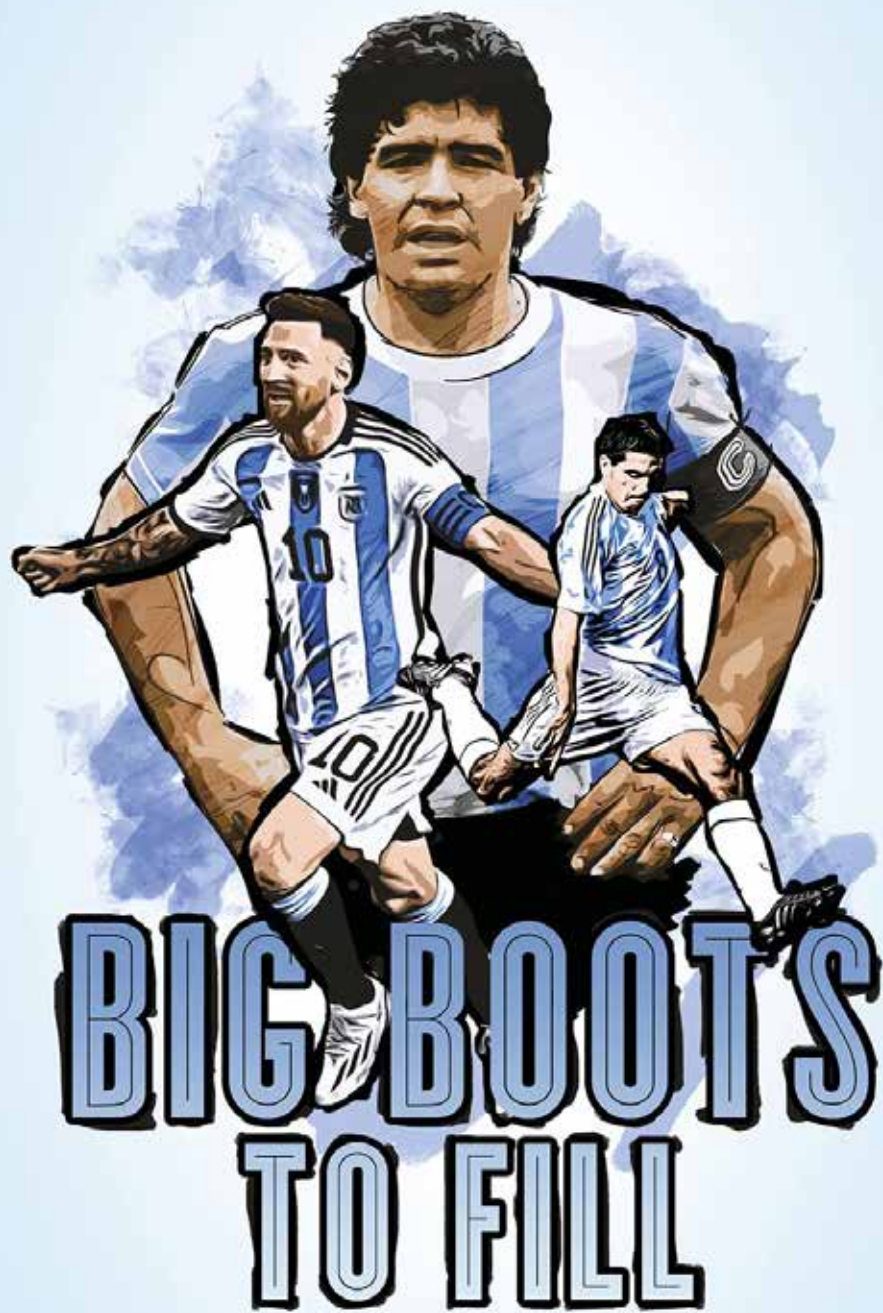


DAVID MICHAEL NOLAN



**The New Maradona,
Riquelme, Messi and Beyond**

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BIG BOOTS TO FILL

The New Maradona, Riquelme,
Messi and Beyond



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ONE

Diego Maradona, ‘El Pibe de Oro’

THE CULT of Maradona means the story of his early years is a familiar one. Born in Avellaneda, his parents had moved from Corrientes in the northeast of the country, where they had been brought up in huts made from clay, manure and reeds. Diego was named after his father and both his parents worked the kind of jobs that had not changed for a century. In Buenos Aires, his father found a job as a factory worker, while his mother became a maid.

As well as a name, Diego also inherited something of his father’s build – short, squat and powerful, with a large head due to the mix of his father’s Guaraní and Italian heritage.

Diego was raised in Villa Fiorito, a shanty town to the south of Buenos Aires, where his father built their house using bricks and sheet metal.

Years later, Maradona would claim in interviews that Villa Fiorito had made him who he was – an archetypal ‘pibe’ (kid) of Argentinian folklore, playing football with a bundle of rags in a ‘potrero’ or area of waste ground, living on his wits and trickery, always fighting to survive.

And he would have had to fight to survive in Villa Fiorito – it had no police station. It was ruled by criminal gangs and suffered from the kind of violence and poverty that would have been shocking in most of Europe or the US at that time.

Given a football by his uncle, Maradona's honest and hardworking parents quickly realised that their son's talent was their best chance to escape poverty. Diego went from scraping a living as a street urchin in central Buenos Aires to local fame for his ball-juggling skills. Archive footage reveals his magical control of the football, and it wasn't long before he was signed up by 'Los Cebollitas' (the little onions), the youth team of Argentinos Juniors.

The Buenos Aires club had been one of the founding fathers of Argentinian professional football but spent most seasons fighting relegation and had dropped a division and returned without ever winning a championship. They did, however, have a reputation for being a great nursery for football talent, a reputation that the discovery of Maradona would firmly fix as a key to the club's DNA.

Maradona was signed at the age of eight and his coach immediately took him to see a doctor who treated boxers. Diego was prescribed a course of pills and injections to aid his growth and physical development. It would not be the last time Maradona accepted medical aid to compete as an equal on the pitch, even if later on it would be painkilling injections to deal with the consequences of the absurd number of fouls he suffered during his career.

Maradona made his debut for Argentinos Juniors' senior side on 20 October 1976, ten days before he turned 16. This made him the youngest player in Argentine league history and he became a legend within minutes, after

nutmegging Juan Domingo Cabrera. With his blend of cocksure impudence and sublime skill, Maradona arrived more or less fully formed.

He spent five years at Argentinos Juniors, scoring 115 goals in 167 games, while soaring to fame in his homeland and growing a personal fortune bolstered by the clever guidance of Maradona Productions, a company that profited from the commercial use of his image.

Even as a young player, Maradona had a sponsorship tie with Puma to wear the company's kit and boots, a deal that lasted his entire career and proved extremely fruitful for both parties. It was also a hint of Maradona's potential and the way the corporate structure around football was ready to exploit it. Puma had established a strategy based around signing only the most talented and iconic stars to wear its Puma King boots. Pelé had worn a custom pair at the 1970 World Cup and famously delayed a kick-off so he could tie his laces, giving the boot and brand immense exposure, for which Puma paid him a significant bonus. George Best also wore the boots, as did Johan Cruyff in the 1974 World Cup and Mario Kempes in 1978.

When Puma saw Maradona, the company saw the future and there was huge pressure on Menotti to select him for the 1978 World Cup. Menotti stuck to his guns, however, and although Maradona was selected for the preliminary Argentina squad, Menotti told him he had missed the final cut due to inexperience. Maradona wrote and spoke of his heartache at missing out, which was increased by the fact he had already made his senior debut against Hungary in February 1977 and been acclaimed the best youngster in the country, with two full seasons at Argentinos Juniors behind him. Maradona wept but

later acknowledged the negative energy he felt became a motivation, something that became a theme in his career.

He was already a terrible loser, having been indulged by coaches and team-mates, and had an agent and the beginnings of a group of hangers-on surrounding him. Maradona talked about his paranoia about Menotti, believing the coach was jealous of him. Even as a 19-year-old, Maradona spoke about the pressure his newfound fame had brought to his life and family.

Instead of taking him to the World Cup, Menotti selected Maradona to represent Argentina at the 1979 World Youth Championship in Japan, a tournament that served as an international unveiling of the little playmaker's incredible gifts. Playing in a free-attacking role in and around the hole alongside another talented number ten, River Plate star Ramón Díaz, Maradona wowed observers with his performances at the tournament. Díaz scored eight goals and won the Golden Boot, while Maradona scored six and won the best player award.

Aside from an easy 5-0 win over minnows Indonesia, Argentina faced tough opposition. They shaded a tight match against one of the only nations with a comparably rich factory of young players, Yugoslavia, wiped out a Poland side that would be the basis for the senior team that reached the semi-finals of the 1982 World Cup with a 4-1 victory, then obliterated Algeria 5-0 in the quarter-finals. That set up a heavyweight semi-final clash with Rioplatense rivals Uruguay, driven by their own star playmaker Rubén Paz. Argentina won 2-0, then defeated USSR 3-1 in the final, a match settled by a beautiful Maradona free kick.

Maradona's gifts were evident at this point in his career. He possessed staggering close control, arguably the best

seen in elite-level football. His low centre of gravity and thick, short legs allowed him to surge and pivot at will, and he could accelerate explosively when required. The ball always seemed under his control. This was the gambeta of Argentine football culture and Maradona did it like no one else in the modern era, setting off on slaloming runs from midfield at pace, dragging defenders with him, shedding them in his wake, twisting and turning, rolling and prodding the ball wherever he needed it to go.

That meant, however, that from the start of his career he was targeted with wild tackles while playing with heavy footballs on surfaces that were often terrible. Argentinian dark arts included knee-high, studs-up challenges as well as sly trips and barging slides. Maradona came of age as a flair player in an era when referees often turned a blind eye to rough play and in a country where defenders were expected to do anything they could to stop the opposition. He began to suffer injuries around the time of his transfer to Boca Juniors and, in a way, his career would be seriously affected by them from that time on.

Dribbling was not all Diego offered, he had an eye for goal too. He could score from distance and tended to take free kicks as if he was stroking a pass, placing the ball precisely in the corner of the net. He also made late runs into the box to meet crosses and in one other way was a typical Argentinian enganche – his passing was stupendous.

If the modern memory of Maradona – fuelled by highlight reels of the famous goals and a seminal and deceptive photograph from the 1982 World Cup in which he seemingly dribbles towards a mass of Belgium players – is of a player taking on defences alone, rewatching his

performances reminds you Maradona was a team player with many dimensions to his game.

He often used his dribbling proficiency to draw the opposition towards him so he could play a perfectly timed through ball and free a team-mate in front of goal. So many of his alternately direct and mazy runs became beautiful assists because of his gift for *la pausa* and incredible vision. Later in his career, after injury, age and a lifetime of pain-killing injections had robbed him of much of his pace and dynamism, he still retained that ability. He played deeper, prompting and cueing up younger players around him who were there to do his running.

In that, he resembled the most classical examples of the Argentinian number ten – such as the idol of his teens, Ricardo Bochini, and his eventual successor at Boca Juniors, Juan Román Riquelme. Even without pace, Bochini and Riquelme were players capable of dominating a game by setting their own rhythm and forcing the game to conform to it. Bochini saw every run, every inch of space before him, and he had a genius for slowing and then slipping the ball through gaps invisible to all except him. Maradona claimed that, after an early devotion to Boca's legendary forward Angel Clemente Rojas, he 'caught the Bochini bug'.

His heroes undoubtedly resemble Maradona's footballing fathers. Rojas was a famously stylish player in the era of anti-fútbol, adept at the gambeta, a dribbling goalscorer adored by the Boca faithful. Bochini, on the other hand, was calm and cerebral, allowing the ball to do the work. Maradona took the gifts of each and improved them. Added to that was Maradona's unique personality; a rage, passion and energy forged in the wastelands of Villa Fiorito and a childhood warped by his own genius.

His 1981 transfer to Boca Juniors, the team he supported, saw a thrilling season that included two goals on debut, a trademark dribbled goal in the Superclásico win over River Plate, and his solitary league title in Argentinian football. However, his transfer fee to Boca almost bankrupted the club and, following numerous rows with coach Silvio Marzolini, Maradona was transferred to Barcelona in 1982 for a then-world record fee of £5m.

* * *

By that point the pattern of his career was becoming established. Everywhere he went, Maradona's fame and talent attracted attention. He caused trouble; or trouble found him. His entourage indulged him and he fell out with team-mates, club and football association officials and reporters. Tales of his personal life and excesses began to spread, even as he was trying to establish a reputation as a family man. Despite all that, even on a bad day, Maradona's singular genius was evident when he played football.

At the 1982 World Cup he was singled out by the opposition and systematically fouled to an extent that recalled the treatment of Pelé in various tournaments for Brazil. Maradona's legend was already so powerful it even made the players who fouled him famous.

Claudio Gentile, the uncompromising Juventus defender who man-marked Maradona in Argentina's loss to eventual champions Italy, fouled him six times in total in that game, yet stuck at his side throughout, niggling and jostling in a relentless way that, in modern football, would earn him a red card to go with the yellow he received for his third foul on Maradona.

In Argentina's clash with a Brazil side that was arguably the most beautiful to grace that tournament, the Brazilians showed another side to their game. Brazil's respect for the talent of Argentina's number ten saw them queue up to kick and trip Maradona whenever he had the ball. The golden boy from Villa Fiorito, so used to getting his own way on the field, eventually snapped and kicked out in retaliation, getting himself sent off.

The tournament was a miserable experience for the World Cup holders. The squad was split along generational lines, with the veterans of 1978 and the younger players clashing repeatedly as Menotti proved unable to solve those problems. The team had also arrived in Spain from an Argentina that found itself amid a deepening crisis after years of junta rule.

The military dictatorship, by this point reviled internationally for 'disappearing' thousands of its own citizens while it struggled to cope with huge economic problems, had declared martial law and invaded the Falkland Islands – known in Argentina as Islas Malvinas – seemingly as a patriotic distraction from domestic issues.

The media, cowed by the government, spewed the official line that the Falklands war was being won. In Spain, the players who were still based in Argentina saw the truth on television and many, still feeling distaste at the way the junta used the 1978 and 1979 victories as propaganda, were disgusted.

For his part, Maradona did not play badly and he and Osvaldo Ardiles had a good understanding in midfield, but it was already obvious that, to really thrive, he needed a team built around his talents. He needed that indulgence and, even at that young age, expected it. But in a team with

huge stars such as Passarella and Kempes, Maradona was just another famous player, not yet the talisman his genius demanded.

* * *

The story in Barcelona had similarities with that of Argentina's national team. On the pitch, Maradona's price tag and growing celebrity made him a target. He dazzled in some performances but Barcelona, even then, were expected to challenge for and win titles, and a variety of factors conspired to prevent that. For Barcelona fans, this stretched the drought since they last won the Spanish league to a decade and, in an era when Basque sides Athletic Club and Real Sociedad rose to claim titles, many wondered whether the vast sums spent on Maradona's transfer and wages had been wasted.

One of the factors in the fans' unrest was the number of Maradona's absences from the team at key stages. In his first season he spent 12 weeks out after contracting viral hepatitis. In his second, an ankle injury caused by a terrible tackle ruled him out for three months. Maradona did not help himself, either. Despite scoring a famous goal against Real Madrid, forging unlikely on-field chemistry with rival playmaker Bernd Schuster, and enjoying success in cup competitions, he also alienated many supporters through his extended battles with club president Josep Lluís Nuñez and gossip that raged around the city about his personal life.

Maradona had been rewarded, praised and celebrated so consistently he could barely accept any authority and his relationship with Barça coach Udo Lattek was strained from the off.

Partly in order to handle Maradona, Barcelona replaced Lattek with Menotti, who moved training sessions from mornings to afternoons to avoid forcing the Argentinian to get out of bed early after another late-night session in town.

Timekeeping was becoming a recurring issue – Lattek reportedly left him behind at an away game after growing sick of waiting for him to board the team coach – as was Maradona's attitude to the demands on him to play in friendlies on top of so many fixtures. His body was already worn despite his young age, from the many kicks and trips he had received and the painkilling injections that allowed him to play in games he should have sat out. Yet he could not or would not change his style of play. His style was what made him Diego Maradona, and his bravery in persistently taking the ball and running at and past defenders who wanted to stop him was part of that.

Yet it was already evident his body would eventually stop him from playing like that particular version of Diego Maradona. In the run-up to a Cup Winners' Cup tie against English giants Manchester United, Maradona had been suffering from back problems for days. He received a series of injections to help him play but his body appeared to react to the medication – his reflexes were off and he did not seem himself. Menotti substituted him and, although Barcelona won the home leg 2-0, Maradona was criticised for his anonymity.

He had left the pitch and gone straight to the dressing room, where his mood swung between fury and self-pitying paranoia about his perception the Catalans were trying to destroy him. At that point, the expectation on Maradona was he would always make the magic happen. Anything less was a disappointment.

In the second leg, he was again muted and a United team inspired by the dynamic – if equally injury-prone – Bryan Robson beat Barcelona 3-0 and eliminated them from the competition.

At the same time, it was also reported Barcelona were unhappy at not receiving money for Maradona's image having paid so much for his services. Maradona, always ready to respond to any rebuke or insinuation in the press with his own juicy quotes, made his displeasure clear.

* * *

The injury that would basically end Maradona's time at Barcelona once again made the defender who was responsible for it famous. At the time, Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao were genuine rivals; the Basque club played more functional, British-style football than the aesthetically pleasing Catalans and games between the clubs were always tense and frequently dirty affairs.

The battle felt sporting but also ideological and almost political. Barcelona's snooty superiority complex about their classier attitude could have been designed to enrage a Basque support still living off the enmity of years of struggle against a Francoist-Spanish state it accused of crushing their culture and nation. They saw their football – tough, pragmatic, winning – as inherently Basque.

Athletic centre-back Andoni Goikoetxea was already infamous in Barcelona for a horrendous tackle on Schuster in 1982 that left the German with a cruciate ligament injury that sidelined him for nine months, forcing him to miss a World Cup where his presence may genuinely have changed the course of the final.