope to the oppressed and confidence in social redemption.

Although thousands of kilometres distant from South America, Naples presented certain parallels. The city, with all its contradictions, was likewise afflicted by socio-economic and political difficulties that almost constituted fertile ground for the construction of an indissoluble bond with Diego. Maradona thus became a son of Naples because he elevated a reality often denigrated and brought it to the summit of Italian football, breaking the established pattern whereby clubs from Northern Italy contested the national championship each year.

This perspective helps explain how Maradona became a social phenomenon both in Argentina and in Naples. His humble origins — never denied and frequently emphasised with pride — were invoked as testimony to emancipation from oppression and suffering. This condition perhaps provided the assist, to remain within football terminology, for the construction of a myth into which collective dreams and hopes could be projected. In certain respects, this Third-World hero represented the South — both of America and of Italy — and, through sport, he generated emotions that alleviated the pain of precariousness for that part of the world.

For many, he represented a god who, despite his weaknesses, rendered proud realities such as Naples and Argentina, accustomed to living in the shadows. That pride bore the unmistakable imprint of redemption.

A footballing god is such insofar as his sporting virtues exceed ordinary standards, rendering him *de facto* worthy of devotion. Yet mastery within the playing field must also be combined with the capacity to “*trigger powerful emotional gratifications nourished by a genuine form of vicarious glory*” (Bifulco & Pirone, 2014, pp.

36–53). For Neapolitan supporters, Maradona remains the charismatic footballer whose extraordinary performances continue to sustain their self-esteem. In this case, one clearly observes the psychological mechanism known as “*basking in reflected glory*” (Cialdini et al., 1976), whereby the champion’s triumphs are absorbed and experienced by supporters as if they were their own.

His name still resonates in conversations among supporters, in the streets and across social media. This oral and digital circulation reinforces the exaltation of those who recognise themselves in their leader and who, through the memory of his exploits, cement a cohesive and solidaristic community. Within the narrative of the myth, Maradona acquires traits of inimitable perfection that constitute a fundamental resource for sustaining the self-regard of a community that felt chosen by the greatest footballer of all time and guided by him toward the awareness that the city could — and should — reclaim its own destiny, since no preordained system existed capable of preventing its social ascent.

His undisputed qualities, the widespread belief that he single-handedly won the 1986 World Cup, and the attraction he exerted on players willing to join Napoli simply to play alongside him all contributed to the typification of his figure. To this must be added the rhetoric of social redemption, coloured by multiple nuances: opposition to the consolidated powers of football, reversal of social hierarchies, and the redemption of the South against the North. Such elements allow Maradona to be identified both as a “*reinforcing hero*,” insofar as he embodied attitudes<sup>1</sup> — anarchy and passion — through which Neapolitans describe themselves (Bromberger, 1999, pp. 87–105; Bifulco & Pirone, 2014, p. 48), and as a “*seductive hero*,” one who, by breaking with established rules, indicated new possible horizons (Bifulco & Dini, 2014, p. 117).

Once it has been established that many of the reinforcing and captivating features of Maradona’s figure function as a mirror for certain idealized traits regarded as constitutive of identity by his community of supporters, one must avoid the mistake of assuming that Diego was also adopted as a behavioural model in everyday life. On the contrary, his problems with drug addiction, his less than irreproachable management of certain family dynamics, and his borderline friendships are by no means acknowledged as beyond reproach<sup>2</sup>. This is clearly perceptible in the words of G., who states:

*“[...] certainly what is remembered of Maradona are his sporting feats and, to some extent, also his decline on a human level, because one must not conceal that [...] from this point of view he disappointed his supporters somewhat, especially the more demanding ones, that is, the more educated ones, those who would have wanted a Maradona who remained a permanently positive symbol of the city of Naples. Instead, Maradona was great in his profession but less so from a human standpoint, because he gave in to the pressures of the environment in which he lived” (Bifulco & Dini, 2014, p. 117).*

A. expresses a similar view, maintaining:

*“[...] Maradona made many mistakes... he used drugs, he cheated on his wife, he did not acknowledge a son and always treated him badly. [...] Ultimately, his character on the pitch — rebellious and combative — later created problems for him in life. [...] he did not always know how to choose the right company, he often surrounded himself with opportunists, and he was unable to*

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<sup>1</sup> Recurring is the attribution to Maradona of the image of the *scugnizzo*, that is, the young Neapolitan who — rebellious by nature — makes his way through the hardships of everyday life, often resorting to cunning stratagems.

<sup>2</sup> One may consider the recognition of Diego Armando Maradona Junior, the son born in Naples from an extramarital relationship.

*manage his own distress. One can understand him to some extent, even if not justify him. [...] He is certainly not a model man... at most, a reference point as a player” (Bifulco & Dini, 2014, p. 118).*

These negative traits, however, do not constitute the core of identification between Maradona and his fans. This is also because many of them, when abstractly describing the prototype of a “*champion*,” emphasize the importance of ethical conduct beyond the sporting arena. What is striking, nevertheless, is the extent to which Maradona generates pride within his community to the point that, in practice, his private life is entirely separated from his sporting life. In his case, reprehensible behaviour is considered strictly personal and therefore beyond judgment, whereas — from sport — those aspects most suitable for self-representation (charisma, tenacity, generosity, leadership) are selectively retained.

## POLITICS, WAR, AND FOOTBALL

In Argentina, during the 1920s and 1930s, art—together with other cultural forms (above all cinema and tango)—actively participated in the construction of an *Argentinity* that had previously been unknown. In this process of identity formation, football also played a significant role, as a sport capable of channelling and containing intense popular passions.

During those years, the so-called *criollo* style emerged on football fields. This style was celebrated as typical of the Argentine people and was characterized by features that were manifestly opposed to those of British football—the game introduced to Argentina together with the Union Jack. Unlike the British style, which was taught in sports clubs and emphasized athletic discipline, the *criollo* style was characteristic of the *pibe*, the boy accustomed to playing on the *potreros*, uncultivated lands used for free cattle grazing under the watch of the *gaucho*. On the *potreros*, the *pibe* learns and refines cunning and ingenuity, expressing them through dribbling—a gesture which, more than any other, represents an act of indiscipline grounded in virtuosic individual effort (Serra, 2015, p. 14).

Within this perspective, “*el fútbol criollo resulta por tanto estrechamente asociado con la espontaneidad y la libertad de la infancia*” (Serra, 2015, p. 15), so much so that great players continue to be called *pibes* even in adulthood; ultimately, the finest plays are nothing other than the actualization of a skill acquired on the *potrero* and untainted by the tactical formalism of the mature game.

Among all players, Maradona was the *pibe de oro*, the perfect prototype of *criollo* football, whose greatness derived from incomparably extraordinary gestures—so extraordinary that they transcended the purely sporting dimension and entered the symbolic realm. That greatness reached one of its peaks on 22 June 1986 at the Estadio Azteca in Mexico City, during the World Cup quarter-final against England, a country against which Argentina had—just four years earlier—lost a war over the Falkland Islands.

To fully understand the nature of the media coverage Maradona received from the British press, it is necessary to examine how politics intertwined with narratives concerning both the player and his country. The 1982 war over the disputed Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas, according to the Argentine denomination), which lasted seventy-four days and resulted in Argentine casualties more than double those of the British, was accompanied by a strong mobilization of the popular press in both countries, contributing to the hardening of public opinion.

The conflict shaped the way in which subsequent sporting encounters between the two nations would be represented. Its legacy was such that, in the lead-up to the 1986 World Cup quarter-final, British tabloids

expressed concerns that a fringe of supporters might exploit the sporting event as an opportunity for politically motivated violence. The *Mirror* reported that “troops and riot police (were being) called in for England v Argentina game” (Boyle, 2023, pp. 6–7).

Despite repeated calls for calm from Maradona—who had also been appointed captain of the national team—he later admitted in his autobiography:

*“In the pre-match interviews we all had said that football and politics shouldn’t be confused, but that was a lie. We did nothing but think about that. Bollocks was it just another match!”* (Boyle, 2023, p. 7).

None of the British media believed that the match between Argentina and England was merely a football game: it was evident that the pitch had become an echo chamber for the political tensions inherited from the still-recent conflict over the Falklands. The tabloids, moreover, played their own nationalistic game by employing language reminiscent of military conflict, stirring patriotic sentiment while simultaneously condemning potential violence.

The match was won 2–1 by Argentina thanks to two goals scored by Maradona, both destined to enter football history—albeit for opposite reasons.

The first, the famous handball goal in the 51st minute, was interpreted by the English press as a deliberate act of deception, with scathing headlines openly branding him a *cheat*. For Argentines, however, that offensive gesture against conventional reason represented the work of the *pibe* of the *potrero*, who outwits the stronger opponent through cunning and trickery.

The second goal, scored in the 56th minute, was universally recognized as an unprecedented technical masterpiece. Even British commentators—despite the highly charged emotional climate—described it as one of the greatest goals in football history. To understand how Argentine fans experienced the moment, it is useful to recall the words of commentator Víctor Hugo Morales:

*“La va a tocar para Diego... [...] Gracias Dios, por el fútbol, por Maradona, por estas lágrimas, por este Argentina 2 - Inglaterra 0”* (Serra, 2015, p. 19).

Only five minutes earlier Maradona had broken the rules, yet that transgression was redeemed by the “*Goal of the Century*,” through which Argentines felt avenged. Their avenger was a demigod: the first goal representing his earthly half, the second his transcendent one.

These two moments determined the ambivalent representation of Maradona in the British media until the day of his death: “*For some he was cheat, for others a footballing genius and for many more he was in fact both of these things*” (Boyle, 2023, p. 10).

From that match onward—at a time when television coverage of football was still limited—Maradona became the first player to experience the dimension of global celebrity constructed through the media. In subsequent years, however, attention gradually shifted from sporting admiration to off-field events, including drug addiction, fiscal controversies, and accusations of connections with organized crime. This trajectory culminated in the public fall of the genius during the 1994 World Cup in the United States, when he tested positive in an anti-doping test and was suspended from the tournament.

The episode consolidated the representation of a constant tension inherent in Maradona: between glory and scandal, myth and human fragility, talent and self-destruction. Yet rather than diminishing him in the eyes of the world, this tension further reinforced his status as a global cultural icon.

## FROM FALL TO POSTHUMOUS CULT

Mediterranean cultures—crossroads of civilizations in which ancient and modern myths coexist—often blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane, blending religious devotion with shared symbolic constructs related to family, art, and sport. Naples represents an emblematic example. On the one hand stands the sacred (and official) cult of the city's patron saint, Saint Januarius, whose blood miraculously liquefies; on the other stands the secular cult of Diego Armando Maradona. Both coexist within a unique form of syncretism.

In Naples, therefore, manifestations of the sacred are not confined to religion alone: the football match becomes a liturgy, the playing field a secular temple, and supporters' chants totemic litanies. The veneration of Maradona quickly evolved into a socio-cultural phenomenon endowed with its own symbolism and rituals from the moment of his arrival in the city. His sanctification is reflected in countless objects, rituals, and images. A gigantic mural in the Quartieri Spagnoli has become a pilgrimage site where fans light candles and leave offerings; a bar in the historic centre has set up a shrine displaying a lock of Maradona's hair preserved as a sacred relic and labelled "*Capello miracoloso*" (Nardi, 2025, p. 39). Such practices, almost religious in nature, demonstrate how supporters have created rituals analogous to the cult of saints<sup>3</sup>.

However, like every hero and myth, Maradona's story also included a fall followed by a process of transfiguration. The god revealed his human weaknesses in the early 1990s with his suspension for doping and his departure from Naples amid scandals. A significant portion of supporters felt betrayed and abandoned, and only time was able to heal the wounds and open the way to a more indulgent narrative. Maradona thus began to be portrayed as a martyr who had sacrificed himself to glorify the Global South and as the victim of a conspiracy orchestrated by the powerful North to discredit Naples. Within such a narrative, the martyr who died for the aspirations of the people he had chosen to represent could only deserve full absolution and veneration.

In the Neapolitan collective imagination, Maradona reached apotheosis in three distinct moments: the bankruptcy of the football club in 2004, the player's death in 2020, and Napoli's victory in the third league title in 2023. After his departure, Napoli sank into the depths of the national league standings, reaching the lowest point in its history with a bankruptcy ruling caused by debts accumulated in previous years. This event further illuminated the Maradonian golden age, nourished by stories transmitted with pathos and folklore. His death, moreover, plunged the city of Naples into a grief comparable to that of a family bereavement: thousands gathered before the mural to recite prayers, leave flowers, and light candles; at the same time, the city council promptly decided to rename the San Paolo Stadium, relocating it within the civic pantheon of Naples as the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the famous graffiti proclaiming "*Maradona is better than San Gennaro*" is an expression that—though steeped in irony—reflects the elevation of Maradona's status to the city's new patron saint. Cf. Nardi, "*Maradona, Secular God of the Mediterranean*," 39.

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, during the celebration of Holy Mass, a priest commemorated Maradona as the one who "*had brought joy [to] the city*," de facto elevating him to an intercessor of collective happiness. Moreover, following the victory of the Coppa Italia in 2020, the players carried a massive poster depicting his image around the pitch, symbolically including him in the celebrations and as proof of the conviction that he watched over the team's fortunes. Cf. Nardi, "*Maradona, Secular God of the Mediterranean*," 40, 42.

Finally, the third league title reactivated the cult of the *pibe de oro* among a generation that had never seen him play. The victory was explicitly linked—by the media themselves—to Maradona’s hand from the heavens: on that occasion his image was displayed throughout the city, the stadium was illuminated with the colours of Argentina, and supporters celebrated wearing the number 10 jersey, claiming that the triumph after thirty-three years was a true miracle, once again invoking religious language.

All this suggests that Maradona assumed the traits of a divinity venerated outside official religious canons and became an all-encompassing symbol of values and identity. His story provided the city of Naples with a triumphant narrative that redeemed it from the stigma to which it had long been relegated. Although Maradona remains a universal icon, it is in Naples that his cult found particularly fertile ground. The city’s cultural traits—strong communal ties and a deep reverence for its patron saint—led people to apply religious practices naturally to a modern figure.

In a city with a deeply rooted Catholic tradition, religious fervour was thus channelled toward an alternative outlet, enriching the symbolic landscape of Saint Januarius and placing beside him a civic saint: a charismatic patron-like figure capable of uniting believers and non-believers within a tangible cult. This does not imply that Neapolitans abandoned their faith but rather that “[the] football has partly taken over the role of religion as the chief occasion for mass celebration” and that football functions “as a parallel civil religion with its own calendar, rituals and saints” (Nardi, 2025, p. 43).

## CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to define all that Maradona was — and continues to be — for his countless fans. For Argentinians he was more than José Francisco de San Martín; for South America (with the exception of Brazil), more than Simón Bolívar; for Africa, a rock star scarcely less celebrated than Nelson Mandela; for the United States, part demon and part outlaw; and finally in Europe, where many tend to draw a sharp distinction between the man and the footballer (Ciriello, 2018, p. 106).

And then there is Naples, to which Diego gave glory while receiving love and compassion for every extra-footballing mistake. Each time the myth fell, there was always someone ready to lift him up again, “*rekindling that electricity which [...] he had brought to the city*” (Ciriello, 2018, p. 106).

At the mere utterance of his name, people grow emotional; memories burst forth in a triumph of feelings and sentiments that nourish the spiritual energy of the idol, the chosen one, the man who — in a collective sport — managed to push self-monumentalization to its extreme. That same process ultimately destroyed him, making him feel alone despite being constantly surrounded by his court — the court of tyrants.

In pursuing the absurd, Diego possessed the rare ability never to appear unsympathetic and, indeed, to transform the collective hostility of stadiums into admiration and consent, combining the authority of a king with the imagination of a jester. His present capacity to dominate the scene mirrors the ease with which, forty years ago, he would enter the goal with the ball at his feet — a simplicity that only reinforced his aura of the supernatural.

Maradona defies conventions: he exercises power while rejecting its structures and lives with the constant contradiction of someone who seeks targets among a long list of enemies and (false) friends, never withdrawing from judgment. That judgment highlights the missteps and anxieties of his private life—marked by illness, arrests, courts, psychiatric institutions, and hospitals—yet Diego mocks it all, for he has no interest

in securing anything other than the status that has always defined him: that of the child from Villa Fiorito on a football field, the only place where he truly exists.

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