



Moody

BLUE

THE STORY OF MYSTERIOUS MARCO

MARCO NEGRI WITH JEFF HOLMES

Forewords by Rino Gattuso, Marco Materazzi and Michael Mols

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BY JEFF HOLMES



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INTRODUCTION

'Each one of us has a pair of wings, but only those who dream learn to fly.'

FOOTBALL has been my life since I was very small. It has given me some of the most intoxicating highs, and mind-numbing lows, but it still remains to this day the one pleasure that I never want to lose. Despite the pain it has caused, my passion for the game has never diminished and I can say with hand on heart that it's the place I still know better than anything else.

When I turned 40, I realised that a flame was still burning brightly, and I wanted to do something about it. I decided to take part in a coaching course to gain my UEFA licence and, at the same time, develop a project that I like to call 'revolutionary and incredibly ambitious', and which I believe in with all my heart. An idea, formed exclusively in my head and planned with extreme meticulousness. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you a course designed specifically for the striker. It's my hope that this is something which will arouse the enthusiasm and curiosity of those who value the contribution of such a player. The course has been designed on the back of my own top-level experiences with the breath of the defender constantly on my neck, and the preying eyes of spectators trained on my boots.

Recently, though, this has been put on hold as I decided to document my life and career in print. If truth be told, not even for a moment of my 'previous life' would it have occurred to me to write a book about myself. Maybe because I'm quite a private and reserved person, but also because my professional career doesn't appear so important or outstanding to me, and I never felt the need to pass on its secrets to such a large number of people.

During pre-season, or in my hotel room on the evening before away games, apart from playing cards with my teammates, I always maintained a passion for reading. Not exactly works of historical significance but mostly the biographies of professional athletes. Footballers, of course, but also tennis players, boxers, wrestlers, Formula 1 drivers, cyclists and rugby players – nothing was out of bounds. I've also had a long-held curiosity for the careers of well-known actors, politicians, and great and revolutionary men who made their mark on history. Thanks to my Scottish experience, I studied the English language at a higher level and started reading volumes that were in short supply in Italian libraries. Mostly non-authorized biographies – my favourites – that aren't simply pages filled with sport results in sequence, but highlight anecdotes, deep reflections, human weaknesses, major errors and uncomfortable truths on the life of the book's hero.

The first thoughts of putting my life down in print came when a Scottish journalist, Gary Ralston, called and suggested it would make an interesting read. The idea grew on me, and although Marco Negri was never the greatest, most talented, or best-loved player to wear the Rangers shirt, without doubt I've been one of the most enigmatic characters of Scottish football in the last 20 years.

My history is in fact quite curious and complex, especially in Scotland, where I left little in the way of interviews, whether in print or on TV. Of course, there are a couple of videos on YouTube or a few articles in the papers and sports magazines. The interest on some Scottish supporters' forums and websites has been quite bizarre, to say the least, but the reality is that nobody really knows

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how things went because I didn't ever speak about it to anyone on the 'outside'. That's why I thought that a book on my life and career might be a good idea: in fact, I was soon ready to throw myself head first into the project.

However, a lengthy series of unexpected hurdles appeared and slowed down the process until Gary decided to buy his plane ticket to Italy, complete with recorder and notebook, only to discover that I had been struck down with an extremely nasty form of labyrinthitis. I had lost all sense of balance and couldn't even stand up. It did occur to me that perhaps everything that happened during my time at Rangers really had brought on a massive headache! And not just that, but that period produced the coldest temperatures in the UK in the last 50 years, and completely paralysed British airports for a few days. It was the winter of 2010/11, and it was a nasty one.

With this in mind, and wrought by desperation, Gary and I decided to try and use the internet to get the ball rolling and started speaking via Skype. It was a real bind, hard to explain, and only served to complicate matters as problems with the line seemed to arise every five minutes. Our main issue was that every time we lost the connection, we would invariably lose track of what we had been saying and would always have to start again from the beginning. We managed to overcome most problems and my journalist friend advised me to write down a couple of chapters, just to see how much I had to say, and to see how the story would pan out. I enjoyed those weekend appointments and was confident something interesting would come of it.

Unfortunately, during the Christmas holidays, I received a phone call from Gary to tell me that the first draft of the book was at risk as a sad, unexpected and sudden episode had taken place in his personal life. Understandably, he had to take a step back as his priorities had changed. At that moment I decided to abandon all notion of writing my story. Or just about, because my brother stepped in and persuaded me to keep on writing, and jot down snippets when they came to mind. I simply watched again the film of my life and, spontaneously, tasty particulars started

to form in my mind – situations that I thought were lost and forgotten, when they had merely been hibernating in a distant corner of my memory. Once again I threw open the doors of that abstract wardrobe, curious to see what joys I would come across in the deep recesses of my mind.

I must admit I had real fun writing this book. I hope you experience the same emotions while turning the pages. What initially appeared to be a difficult journey turned out in the end to be a pleasant stroll because it soon became natural writing about myself, especially as I described my experiences with the same intensity used while living my life – and with complete honesty.

I also reckon writing a book represents a great way for an ex-footballer to make sense of what he has just lived and experienced, and with that in mind I would recommend that more pick up the pen and start scribbling. Giving up a career such as football is incredibly difficult and nothing prepares you for it. Everything changes with the flick of a switch. You give up the camaraderie of the dressing room, training, technical meetings and actually playing. Sadly, I've known many colleagues that found themselves lost once they had kicked their last ball. In the blink of an eye, they had moved from a totally privileged position, a status that gives you control on everything and everyone, to a world of confusion and negative emotions. The feeling of not being useful anymore is potentially destructive.

At this time, and almost without realising it, you can fall into a world of temptations, and more than one of my former colleagues have destroyed an apparently solid relationship with their wives through choosing a much younger girlfriend, perhaps because they wanted to feel young again. Others have thrown themselves head first into risky adventures, just to feel one last time that adrenaline rush that only professional football brings. And just a small number, fortunately, have been seduced by drugs.

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American man of words, 'The non-examined life is not worth living.' I have to agree with him, as through a book such as this, you can accompany the author on his journey, before summing up the life just lived. And,

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of course, it is a wonderful legacy to leave to children, parents and best friends.

‘For a man, there’s no greater glory, until he lives, than to accomplish undertaking with his feet and hands.’ So, if it’s true I was a success in my chosen field, I would have to conclude that the Great Omer was accurate with his words. I can only hope I do not disappoint with mine, as for me, he has been a tremendous source of inspiration.

I

FIRST STEPS

MILAN was around a decade away from becoming the fashion capital of Europe when I was born in the city's main hospital, the Mangiagalli e Regina Elena, in October 1970. I'm told Italy's second-most populous city was still a bustling and vibrant metropolis but that didn't prevent my father, Angelo, deciding to move the family north-east to Monfalcone when I was just 12 months old. His decision to relocate was taken on the basis that it would be good for the family, and his own job prospects, so it was goodbye 'Mia bela Madunina' (the unofficial anthem of Milan) and nice to meet you 'Rocca', a ruined fortress that dominates the town of Monfalcone.

Monfalcone is as close to the old Yugoslavian border as it gets, and just a few miles north of Trieste. But unlike Milan, which is landlocked, Monfalcone is at the head of the beautiful Adriatic Sea, so while we may have moved just 250 miles to the east it was like switching to a whole new country, such was the dramatic change in landscape. It was the ideal place to grow up, with lots to see and do. As a kid you make your own entertainment, but there was a huge US Naval shipyard on our doorstep, while we just had to open the door of our flat and there were great schools, medical centres and awesome sports facilities. The sea and beaches were

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reachable even by bicycle, and there were snowy mountains, where you could ski, within a 90-minute drive of the centre of town.

My father has always represented the classical masculine figure, the strong and important axis around which my entire family revolved. A typical Milan citizen of many generations, he started work at just 15, and found himself in Puglia, miles from home, where he decided to join the Italian Navy. Apart from fulfilling his many naval duties, he distinguished himself in marine sports activities, achieving medals in rowing as well as football. On his release from the Navy, he started a professional football career with AC Fanfulla, a Serie C side. He was an attacking midfielder with clever feet but his career was brought to a shuddering halt when he developed serious knee problems, which may have had something to do with the strict manner in which he always ensured his children did the best they could at school. On the other hand, even though he would often work long shifts and was usually tired by the time he arrived home, he would still pass the evening playing with me and my brother.

My mother Maria is a very sweet, fragile and sensitive person, with a real passion for cooking. She was born in Piove di Sacco, about 25 miles south-west of Venice, and brought up in Domodossola, before moving to Milan. She met my father in a dance hall when she was 20 and they soon fell in love. They often spoke of their romantic meeting, which I 'now' find really sweet. She had been working in the Olivetti typewriter factory but when my brother Alessandro and I came along, she dedicated her life to her husband and children. With my father working from early morning to late evening, she gave up work, and while that must have saddened her to a certain extent, she never once showed it and was always extremely cheerful and positive.

Dad, despite his strong moral values and having his head firmly attached to his shoulders, was an unsuspecting spendthrift. The family still talk about the time he spent his entire salary on a brand new camera. It was Christmas, and savings were pretty low in the Negri household, so I can still imagine the discussions my

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mother and father had about it. My mother is still the complete opposite and the most careful saver I ever met, although we didn't ever go without.

Like most siblings, Alessandro, who was the eldest, and I were always fighting. I suppose I was a typical 'second son', forever instigating trouble but always coming off second best. His favourite sport was basketball – which he was pretty good at – but my passion was always football. He is left-handed and I am right, and he was around 12 when he started forging friendships with other kids of a similar age in our neighbourhood. I wasn't too happy about it at first because I was happiest playing around with Alessandro, and inevitably we started moving in different circles. Our frequent conflicts were usually born out of petty little things, but I suppose it was an unconscious way of keeping our sibling rivalry intact.

Growing up, Alessandro and I were of similar build – but one thing I learned quickly was to never go near his wardrobe. His sweatshirts, trousers etc were strictly off limits and I didn't even get them when they didn't fit him any more. As we continued to grow and develop, our relationship changed somewhat, with Alessandro spending the bulk of his time studying at university, while I began to follow my dream of becoming a footballer. It was only when we started moving in different directions that I began to really look up to him. I consider my brother to be very intelligent and hard-working – qualities that allowed him to fulfil, with merit, an enviable position in a well-known, worldwide industry. He has achieved so much by showing great personal strength, intelligence and a strong, fighting character.

As we grew apart, we became even closer, and for years now he has been the first person I get in touch with if I have any problems. We get on very well and I can't remember a single verbal clash or difference of opinion since we were kids. Despite the obvious geographical distance, we have a very tight relationship and it's one that I value so much. I might have opted for a more high-profile career, but never once has he felt envy towards me. I have always felt proud of the fact that I achieved many goals in life,

and these are the exact same feelings that I have for him, his work and his private life.

My childhood was divided equally between school and having fun with friends. When I was six, the family moved to a bigger apartment, which had a large tarmacked courtyard. We became friendly with two other boys from our block – who were also called Marco and Alessandro, although on this occasion Marco was the older of the two! We became good friends and in the winter months, I took up basketball. My brother was already playing to a very good standard but when spring arrived, I went back to football, and in the afternoon we would all play in the yard. The matches would last hours and it would be the ‘Marcos’ against the ‘Alessandros’. These games were fiercely contested and, to all intents and purposes, were like small-sided derby matches, where the need to win was all-pervading. Sadly, they were usually brought to a premature end as the neighbours regularly complained that the constant thumping of the ball against the garage doors was driving them mad. Eventually, the council got involved and we were banned from playing games there before 4pm.

When we weren’t being chastened by our fellow tenants, there was one more danger to our matches – the private villa with the scary drop at the front of the building. The wall that separated the two buildings was so high that one misplaced shot could’ve ended the game. From that moment, we knew we had just one minute to run around the block and ring the bell of the neighbours’ house to ask for our precious ball back. If it hadn’t taken the drop, then their boxer dog would have ripped it to shreds. That would have signalled the end of the ‘season’, until we could afford a new ball. At other times, our cup final would end when my exhausted father clapped his hands from the bathroom window and we would have time only for the ‘golden goal’. Then it was a quick wash, a few minutes watching my favourite cartoon *Goldrake* – about a super robot – and then dinner.

My father had golden hands and a big heart, and he created our own personal basketball park in the yard. We had a high

basket with scoreboard, iron and net. It was only then that hands replaced feet and Alessandro and I would enjoy regular matches. I might have had the upper hand over him at football, but in terms of basketball, the shoe was on the other foot. We had a great rivalry, and again the matches were fiercely competitive. I would inevitably end up defeated, but always possessed the greater desire to improve and compete with the type of spirit that would help save face – and bring the occasional victory.

There is no question I felt more comfortable with the ball at my feet, but as far as I'm concerned, I never felt destined to be a top footballer, like a kid at say four or five years old who you can just tell has the look and qualities of a future star. And I didn't ever support any particular team when I was a kid. Not even the great Zibi Boniek or Michel Platini pulled me towards the black and white of Juventus. There were no posters on my bedroom walls or football shirt doubling as pyjamas. At the start of my career, I didn't have one team in particular that I supported (although that has changed now, because Glasgow Rangers will always be my number one), which is probably why I had difficulties understanding the mentality of the typical football supporter: the one who has a tattoo of his favourite team and takes annual holidays to follow that team despite awful weather or a furious girlfriend. Mind you, in recent years I have come to better understand this mentality, and grown to fully appreciate their passion.

It was amazing to see supporters in Scotland going about their daily lives from Monday to Friday and then transforming into crazy fans at the weekend, singing loudly with giant hats on, like at the Munich Beer Festival, and sitting next to their little son, who was already draped in club colours and doing everything his father did.

I remember watching a television interview with a Celtic supporter, who made up a story about a serious family problem just to get a couple of days off to go and watch his team at the 2003 UEFA Cup Final in Seville. Celtic were up against Jose Mourinho's Porto, and this fan was willing to do just about

anything to see his team attempt to lift their first European trophy since 1967. However, his trip ended in disappointment, and was well documented in the Scottish press, with pictures galore of the fans having a ball in the Spanish sunshine. And here comes the good part, because our friend was unmasked while directing the Celtic choir, perched on top of a crash barrier. Unfortunately for him, his boss reckoned he wasn't sick at all and fired him on his return. Maybe his boss was a Rangers fan who gleaned double satisfaction from the fan's desperate situation. A couple of years later, he got another job and appeared once again in front of the cameras with the photo that lost him his previous job. Asked if he would have changed anything about the past, he answered, 'Yes, the result!' That's the passion I mean when I talk of football supporters.

When I was growing up, dad never pressured either Alessandro or I into practising any sport in particular. My main reason for leaning towards basketball at one point was down to the impressive facilities of A.R. Italcantieri of Monfalcone. They also offered training sessions during the cold winter months in a warm and safe environment. Alessandro and I were encouraged by dad to practise sport because it was healthy, but especially as a release valve for two restless kids. We had a lot of fun with loads of other kids, and reaped the rewards of the discipline that taking part in a team sport brings. We learned to respect the coach, and anyone in authority, and I grew up loving sport in general thanks to this kind of encouragement and mentality. Tasting the adrenaline of the challenge, living the happiness of the victory or the disappointment of defeat, as well as the desire of revenge, was drummed into me from a young age. There was always the need to keep improving, and show the type of determination that you need to achieve your goals, but most of all, to enjoy the shared experience of achieving something with your friends. That's why afternoons passed so quickly. The word tired didn't exist, nor were there any kind of huffs or moods. We went to sleep satisfied, thinking about what we did and what we would do better the next day.

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Following the same philosophy we started playing tennis. We built a net in the yard, with the manhole covers defining the boundaries of the court, and we would watch how the professionals played and attempt to copy them during our games. Today it's all different. Children don't take advantage of the simple street teaching and the rules that come with it. They're not free to put their imagination into practice. Once, you only played if you were good or if the ball was yours. Otherwise you would go in goals or, even worse, just watch. Now, everything is done with the help of a coach or teacher: football camps with the teacher, skiing with the teacher, tennis and golf with the teacher. Everything is straight from the textbook, which brings a real lack of entertainment or competition. I'm certainly not suggesting that teaching is useless. I'm doing it now but in the 1980s there was a different way of doing things. For example, I learned to play tennis with a racket that was just about hanging together, whereas today kids are brought up to believe that boots sponsored by Zlatan Ibrahimovic have the magical powers to score thousands of goals. Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – we know that's not true.

When a child is starting out in any sport, money is nothing compared to passion, devotion and sacrifice. Sadly, there is little talent being nurtured nowadays, especially in Italy, because there are no playgrounds, yards, or streets that proved a source of inspiration for many generations. But there are also many new dangers generated by the sick world in which we now live. Whereas kids were always out playing when Alessandro and I were growing up, many parents are now alert to the dangers that their children face from unscrupulous predators.

In summer, though, our exciting little world was transferred from the city to the stunning gulf of Trieste and, in particular, the happy and colourful Marina Julia. It was a time we looked forward to for months. We would meet in the yard immediately after lunch, each of us with his bicycle and the inevitable ball attached to the luggage rack. We would then pedal and chat all the way to a part of the beach that was just ten minutes from home. We were well aware of the rules of the road. Never ride four deep, always

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in couples, so that drivers could pass easily, although there were always the angry ones who would honk their horn and shout at us as they passed. In fact, it was a game of ours to count the number of 'curses' we got before reaching our destination! We would then lay down our beach towels and get the ball out. All around was empty beach – as nobody wanted to get hit on the head with our ball or breathe in the shifting sand.

It became our personal beach soccer field and we constructed goalposts with pieces of wood. Sometimes other children would join in and only when we were exhausted, and I mean really exhausted, would the final whistle sound and our reward was a relaxing dip in the Adriatic. We would then buy an ice lolly from one of the many beach bars with the few coins we had in our pockets and, change permitting, enjoy a game of table football to round off the perfect day. That said, the table football could last an eternity because we soon discovered a way of keeping the lever opened, without the owners knowing, and have endless balls to play. It was then a case of collecting our meagre possessions and cycling home. Then, as usual, it was a quick shower, dinner and we would reconvene to pass more time together in the yard. It was bliss.