



THE  
**WORKING  
HANDS**  
*of a Goddess*

The Tactics, Culture  
and Community Behind  
**Gian Piero Gasperini's  
Atalanta BC**



TOM UNDERHILL

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# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Introduction: Beautiful Bergamo . . . . .	11
Building La Dea . . . . .	18
Silverware, and a long end to the century . . . . .	39
2016/17: Atalanta's man of football. . . . .	66
2017/18: Building on a foundation . . . . .	97
2018/19: The wolf pack. . . . .	126
2019/20: Winning, or learning . . . . .	156
2020/21: Five years . . . . .	187
The ultras . . . . .	215
Centre-backs: Building from the back . . . . .	233
Central midfield: More than just enablers . . . . .	253
Wing-backs: The Gasperini archetypes . . . . .	274
Forwards: Hidden geniuses. . . . .	291
Following the unprecedented. . . . .	314
Bibliography . . . . .	318

# Building La Dea

ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL had arrived in Italy in the late 1800s as British workers set up clubs to exercise their need for competitive sport. Early traces to football within Italy date back as far as the Roman era with the game *harpastum*. Romans commonly referred to it as ‘the small ball game’, and there are records of crowds gathering to watch, and almost refereeing by means of instructing the players to remain within the field of play. In truth, anecdotes from the time imply it was more similar to rugby than football, but the size of ball, and endeavour to prevent the opposition from ‘scoring’, firmly place it with the annals of football’s history within Italy.

Wind forward to the late 19th century, and football is taking root within newly formed Italy. Unified in 1870, making it one of Europe’s youngest countries, the disparate and warring cities and states were now collectivised under common rule. What better way to channel that enduring sense of tribalism and patriotism than sport? British immigrants and workers were responsible for the initial rooting of football in Italy, using their time away from the factories and fields to play their national game. However, it was in fact an Italian textile worker, Edoardo Bosio, who founded the first club in Italy. Bosio was posted to England to work in Nottingham, and would return to his homeland years later with a passion for English football. Football in England had been

professionalised since 1863 with the formation of the Football Association. The England national team too had played the first international fixture in 1872, against neighbouring Scotland. It would take some years for the rest of Europe to catch up with England's state of development football-wise.

Amid the growth of professional football in England, a 23-year-old Bosio departed England enchanted by the national game. Returning to Turin, Bosio founded the International Football Club as the country's maiden football club. Being the sole ambassadors of the sport, the club had no recognised opposition, so organised friendlies, and exhibition-style matches had to be organised. In his book *Calcio*, charting the history of the game in Italy, John Foot writes, 'One problem for Bosio was that his team had nobody to play against. There were no football federations, no written rules, no referees, no pitches. Games were similar to park kickabouts.'

Bergamo too was beginning to take note. In 1904, Swiss immigrants met in a restaurant to form Foot Ball Club Bergamo – the city's first recognised football club. This maiden club would survive until 1911 when it dissolved and was taken on by rival club Bergamasca to form *Bergamasca Gymnastics Society e fencing* (gymnastics, fencing and wrestling were the primary sports in Bergamo at the time, and far more popular than football). As part of this merger, Bergamasca also adopted the absorbed club's blue and white vertically striped shirts with black shorts. By this time, however, they had company and were rivalled for the city's biggest football entity.

The year is 1907, three years after the birth of FC Bergamo and four years before its merger with Bergamasca. Five students of the esteemed Liceo Classico Paolo Sarpi school in Bergamo gather at the Correggi restaurant. The five students, Gino and Ferruccio Amati, Eugenio Urio, Giovanni Roberti and

Alessandro Forlini, had been members of the Giovane Orobica sports club, but separated in 1907 to create their own. The club was based in Bergamo's Città Alta (upper city), while the five students came from its Città Bassa (lower city) and had to travel on foot or by train each day to attend practice. Creating a sports club in the lower city represented an appropriate compromise. At this point, the intention was to form a wider club rather than being football specific. Most important on the agenda that night was deciding what to call this new venture. It is widely believed that the students turned to their academic readings and books for the name's inspiration. In their Greek mythology books, they stumbled across Atalanta.

In the tales and legends of ancient Greece, Atalanta was a human huntress who followed the goddess of the hunt, Artemis. Left to die at birth, Atalanta was mothered and raised by a bear before coming of age to partake in the fabled Calydonian boar hunt. This terrifying creature had been sent to destroy the ancient city of Calydon, and so was pursued and hunted by its protectors, hunters and huntresses. Atalanta is told to have been the boar's slayer, and it is from this feat that the name 'atalantos' (to be of equal weight or standing) takes on greater meaning. As a woman, deemed to have been lesser in social standing than her male adversaries in the hunt, Atalanta's relevance to ancient Greek lore is significant.

Throughout many tales of Greek mythology including the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts, Atalanta recurs. Her most famous legend states that she offered her hand in marriage to any man who could run faster than she, having reconciled with her father after he had demanded she find a husband. Atalanta is said to have been so fast and swift across the ground that no living man could have beaten her fairly. So Hippomenes, enchanted by Atalanta, asked the goddess Aphrodite for help in winning the

race for her hand. He was gifted three apples which he tossed upon the ground in front of Atalanta, and as she stooped to pick them up, Hippomenes overtook her and so claimed her hand in marriage. The story ends in a rather grisly fashion. Hippomenes failed to compensate Aphrodite for her help in beating Atalanta, and both were duly cursed and transformed into lions.

Such a tale of athletic heroism from an unfancied source such as Atalanta captivated the five founders. The following day saw them reconvene and agree on the new name and embodiment of their club: *Società Bergamasca di Ginnastica e Sports Atletici Atalanta*. Atalanta was born. Writing for *Gazetta Fan News*, Atalanta fan and writer Filippo Davide Di Santo says that the new club attracted roughly 60 new members within a week of its inception, and the five founders appointed Vittorio Adelasio as their first president, with founding father Gino Amati as the first secretary. The early years of Atalanta were spent playing friendlies and exhibition matches at the Piazza d'Armi and the Campo di Marte. The latter ground is described by the club as being makeshift, with 'wooden doors that were assembled and disassembled every time'. Campo di Marte had also been the home ground of FC Bergamo before their absorption into Bergamasca, so the two city's primary football teams were sharing stadia in their early years.

Atalanta would continue playing friendlies until 1914, seven years on from its inception. The issue was that they would only be accepted into the formally recognised national championships organised by the FIGC (Federation Italiana Giuoco del Calcio; the Italian Football Federation) if they had a permanent playing surface and ground of the required pitch dimensions and with adequate seating capacity. The structure of Italian football had changed dramatically in the less than two decades since the national federation was created in 1898. Then it was named the

Federazione Italiana del Football (FIF), to which the FIGC was created to rival. While the FIF was the founding national federation, it was essentially overthrown by the FIGC following proposals to create a two-tiered system, whereby the teams containing entirely Italian born players would occupy the top league, and the clubs with international players would play in the second division. This created outrage among founding clubs such as Genoa, Torino and Milan, who deferred to play in the FIGC's competition instead.

In 1910, as the FIF's crumbling competition entered its third year, the country's biggest clubs had all pledged allegiance to the FIGC (except for Juventus who won both versions of the FIF's competition), the FIGC was recognised as Italy's primary footballing body and competition at the expense of the rival body's survival. Interestingly, the FIGC's league continued to award two trophies at the end of the campaign, one to the winner of the competition, and the other to the best 'pure' Italian side. Nevertheless, the governance and directorship of both the national and regional championships (at this point in Italian football's infancy the league structures were contested within regions, as well as the national championship devised by the now defunct FIF) were under the control of the FIGC. Within the Lombardy regional league, Internazionale (Inter), Milan and Juventus topped the table in the 1913/14 season, the year before the league was curtailed by World War I's outbreak. Juventus are not from the region, but had been relegated from their regional Piedmont League the previous season and were permitted a place in the Lombardy division. These three giants of the Italian, and eventually European, game finished in the top three places of the league but lost the national competition to Casale of Piedmont.

Atalanta now wanted a piece of the competitive pie, but as decreed by the FIGC's regulations were not permitted to due



to the size and capacities of their temporary grounds. President Piero Carimanti invested in a new, permanent playing facility for the team to call home in Via Maglio del Lotto, and Atalanta were granted association status by the FIGC in 1914. The inauguration of Atalanta as a competitive club was realised in a friendly match versus national giants Inter on 24 May 1914. With 800 spectators in attendance, Atalanta were narrowly pipped 2-1 by their Lombardian rivals, but the occasion marked the start of the club's journey to where they are today. Primitive perhaps, but the single-grandstanded ground had afforded Atalanta their right to play competitive football in the second tier of the Italian Championship, then known as the *Promozione* (now regarded as the sixth tier of football in Italy).

Results and match reports are rare and difficult to find from this 1914/15 season; however, records show that the black-and-white-shirted Atalanta finished second in their group and thus qualified for the knockout phase of the competition. A 1-0 away win against Monza gave Atalanta their fourth win in four matches after losing the first two games of the 1914/15 season. A 7-0 trouncing of Fanfulla, a 0-0 draw with table-topping Pavia, and a 1-0 home victory over Treviglese was enough to secure their progress to the next stage to compete for promotion. Historical site *Atalanta Story* describes the team's performances in the promotion round as being underwhelming, and Atalanta finished fourth out of six. The site even remarks that a home defeat to Varese was met with outrage from the supporters to the extent that the club were warned to control the behaviour of their fans. No promotion for Atalanta, but a sterling effort to come within reach of the Lombardian top flight in their first year as an associate club. Aldo Lazzaroni scored an impressive six times in the league that year, contributing to the team's impressive results, and can arguably be dubbed as Atalanta's first star player.

Finishing fourth out of six was no meagre feat for Atalanta but unfortunately they would never play their final fixture of the campaign. Their scheduled curtain-closer with Pro Lissone was cancelled, along with every other fixture across the country that weekend, as Italy declared war on Austro-Hungary on 23 May 1915. This signalled Italy's entry into World War I, an involvement that saw them align with the British and French troops in the Triple Entente having previously sided with Germany and the Austro-Hungarians. Association football in Italy would break for the next four years as the war raged on, and close to 1.5 million Italian soldiers were killed or injured.

Returning from such devastation left the taste for football an almost unpalatable one, given that the casualties were primarily of the football-playing profile: young, fit and athletic men in their early 20s to early 30s. Atalanta also had to sell their ground after the four football-less seasons, endangering the progress made in their maiden competitive season in 1914/15. There would be a saviour, however, from an unexpected source. Red Cross nurse Betty Ambiveri granted the club the rights to a plot of land containing an old racecourse called the Clementina. This gave Atalanta the ground needed to continue participating in the FIGC competition. It became known as Stadium Atalanta, and was far more suitable for the level of football Atalanta were aiming to play at, and supported the club's other sports with a perimeter cycling and athletics track and tennis courts. In Atalanta's inaugural matches at their new and improved home, they hosted Inter and Genoa in front of crowds of over 10,000 fans. That Genoa side was the greatest of the era and, despite losing six first-team players during the war, would win the Italian Championship in 1922/23. No wonder the crowd swarmed in their thousands to welcome such esteemed visitors to their shiny new parish.

However, the greatest change was to occur off the field. In 1920, with Atalanta now confident to push for the national championship beyond their regional competition, the FIGC once again would present an obstacle. Only one team from Bergamo were permitted to compete in the top division for the 1920/21 season, with three regions represented by six teams apiece. Lombardy's group was only large enough for one Bergamaschi side, and Atalanta were not sole occupants within the city. Bergamasca were still alive and kicking as Bergamo's other side, and rival to Atalanta.

Their merger with FC Bergamo in 1911 had allowed them to survive the war, albeit as a smaller entity than their city rivals. Atalanta and Bergamasca played each other in a qualification tie to decide who would represent Bergamo in the Lombardy group. It can safely be regarded as the first intra-city competitive derby, and one that would decide the city's footballing future. The black and white of Atalanta would triumph 2-0 over the blue and black 'Nerazzurri' Bergamasca, denying their rivals entry. Atalanta would finish a respectable third place in the Lombardy B Group that year, in a sub-league containing an unbeaten Milan side.

Following this groundbreaking Bergamo derby, and Atalanta's now clear ascension above the level of their rivals, a meeting was called in spring 1920 between the boards of both clubs. With only one spot to be allocated by the FIGC for the city's two sides, and Atalanta's now growing infrastructure, Bergamasca and Atalanta agreed to merge and combine their resources. One of the Swiss founders of FC Bergamo back in 1904, Enrico Luchsinger, was anointed as the emergent club's new president, carrying on a Swiss tradition within Atalanta that retains relevancy today. The fusion mixed the names and shirts of the two clubs to create the first occurrence of Atalanta

in its modern form; Atalanta Bergamasca Calcio, playing in blue and black shirts with black shorts. This first shirt was vertically separated into two halves, and the club would not take on the associated black and blue stripes for another four years.

In the nearly two decades preceding the historic merger, there were crumbs and semblances of the club's creation harking back to that creation of Foot Ball Club Bergamo in 1904. However, the merger consolidated Atalanta B.C. as Bergamo's proud sporting ambassadors (the club was still a keen exporter of other sporting talent through its cycling, wrestling, tennis and gymnastics groups). The club's official founding date was still marked as 1907, the year of the five-strong split from the Giovane Orobica, a date that is inscribed into the club's north curva today. The foundations were now laid. Atalanta B.C. was born.

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With Atalanta B.C. now firmly set at their Clementina ground, they were entered into Lombardy Group E of the Prima Categoria with the overall competition now hosting over 60 teams across four regional groups, with 12 sub-divisions. These were also set against a wider context of the country's division into north and south. The Lega Nord (North League) and Lega Sud (South League) kept competition regional before any dominant national league championship could be feasibly contested. With regulations varying between regions, and the now swollen capacity of the competition, discontent was beginning to rumble among the best sides, towards the FIGC. So much so that a rogue championship was organised to run alongside the Prima Categoria for the 1921/22 season. Nevertheless, Atalanta finished a disappointing fourth place out of four teams in their group, winning only one of their six games (although that one victory was a 3-2 victory over local rivals Brescia).

As the country's powerhouses deferred to the rogue championship in 1921/22, the size of the Prima Categoria shrunk back for that season. Atalanta competed in Group B of the Lombardy regional competition and recorded a more respectable third-place finish in the group. Winning three and losing three, Atalanta finished five points ahead (wins received two points) of bottom side Stelvio, a club that was consequently disbanded. This relegated Atalanta to the Seconda Divisione for the following season, when the CCI's rebel competition collapsed and brought the biggest clubs back under the FIGC's domain.

Competing in Group C of the Seconda Divisione for 1922/23, Atalanta made their biggest stride as an association team. They topped the group, winning eight, drawing four and only losing two of 14 games. They also outscored all other sides in the league with 34 goals, and conceded a measly 12. This qualified them for the knockout phase of the tournament and a two-legged semi-final with Carpi. A 0-0 draw was followed by a 2-0 Carpi win, knocking out Atalanta. Progress was in motion, however, with the Nerazzurri lifting their first piece of silverware in winning the regional group. Normally this would have promoted them to the Prima Categoria for the following season. However, ludicrously, Atalanta were denied their promotion as the FIGC reshuffled the league configuration for the next season. The sort of laughably unfortunate circumstance that many fans associate with their club's ill fortune, but one that has sincerely followed Atalanta throughout their existence.

The following years would not bring another title, instead battling in the lower reaches of their regional championships in the second tier, before in 1925 Atalanta hired their first professional coach in Cesare Lovati. Lovati was an Argentine-born Italian manager who had a hugely successful playing career at Milan, where he won the Federation Cup in 1916. In 1920

Lovati also represented Italy at the Olympic Games, and won six international caps that year before moving into management with Atalanta.

With the new coach's arrival also came two overseas signings from Hungary: centre-forward Gedeon Eugen Lukács, and half-winger Jenő Hauser. Lukács especially would emerge as one of the club's first major stars by ending his first season as Atalanta's top scorer with 13 goals in 20 games. Hauser was less of a hit, and was subsequently released by the club at the end of the 1925/26 season. Not that this choice was entirely in the hands of the club.

The conclusion of 1925/26 in Italy brought about yet more radical change to the footballing landscape. The FIGC first sought to make the game professional, to cope with the growing numbers of amateur players who could no longer balance a full-time job with playing and training. The end goal for the FIGC was to institute a national championship system, rather than one separated by the geographies of the contesting teams. Such an overhaul of the existing, more convoluted system could only be feasible if the players were professionalised and free to travel each week to the country's distant corners. The FIGC revamp, known as the Viareggio Charter, sought to eradicate any foreign influence within the league by limiting each club to one foreign staff member. Lukács's success in his first season meant that Hauser was released by the club as part of a national exodus of Hungarian and Austrian players from Italian clubs. With the National Fascist Party (known as the PNF or Partito Nazionale Fascista), headed by dictator Benito Mussolini, implementing a severe and ruthless fascist regime since 1922, enforcing the Italianness of the growing football league formed part of a wider-reaching image and philosophy of power.

The new league format would see the *Divisione Nazionale* as the national championship at the very top of the Italian pyramid.

The Seconda Divisione, made up of the four groups of 11 (of which Atalanta were competing in Group C for the 1925/26 season), was renamed as the Prima Divisione for the 1926/27 season. It remained as the country's second tier of professional football, and still contained four sub-groups; however, it served as the highest tier in Italy, beneath the newly formed national championship.

In the new format's first outing, Atalanta performed admirably to finish second in their group, just one point behind Pro Patria. The season featured many hallmarks of the modern La Dea: capable of huge victories while also receiving hammerings of equal magnitude. Victories of 7-1, 5-0 and 6-0 were somewhat balanced by defeats of 7-0 to Pro Patria and 6-1 to Fiumana. These results were damaging in that the loss away to Fiumana meant that Pro Patria leapfrogged Atalanta to finish top of Group B, and thus were promoted to the Divisione Nazionale. Thirty-three goals from Lukács and Italian forward Luigi Poggio had left Atalanta in the driving seat to reach the top flight for the first time in their history. It was an agonising shortcoming, and one that was not warmly received by the club's hierarchy.

The PNF had come to view football as the ideal vehicle with which to exert control over the leisure and cultural pastimes of the Italian people. It brought the working classes together, and offered escape from not only gruelling labour but also from the realities of the dictatorship. Infiltrating the sport's organisation allowed Mussolini and the PNF to appeal to the hearts and minds, while simultaneously tightening the grip on their freedoms and expressions. The *Direttorio Divisioni Superiori* (Directory of Higher Divisions) was created ahead of the Viareggio Charter by the PNF to wrestle control from the FIGC, and enforce the PNF's rule and regulation over all footballing decisions. In doing so, many clubs found their day-to-day running and hierarchy

was now influenced by members of the PNF party. Leandro Arpinati, for example, was close friends with Mussolini and had forged a political career out of this acquaintance. Arpinati was a boyhood Bologna fan, and was the club's chairman as well as simultaneously being the FIGC's president, and being the city's unelected mayor.

In Bergamo, there were similar occurrences of the PNF's creeping influence. Pietro Capoferri was a Bergamaschi bricklayer and since the end of World War I had risen through the PNF's ranks to occupy a position at the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers during the 1930s, having previously been chairman of the Milan trade union federation. At one point, Capoferri's influence was such that during 1940, he was temporarily head of the party when secretary Ettore Muti left his post to fight during World War II. Over a decade previously, however, Capoferri remained in Bergamo, and was Atalanta's vice-president for the 1926/27 season. With the team failing to achieve promotion on the final day, Capoferri fired coach Lovati, as well as replacing Antonio Gambirasi as club chairman. Gambirasi, a lawyer by trade, had only assumed the role himself the year before after taking over from Enrico Luchsinger (one of the Swiss founders of FC Bergamo back in 1904). Like much of Italy, the club was feeling the ruthlessness and power of the PNF.

Hungarian coach Imre Payer replaced Lovati for the next campaign. As per the new league rules regarding foreign players and staff, bringing in Payer caused the prolific Lukács to be released. The influence of Hungary over western Europe was considerable, with a mass exodus of Hungarian players and coaches in the 1920s being driven by significant push-factors in their homeland, including a struggling post-war economy. The likes of Lukács, Hauser and Payer arriving in Bergamo in



quick succession were evidence of this Hungarian impact. The changes rung by the club, harsh and swift as they were, proved to be fruitful the following campaign. Atalanta finished top of Group A of the Prima Divisione and proceeded into the knockout stage of the campaign against the winners of Group B, C and D respectively. Biellese, winners of Group B, forfeited their tie against Atalanta, meaning that La Dea progressed to the final, to face Pistoiese. Atalanta triumphed 3-0, and thus secured their place in the Divisione Nazionale for the first time in their history.

The opening of a brand-new stadium coincided with this momentous chapter in the club's history. Stadio Mario Brumana was a 12,000-seat venue located in the lower new town of Bergamo, on a different site to the Clementina ground. Mario Brumana, after whom the ground was named, was a Bergamo-born fascist soldier who had died before the PNF had taken power in 1922. The stadium would be renamed following World War II, yet even without the emblazoning of a fascist icon's name, the ground resembled the architecture and design of the Mussolini era. Concrete-like struts support the overhanging south curva, an uncovered terrace under which fans would bake in the summer sun, and freeze in the alpine winter rain. Until the redevelopments and regeneration work carried out after 2018, many attendees stated that the ground bore many of the same hallmarks as had been present when Mussolini opened it himself in 1928. In fact, Mussolini's ceremony to officially open the stadium was the second such ceremony. Atalanta played a friendly match against Triestina, winning 4-2 and consecrating their new turf. Mussolini, however, deemed the event to be underwhelming, and thus declared a new and official ceremony to take place months later. Atalanta won 2-0 against La Dominante Genova (the historic incarnation of Sampdoria), with Mussolini riding out on a white horse prior to kick-off to welcome 14,000 Bergamaschis.

The club's first season in the top tier would turn out to be their last under the existing format. With the major reforms outlined and beginning in 1926, the final (and most notable change) arrived in 1929/30 when the FIGC collapsed the league system once more. The pyramid, with the *Divisione Nazionale* at the summit, and the *Prima Divisione* with its regional subjects representing the second tier, was to be replaced by a simpler, fully national format. *Serie A* and *Serie B* were to be Italy's two top leagues, with classification being entirely based on performance, without regional segregation.

With the previous *Divisione Nazionale* being contested over two groups (north and south), the top nine teams of each group were entered into the 1929/30 *Serie A* season, with the remaining seven of each group 'relegated' into *Serie B*. Atalanta had finished 14th in the *Divisione Nazionale* Group A, scoring a league low 27 goals in the process. Their dalliance with the top flight was therefore to be a brief one, and they were to compete in the first *Serie B* season. It would remain so for the following seven seasons, with the club stabilising as a consistent *Serie B* presence. Between 1929 and 1936/37, La Dea would only twice finish outside the top half of the table, and would finish as high as fourth in 1931/32. As is by now to be expected, the FIGC found time within this half decade to fiddle and tamper further with the renovated league system. The 1933/34 season saw the FIGC scrap the single national league system in favour of an east-to-west split, with *Serie B* once more becoming a divided league of two sub-groups. This bizarre deviation from the format was ended just two years later.

The 1935/36, and 1936/37 seasons would see further milestones achieved by Atalanta. The first, in autumn 1935, was a debut in the *Coppa Italia* albeit in a home defeat to Viareggio. Registering and reaching competitions like this, while knocking

on the door of promotion to Serie A, were positive indications of the direction the club was taking. That elusive promotion would finally be reached in 1936/37 with a second-place Serie B finish and a satisfying final-day victory over bitter local rivals Brescia. Again, their time as a top-flight team would not extend beyond one season, finishing 15th in the 16-team division. Wins over Napoli and Torino were highlights in the campaign; however, a return to the second tier awaited.

With that came a renewed status as big fish in the Serie B pond, and an immediate return to Serie A was only delayed by a year. Winning promotion in 1940/41, Atalanta could even have bounced straight back into the top tier the previous year were it not for finishing level with Venezia in second place and missing out via a final-day play-off. Nevertheless, 1940 would bring about the club's return to Serie A, incidentally arriving on the very day prime minister Mussolini announced the country's entry into World War II. Domestic football in Italy would continue through to 1943 without disturbance, and in this time Atalanta established itself and extended its stay in the league beyond one season for the first time. A confident sixth-place finish in 1940/41 included home wins against giants Juventus, Milan and Napoli, and a 2-0 win at home to eventual champions Bologna. Having been on the brink of financial peril just five years before, and selling star goalkeeper Carlo Ceresoli (a member of the 1938 Italian World Cup-winning side) to Inter in order to register their team for the season, Atalanta had begun to flourish beyond merely existing. With the exception of the 1943 to 1945 break taken due to Italy's World War II involvement, Atalanta would feature in Serie A for a total of 15 seasons consecutively; the run remains to this day as their longest stay in the top flight.

Crucially, within this prolonged period of top-flight football came a change in stadium name. Mussolini was ripped from

office in 1943 after a vote of no confidence from his council, with the economy suffering and the Allied invasion of Sicily provoking many to question the supposedly unbreakable spirit of the fascist dictatorship. With Mussolini's removal came the fall of the fascist regime, over two decades after it had barged its way into power. This brought about a cultural shift within Italy, as could be seen in Bergamo with the renaming of the Mario Brumana Stadium. Without being a flashy or expressive label upon which to attribute Atalanta and its fans, the newly named Stadio Comunale (the City Stadium) was a more encompassing and welcoming name for the ground.

A fifth-place finish in 1947/48 was the highlight in the club's most successful Serie A run. In fact, it would remain Atalanta's highest league finish in the top flight until 2016/17. The season started in mixed fashion, and despite winning the opening fixture 3-1 at home to Bari, Atalanta would win only one of their next ten Serie A matches. This miserable form, which included a run of scoring just twice in five league games in late October and November 1947, was broken by a 5-0 battering of Lucchese. This proved to be the season's turning point as they lost only once in their next nine matches, including wins over Napoli and eventual league champions, Torino. There would even be a crushing 3-0 away win at Inter, with winger Edmondo Fabbri scoring against his former employers. By the end of the season Atalanta's 44 points were just five shy of Milan and Juventus, tied in second place. Their 41 goals conceded was second only to Torino across the division; however, their top scorer that season was Mario Astorri with just nine Serie A strikes. Had there been more goals spread among the team, there could plausibly have been a second-place finish.

Even after this high point (a high point which would remain so until the second decade of the next century), Atalanta would

enjoy another ten years in Serie A. There were dalliances with relegation in the years preceding their eventual demotion in 1957/58, yet the club would bounce between the top half and upper-lower half of the table. Several players emerged in this time who remain firmly in the echelons of Atalanta history. Severo Cominelli emerged as a star of Italian football, playing for Atalanta in three separate spells between 1934 and 1949. The attacking midfielder played over 200 times for the club, scoring 62 times, and until 2021 was the second-highest top scorer in their history. Giovanni Gaddoni had been signed in 1939 from Torino (while Atalanta were still in Serie B), and would remain in Bergamo for three seasons. His 25 league goals propelled the club to Serie A promotion in 1940, and he would be sold to Inter at the end of the 1941/42 season, having guided the club to a respectable ninth-place finish. Then there was Adriano Bassetto, another Italian midfielder, who signed from Sampdoria in 1953. Dark-haired and with a furrowed brow, Bassetto would win one cap for the national team, and score 57 Serie A goals for Atalanta: a record for the club until the early 2000s.

Hans Jeppson, a Swedish striker for whom Napoli would pay a world-record fee of 105m lira in 1952, would also shine for Atalanta within this period. Jeppson was a lethal forward who held nicknames such as 'Golden Foot' and the 'Bank of Naples' for his ruthlessness in front of goal. Atalanta signed him from Charlton Athletic in 1951, and he would be sold to Napoli just a year later. Yet in that season, his scoring exploits served to keep Atalanta in Serie A. He was signed seven weeks into the 1951/52 season, with La Dea struggling badly in 18th position. Despite arriving in the division at such a late stage in the season, Jeppson would score an astonishing 22 Serie A goals, tying him for fourth place in the scoring charts that year. His instant adaptation not only attracted a side with the ambitions of Napoli, but also kept

Atalanta in the league as they finished in a more respectable 12th place.

Jeppson was part of a strong raft of Scandinavian players to thrive in Bergamo, right through to the 1980s. Even before Jeppson, there was the Danish pair of Karl Aage Hansen and Jorgen Leschly Sorensen, who combined for a total 35 goals in the 1949/50 season. In fact, of the top 18 goalscorers in Serie A that season, six were from Denmark or Sweden. Hansen would only stay at Atalanta for that single prolific season before joining champions Juventus for the 1950/51 season, where he would form a formidable Danish trio with John Hansen and Carl Aage Praest. Sorensen too would leave for a more prestigious club, Milan. However, he would play for Atalanta for four seasons between 1949 and 1953, scoring over 50 goals. Bertil Nordahl too had arrived from the continent's north, this time from Sweden, as a more defensive-minded midfielder. Having sold Jeppson to Napoli in 1952, La Dea recruited yet another Scandinavian to fill the goalscoring void. Poul Aage Rasmussen was described as being slighter, and with a less powerful shot than Jeppson, and with huge boots to fill. Incredibly, he scored 19 Serie A goals in his first campaign in Italy, and even finished five goals clear of Jeppson's total at Napoli that season. Rasmussen's goals would help Atalanta finish four points higher than the previous season and, in finishing as the third-highest Serie A scorer, rounded off an all-Scandinavian top three that season (Gunnar Nordahl of Milan and Juventus's John Hansen finished with 26 and 22 goals respectively). Rasmussen would continue scoring proficiently for Atalanta, netting 31 times in Serie A in the two seasons following his breakthrough. By 1953/54, the Dane had received assistance in the shape of Adriano Bassetto, and together the pair would combine for 32 league goals in Atalanta's 1953/54 season.

Two finishes of 15th and one of 14th would precede the end of Atalanta's long Serie A stay, yet the terminal campaign itself would be condemned for far greater offences than poor performances on the pitch. Having struggled throughout the 1957/58 season, Atalanta were second from bottom on 30 March 1958 and travelled away to Padova, who at the time were second in Serie A. A surprise 3-0 away win ensued, with Italian forward Giovanni Zavaglio scoring twice. The match was prominent for the error-prone performance of Padova defender Renato Azzini, who was at fault for both of Zavaglio's strikes. Sampdoria, who were embroiled in a relegation dogfight with Atalanta, appealed to the FIGC that the match had been fixed. Remarkably, Azzini's fiancée Silveria Marchesini came forward as a witness and claimed that the defender had rigged the match with the help of infamous fixer Eugenio Gaggiotti.

Gaggiotti was involved with multiple match fixings within the 1950s and '60s and according to Azzini's fiancée had met with Azzini in the week prior to the fixture to arrange for the defender to allow the Atalanta forwards to score. An investigation into the case found that Marchesini had been paid to give her witness statement, while urban myth claims that Marchesini acted out of frustration for her wedding having been postponed. The initial ruling banned Azzini from FIGC activity for life, and for their part in the scandal, Atalanta were relegated to Serie B. The following year, appeals were launched by both Azzini and Atalanta's respective legal teams. Azzini's sentence was reduced to a two-year ban and Atalanta were retrospectively cleared of any wrongdoing.

For Atalanta, however, the damage was done, and they suffered relegation to the second tier for the first time since 1937/38. This revocation of wrongdoing arrived towards the end of the 1958/59 campaign, at which point Atalanta had

already secured promotion back to Serie A. The forward who had profited from Azzini's errors on that infamous day, Zavaglio, was integral to their re-promotion in scoring 13 times. The long-serving Italian winger Angelo Longoni also weighed in with 11 as Atalanta returned to the top flight with only five defeats across the league campaign.

The rest of the 20th century would follow a far less stable and consistent trajectory than that experienced by the club since its first Serie A promotion in 1936/37. However, despite the unprecedented high, and all too frequent lows that would follow between 1960 and the 2016/17 season, Atalanta's identity would begin to take an even firmer shape in the landscape of Italian football.