

R O B   C A R L E S S

A vertical poster featuring a collage of Italian football players and manager Roberto Mancini. The background is dark blue with a vertical Italian flag (green, white, red) running down the center. The title 'CINQUE ANNI' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the middle. Various players are shown in action: a player celebrating with a trophy, a player in a blue jersey, a player in a black jersey, and a player in a blue jersey running. Roberto Mancini is shown in a blue jersey holding a trophy.

# CINQUE ANNI

THE STORY OF THE ITALIAN NATIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM

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# Genesis

THE ORIGINS of football in Italy date back many centuries, just as they do for many other countries, and they are inextricably linked by the same trope. A 'ball' was used on a 'piece of land' by a group of people; the land varied in size, while the game varied in structure and execution. One of the earliest forms occurred in the Roman Empire and was known as '*Harpastum*'. The game involved balls that were stuffed with feathers. They were not as big as the footballs we see today. Little is known about the actual dimensions, but the likelihood is that it was more 'softball' than anything else. Due to the expansion of the Empire, it became a very popular sport. Derived from a Greek game called '*Phaininda*' or '*Episkyros*', matters on the pitch were decided by retaining the ball for as long as possible and by using varying degrees of speed, agility and physical exertion. The physical side was most prominent and was prone to acts of violence, with limbs broken at regular intervals.

Further adaptations to the game were made in the 16th century in Florence, the capital city of Tuscany in central Italy. Known as '*Calcio Storico Fiorentino*' during

the renaissance period, it was mainly played by the upper classes and the rich and famous. It wasn't just played in Florence, though, as there are reports that the game was even played by various Popes in the Vatican City. It was similar to the ancient times in as much as it could get very violent, but the *raison d'être* was to score more goals than the opponents. The term '*calcio*' means 'kick' and is still used today as the name for association football in Italy.

Association football was started in England in 1863 and the opening of the Suez Canal just six years later created the chance for English communities to stop off on new routes between their home ports and India. Italy was an important part of the route, and whilst in port, sailors would gather for 'kick-about's'. This happened at several ports in the region, including Naples, Genoa, Livorno and Palermo, and locals were invited to make up the numbers. The popularity of the more modern adaption of the game had started to increase, especially on the docksides. This gave way for people to take the game further inland and to the masses.

The pioneer of this was a man called Edoardo Bosio. Born in Turin in 1864, Bosio spent a great deal of time in the United Kingdom (mainly in the textile industry) where many football clubs turned professional and the Football Association – the first of its kind – was born. Bosio very much liked what he was witnessing and wanted to set up something similar in his native country. Upon returning to Turin in 1887, Bosio set about forming Italy's first football team – the Torino Football and Cricket Club –

which was made up mainly of his co-workers in the textile business. However, Bosio faced two issues. Firstly, there were no rules to abide by, so it was very much a kick-about still, in the style that had been played in the ports. Also, there were no other teams to play against, but this would soon change in and around the Turin region. Football was still very much a 'local' sport, and there were no official teams. However, in September 1893, the Genoa Cricket and Football Club was formed by the British Consulate. It was not an inclusive project to start off with as Italians were not allowed to be members. In 1894, another club was formed in Turin, Football Club Torinese. Again, the rules were open to interpretation and teams seldom travelled so the matches were local affairs.

This would change just three years later thanks to the game's second pioneer.

James Richardson Spensley was born in London in 1867. He was a doctor and had arrived in Genoa in 1896, initially to treat sailors from the coal ships. A much-travelled man, Richardson Spensley found himself managing the football side for Genoa soon after. One of the first things that he did was to negotiate with the British Consulate to allow Italians to be members of the club for the first time. As well as taking an authoritarian role within the club, he could also play the game and his favoured positions were goalkeeper or defender.

It would not be long before the first official match in Italy was played between his team and Football Club Torinese, on 6 January 1898, with the first official

championship taking place on 8 May 1898 in Turin under the guidance of the Italian Football Federation. It was known as *Campionato Italiano di Football* and would feature teams in the northern region of the country. There were just three matches played, all on the same day. In the morning, Internazionale FC Torino beat FBC Torinese, and RS Ginnastica Torino lost to Genoa, then in the final match later in the day, Genoa beat Internazionale FC Torino 2-1 after extra time and thus became the first champions of Italian football.

Such was Genoa's dominance in the early years of Italian club football, they were crowned champions a further five times in the next six years, only not winning in 1901 when AC Milan claimed their first championship.

During their last season of dominance, in 1904, there was a change of name for the competition as it became the Prima Categoria, and it was during this period that national sentiments came to the fore that would ultimately give rise to the national team.

In 1907, the competition was split into two areas.

The Italian Championship was deemed to be the most important as only Italian players were allowed to participate. The victors would be crowned *Campioni d'Italia* (Italian Champions) and would be awarded the Coppa Buni.

The Federal Championship was deemed to be a secondary competition where foreign players were allowed to play. The only caveat (apart from ability) was

that they had to reside in Italy. In this competition, the victors would be crowned *Campioni Federali* (Federal Champions) and would be awarded the Coppa Spensley.

The rationale for the two championships was to ultimately strengthen the national cause as it allowed the weaker clubs to win trophies and develop winning mentalities.

The majority of big clubs (Genoa, Torino and Milan) withdrew from both championships in order to protest against the autocratic policies that were being set up by the powers that be, and it wasn't until the 1909/10 season that the format was changed to nine teams playing each other home and away, representing the introduction of a league that it is now known as Serie A and Serie B. There were more changes to the name (Prima Divisione and Divisione Nazionale) and format over the years, with northern and southern regions being introduced before amalgamation.

Club football had grown in popularity, importance and influence. And it wasn't just on the pitch that this was happening, but moreover within the walls of Italian politics, the union between the two forming at a very early stage and, in reality, the game has been held in ligature ever since.

With the rules initially put into place by James Richardson Spensley and the changes enforced under Prima Categoria, it invariably led to interest in a national team to represent Italy on the world stage. There had been an attempt to set this up at the end of the 19th



century when an Italian select team played against a side from Switzerland. The game was played, unsurprisingly, in Turin on 30 April 1899. Little is known about it, other than it was the Swiss who travelled back home the happier after picking up a 2-0 away victory.

History was made on 15 May 1910 when Italy played their first official (FIFA-recognised) international match, hosting France at Civico Arena, Milan. The crowd was estimated to be 4,000. The referee was an Englishman called Henry Goodley. The team wore white as no official colours had been agreed at this stage. This would soon change though, with blue being chosen to honour the Italian house of Savoy, the country's royal family since unification in 1861. The Italian side was picked by a committee (as was the general case in football at that time) that consisted of Umberto Meazza, Agostino Recalcati, Alberto Crivelli, Giannino Camperio and Giuseppe Gamba. The captain for the historic first match was Francesco Calì.

The match sprung to life in the 13th minute when AC Milan's Pietro Lana gave Italy the lead, therefore having the honour of being his country's first ever goalscorer. The lead was doubled just seven minutes later when Virgilio Fossati converted. A few minutes into the second half Henri Bellocq reduced the deficit, but the first ever goal conceded by Italy didn't rattle them and soon after it was 3-1 when Lana scored his second goal of the match. Once more, the French came roaring back, and the deficit was reduced to just one when Jean Ducret scored in the

62nd minute. The Italians were still not fazed by this, and it was 4-2 just moments later, Giuseppe Rizzi on the scoresheet. That would signal the end of the French resistance as two further goals in the last ten minutes signalled a famous Italian win. The fifth goal was scored by Rizzi before Lana capped a wonderful match with his third from the penalty spot, to make the final score Italy 6 France 2.

The starting line-up that represented Italy in their first ever official international match was made up of players that primarily played for US Milanese, Andrea Dona, Torino, AC Milan, Inter Milan and Ausonia. The system that was played in the match was 2-3-5 – also known as ‘the pyramid of Cambridge’. The apex of the formation was the goalkeeper and it was very much an inverted system that was invented in England and used for several decades, firstly in the country of its origin and then picked up by the rest of the world.

Italy’s first match on the international stage had exceeded all expectations. Such was the gratitude from the Italian fans that they rewarded the players with packets of cigarettes. Confidence was now sky high, but this was reined in during the course of Italy’s second foray. Just 11 days later, on 26 May 1910, Italy were soundly beaten by the Hungarian national team at the Millenáris Sporttelep in Budapest. With 15 minutes remaining, Hungary had raced into a 6-0 lead, leaving the Italians somewhat sundered. Even though Giuseppe Rizzi pulled a goal back in the 88th minute, it really was

just a consolation calling card, as the match finished 6-1 in favour of the hosts.

There would be no further matches in the calendar year, but Italy would have the chance to exact early revenge in 1911 when they hosted Hungary on 6 January. The match was played at the Arena Civica in Milan. Once more, the eastern European country came out on top, albeit in a much closer fashion, with Hungary winning the match by a single goal scored by Imre Schlosser in the 22nd minute.

Three other friendlies were played in the same year, the first being against France away in Saint-Ouen. This time it would be up to the French to try to provide the dish best served cold. However, the Italians were resolute and put up a much better fight than they had done in Budapest the year before. The match finished all-square with the two countries sharing four goals, with Carlo Rampini and Arturo Boiocchi replying either side of goals scored by Eugène Maës. Italy then played two matches against Switzerland, who they had played in their first unofficial match in 1899. Once again, the Swiss came out on top after the two matches, although the Italians could seek solace in the fact that this time the game on home soil did not end in defeat, after another 2-2 draw in Milan. The scorers were Gustavo Carrer and Boiocchi, who had now scored in two consecutive matches. It was not to be three on the trot though as Switzerland ran out 3-0 winners in the city of La Chaux-de-Fonds.

There would be a further five matches played in 1912, resulting in losses in international friendlies to both

France and Austria. First came a 4-3 defeat to the French on 17 March, followed by a 3-1 reverse against Austria in December. Both losses were on Italian soil. The other games were part of the 1912 Summer Olympics held in Sweden. Once more, Italy would taste defeat in the first round against Finland, losing the match 3-2 after extra time. They then played two other matches as a first-round defeat meant games in the 'consolation tournament'. Italy defeated the hosts 1-0 thanks to a goal scored by Franco Bontadini, but then fell foul of a rampant Austria team, losing the match 5-1.

Italy also played an exhibition match in 1912, against an English team called English Wanderers, with the match ending 1-1. Fixtures like this were unofficial, as they were not recognised by FIFA. The next match of this kind came against Reading FC on 18 May 1913. It was played in Turin, with the English team winning 2-0. In total, Italy have played 27 matches that have been classed as unofficial, with the last one being played against a select team from Cagliari at the time of writing this book (August 2024). The national team won 12-0 in Sardinia, with the game only lasting for 60 minutes.

In terms of results, 1913 was not a vintage year for the Azzurri – they played only three games, losing two and winning just one, with the solitary win coming against Belgium with a goal scored by Guido Ara in the 57th minute. It would be the only time that the team would celebrate a goal in 1913 as they lost 1-0 to France and 2-0 against Austria. However, there would be a marked

improvement in results in 1914, when they remained undefeated after four matches, recording two wins and two draws. The wins came against France, 2-0, in Milan and their first ever victory on foreign soil (save for the Olympics) with a 1-0 win against Switzerland, Luigi Barbesino scoring the only goal. The draws came against Austria and the Swiss.

The unbeaten run continued into the early days of 1915 when Italy once again defeated Switzerland in Turin, on 31 January. It was a real family affair with Aldo Cevenini scoring two of the goals alongside his older brother, Luigi, who scored the other. This would be the last official game played by Italy until 1920, because of the First World War. A further six unofficial games were contested between 1915 and 1919, however, the last three being played as part of the Inter-Allied Games in Paris after the Allied victory in the war. The group stages saw the Italians paired with Greece, Romania and France. It was a complete goal fest in the first two games with Italy beating Greece 9-0 and Romania 7-1. The only defeat occurred in the final group game, where France won 2-0. Despite the heroics in the first two matches, Italy didn't progress any further in the tournament.

There was an explosive start in Italy's first official game after the war, in 1920. Another friendly against France was played on 18 January in Milan and the 14,000 in the Velodromo Sempione were treated to a game that had 13 goals, with nine of them being celebrated by the home nation. Aldo Cevenini opened the scoring in the

seventh minute and by the time the referee had blown for half-time, there had been another six goals. Cevenini added his second on 18 minutes just before Ermanno Aebi extended the lead further. France then cut the deficit by scoring a couple of goals themselves before the half-hour mark via Paul Nicolas and Henri Bard. Moments later the lead was extended when Guglielmo Brezzi put the ball into the net. A frantic first half of goals was completed by Bard just before half-time for his second (and his country's third) goal of a pulsating match. The Italians were even more of a threat in the second half and by the 84th minute, they had scored a further five goals with Aebi and Brezzi both netting twice to complete their hat-tricks. The other goal for the home nation was converted by Carlo Carcano. France did manage to score a fourth in the dying minutes through Raymond Dubly, but it was all in vain as the Italians won 9-4.

Italy participated in the Summer Olympics in 1920, in Belgium, and they made a winning start in a game which made history, as it was against the first non-European country that they had played against. The 2-1 victory over Egypt occurred on 28 August with goals from Adolfo Baloncieri and Guglielmo Brezzi. This win put the Italians into the quarter-finals, and they would face their old adversaries, France, the day after the win against the African nation. France won the match, 3-1. Italy would then once more play in the consolation tournament, where they beat Norway 2-1 after extra time to set up their first ever encounter with Spain. And it was

the Spanish celebrating, with a 2-0 victory to end Italy's football interest in the tournament until 1924.

The next Olympics was held in France and Italy would once again reach the quarter-finals. The difference from four years previous was that it took them a further round to get there. A 1-0 victory over Spain was followed up with a 2-0 win against Luxembourg in Paris. Any medal hopes were dashed when Switzerland beat them 2-1, once again in the capital. There were no consolation matches this time.

Just prior to the Paris tournament, Italy had been soundly beaten by Hungary, 7-1, with the unwanted record of it being their heaviest defeat. There was better news for Italy the following year as they recorded their biggest win to date with a 7-0 home victory against France. Leopoldo Conti opened the account after just four minutes and that was the only goal scored in the first half, the blitz occurring in the second period with braces from Adolfo Baloncieri, Virgilio Levratto and Giovanni Moscardini completing the rout.

The rest of the decade was made up of friendly internationals, and a couple more unofficial matches. The results (like they had been in the previous ten years) were mixed. However, in a newly formed competition from 1927, and at the 1928 Summer Olympics, the football world started to take more notice of Italy.

The first Central European International Cup was played between 18 September 1927 and 11 May 1930. The tournament's structure was a round-robin

competition for the five teams involved: Italy, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Switzerland. The tournament was later known as the Antonín Švehla Cup in honour of the Czechoslovakian prime minister of the same name, who would present the winners with a Bohemian crystal cup. The trophy went to Italy, who finished top of the group with 11 points (one more than Austria and Czechoslovakia). It was a tight tournament, with Hungary on nine points themselves, but the exception was Switzerland who suffered eight consecutive defeats. Italy's record was played eight matches, won five, drawn one and lost two. There were 86 goals scored in 20 matches, for an average of 4.3 goals per match. Italy were the highest scorers with 21 goals and two of their players were leading goalscorers alongside Hungary's Ferenc Hirzer on six goals. These were Gino Rossetti and Julio Libonatti.

There was further progress made in the Summer Olympics held in the Netherlands with the Italians claiming a bronze medal. The first-round match took place on 29 May and a seven-goal thriller was served up against France in Amsterdam, with Italy winning 4-3. The reward was a quarter-final against Spain which eventually went to a replay after the teams drew 1-1. In the replay the Italians once again found their scoring boots with an emphatic 7-1 victory. Dreams of standing on the gold podium were dashed when they played their first ever match against South American opposition in the form of Uruguay. The scoreline was 3-2 in favour



of the South Americans. Italy then played Egypt once more for the right to claim the bronze medal and they completed the task in some style. The match started at a blistering pace and the half-time score was 6-2 to Italy. If the players and fans thought the second half would be a much more sombre affair, where breaths could be taken, then they were seriously wrong, as Italy scored five more and Egypt just one, the match finishing 11-3 to Italy. Three players recorded hat-tricks in the game: Angelo Schiavio, Elvio Banchemo and Mario Magnozzi. The other two goals were scored by Adolfo Baloncieri.

For the vast majority of their first 20 years in international football existence, Italy had been managed by committee, with coaches being put in charge at various times. The coaches were Umberto Meazza, William Garbutt and Vincenzo Resegotti. The exceptions occurred mainly in the latter years of the 1920s. Augusto Rangone was the manager who oversaw the start of the Central European International Cup campaign, and the bronze medal in the Olympics. He was followed by Carlo Carcano, an ex-international player for Italy who only lasted just over six months in the job.

What Italy required was someone who could build on the successes afforded to the nation just as the 1930s were about to commence; a man who could take the position and maintain the winning philosophy. That man was Vittorio Pozzo. He wasn't exactly new to the role when he took up the position as manager of the national team on 1 December 1929. Like Rangone, Pozzo had served

on the committee and taken up the position of head coach on a temporary basis on two separate occasions – firstly in 1912 and then for a brief spell in 1924. His record wasn't something that had pulled up any Italian trees during this time, taking charge of just eight games, winning only three. All this was about to change, though.

The 1920s had not been roaring for the Azzurri. But the impending 1930s certainly would be as Italy aimed for world domination, in a brand-new competition that was about to start and that would change international football forever.

And they did it not once, but twice as well!