

PAUL GRECH



ECHOS
OF AN
ITALIAN
SUMMER

STORIES FROM
ITALIA '90

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The Other Schillaci

THOSE WILD, crazy eyes.

If there's one abiding image from Italia 90, it's of Toto Schillaci's face. It's impossible to think of those nights without recalling the pleading look the Italian striker reserved for referees every time he was touched in the penalty area, a mixture of affront at the injustice that had just taken place while imploring the referee to use his authority and provide retribution.

Of course, Schillaci did more than try to win dubious penalties, and over the six weeks of the World Cup he became a national hero. Thrown in as a late substitute in Italy's opening fixture against Austria – a desperate choice by the under-pressure coach, Azeglio Vicini – Schillaci scored the winning goal. He'd go on to score in all but one of Italy's matches in the competition, each goal followed by his explosive and liberating outpouring of joy. For Italy it was Schillaci, wild eyes and all, that made those nights magical.

It all capped a meteoric rise for the Palermo-born striker who had been playing in Serie B with Messina just 12 months earlier. Then came a move to Juventus, who have always been better at spotting talent than most others. Expectations weren't high but coach Dino Zoff put his faith in him from the start and was rewarded by goals that helped

them win the Coppa Italia against AC Milan as well as an all-Italian UEFA Cup Final with Fiorentina.

His goals for Juve, and his ability to be in the right spot at the right time, convinced the usually conservative Vicini that, even though this striker had only played once for Italy before the start of the competition, he was worth a place in his World Cup squad. Schillaci was what the Italians call a 'jolly': a possible trump card to be used if things become desperate.

And so he proved to be. It was the remarkable nature of his success, as well as his theatrics (and goals, of course), that made the whole nation fall in love with him.

* * *

That Schillaci, a Sicilian, had managed to unite the nation was in itself something of an oddity. Among scholars, there's a long-standing debate as to whether the country was always split economically between north and south. Whereas some argue that this was always the case, others claim that upon unification in the mid-19th century they were on similar footings, and that it was the policies adopted in later years that led to a growing gap between the two.

Whatever the reason, it's undeniable that there was a distinct difference in the standard of living by the time Schillaci was growing up. Much of Italy's industrial wealth was concentrated in the north and, stuck in a cycle of unemployment, thousands of families from his native Sicily and the rest of the south were forced to emigrate in search of a better life. Many of them made their way to the north, where they filled factories and took up other menial jobs. Often, they had to live with the snobbery and ridicule of the locals, who reserved the denigrative label of *terroni* for these southern immigrants.

The north–south divide has also been reflected in Italian football, where the most successful clubs have always been from the rich heartlands of the north. Indeed, although at the time of the 1990 World Cup, Napoli had just won their second league title, which, as it would eventually transpire, came at a huge and ultimately unbearable financial cost, it's the rich clubs from Milan and Turin that have historically dominated.

Schillaci, however, seemed to transcend whatever animosity there was between the two poles. Born in the San Giovanni Apostolo area of Palermo, a housing district full of the usual social problems, he was someone that the common man – particularly those from the south – could identify with. Even the exaggerated mannerisms that accompanied his play, how he pleaded with referees when decisions went against him, looked distinctively southern.

Yet his passion for his country was something that anyone could appreciate. So too was his oversized desire to win, no matter what it took. Indeed, whereas in England his willingness to fall at the slightest touch was frowned upon, in Italy it was admired; it was considered less an example of cheating and more one of resourcefulness. In many ways, this is seen as part of the Italian character.

All this made Schillaci someone that any Italian could get behind; he was one of them, regardless of where he came from.

Yet the inclusion of Schillaci in the national team was in itself an anomaly. Apart from a brief period in the early 2000s when there were three Sicilian clubs in Serie A – Palermo, Messina and Cagliari – teams from the island have struggled to make it to the top tier of Italian football. Indeed, often there aren't any Sicilian clubs even in Serie B. While most Sicilians follow the game passionately, the

majority support the big northern clubs of Juventus, Milan and Inter. It's a strange state of affairs that means local clubs often lack the financial resources to compete. That all of those three clubs faced bankruptcy in the years following their heyday and all had to restart from the very bottom of the Italian league structure tells its own story.

The absence of Sicilian clubs has a knock-on effect on Sicilian players, who struggle to find a route to the top of the game. It makes it harder for them to be noticed, which means that fewer make it to Serie A or get the opportunity to show what they can do. Indeed, since the 1980s only four of the 400-plus players called up to play for Italy have come from Sicily. And even that number is somewhat falsely boosted by the inclusion of Mario Balotelli, who was born on the island but who moved to Lombardy in early childhood.

Those are abysmal figures that place Sicily third from bottom of the 20 regions that make up Italy when it comes to players that have worn the national jersey over the past four decades. Considering that its five million inhabitants make up almost 10 per cent of Italy's population, that's a truly appalling statistic.

And yet there could – perhaps should – have been another Sicilian playing alongside Schillaci, making those nights magical. There was another who had the potential to shine even when asked to find a way past the dour defences of 1980s Serie A, a player celebrated by many who worked with him as one of the greatest talents ever to emerge from the island. It was also someone Toto knew very well. In fact, he came from the same family.

* * *

As with his cousin, Maurizio Schillaci was born in Palermo and spent his early childhood kicking a ball wherever an

empty space could be found to set up a pitch. His talent for the game was evident from an early age and soon Palermo Calcio were receiving reports of this wiry kid who could run with the ball as if it were glued to his feet. These became so frequent that Palermo eventually took notice and signed him up for their youth team.

It was there that he first came across a man who would figure prominently in his career. In the mid-1940s, Palermo had signed a Czech winger by the name of Čestmír Vycpálek, who became a legend at the club. In his first season he led them to promotion to Serie A and eventually became their captain, the first foreigner to do so in Serie A. Once his playing career wound down, he was named Palermo coach and, once again, led them to promotion to Serie A.

It was the start of a long career that saw Vycpálek coach across Sicily before, surprisingly, landing a job with Juventus' youth team and then eventually with the senior team. In Turin he enjoyed his biggest successes, winning back-to-back Serie A titles and leading Juve to a first European Cup Final, yet home for him remained Palermo. That was where he'd relocated his family after the Prague Spring, where he'd move once he retired and where he died in 2002.

Among those who joined Vycpálek's family was his sports-mad nephew, who opted to become a physical education teacher. Vycpálek, however, felt that he could do more and convinced him to take his first steps in coaching. Indeed, he did more than that, convincing Palermo to give him a job in the youth setup. So it was that when Maurizio Schillaci joined Palermo he was welcomed by an inexperienced Czech coach for whom this was a first major job – a certain Zdeněk Zeman.

Although young, Zeman already had clear ideas of how his teams should play, and Schillaci was the sort of

forward he loved. Willing to work hard, creative on the ball and extremely fast, he had all the characteristics that the coach required of a striker for his ideas to work. And those ideas also worked for Schillaci, making him the star of the youth team and getting him noticed by the first-team coach, Antonio Renna.

On the final day of the 1981/82 season, Palermo had nothing to play for and neither did their opponents, Lazio, so Renna probably felt a bit more emboldened than usual. The 5,000 who had made it to the Stadio Barbera saw Lazio take an early lead before Palermo drew level. At that point, Renna threw on Schillaci, and his risk paid off. After just 20 minutes on the pitch, a loose ball gave Schillaci a sight of goal and he finished clinically, hitting the ball low and hard beyond the reach of the keeper.

With that kind of impact, it might have been expected that more opportunities would come to Schillaci. Unfortunately, it didn't pan out that way. Palermo endured a difficult follow-up season, avoiding relegation with a draw on the final day of the campaign. Renna lost his job midway through the season before being recalled to see the term out. However, there was little appetite to take risks, even on someone who was as promising as Schillaci, who, as a result, ended up playing just a couple more times for the first team.

Both Schillaci and the club realised that this wasn't going to work for him and, as has long been the tradition in Italian football, he went on a season-long loan to gain experience. The chosen destination was Rimini, a small club a division below Palermo, who had just appointed Giuseppe Materazzi, a young coach who would go on to enjoy a long career that included plenty of experience in Serie A.

Everything seemed set up for Schillaci to take flight but instead he was stuck on the sidelines once more. As with Palermo the previous term, Rimini's season didn't pan out as expected, and with the threat of relegation looming there was no desire to take risks on the young striker.

Such early setbacks can be fatal to a player's career, not only preventing any momentum from building but also silencing any praise that he'd earned in the past, which became just a forgotten memory. For Schillaci, that spell at Rimini could have done just that. It certainly put paid to any lingering desire at Palermo to take a chance on him. But, luckily, not everyone was as dismissive of his potential.

As Schillaci's dismal season was playing out, Zeman had finally outgrown the Palermo youth team and been given the opportunity to coach Licata, a minor Sicilian club that had just enjoyed their first season outside Italy's amateur leagues, in Serie C2, as the fourth division was called at the time. Zeman leant heavily on his Palermo connections, building a team that was a mixture of individuals born in the Sicilian capital and young local players. Among the players he identified, there was the former star of his youth team, Maurizio Schillaci.

Finally trusted by his coach, Schillaci excelled. Licata played the aggressive attacking football that their coach would come to be known for, and Schillaci, who had the benefit of knowing the tactics, fitted right in. At last he could show just what he was capable of, and that was scoring goals, ten in that first season, in which he finished as the top scorer in Italy's top-scoring team. No other professional club managed to score more than the 58 goals that Licata did. More importantly, Licata won their division and went deep in the cup, where Schillaci even enjoyed the satisfaction of beating Palermo.

Unsurprisingly, the following season was much harder and, despite a great start, Licata only confirmed their place in C1 on the final day of the season. This was no disappointment, however. Indeed, for a club that had been playing among the amateurs a couple of years earlier it was a fantastic achievement.

Schillaci also had reason to be satisfied on a personal level. Any doubts over his ability and whether he was good enough only for the bottom tier were dispelled as he proved capable of upsetting defenders at this level just as well as he'd done the previous season and once again ended the season as Licata's top scorer with nine goals, just one fewer than the previous year.

It's perhaps difficult to appreciate the extent of this achievement. Licata is a small club that had spent most of its existence outside league football. There was no rich benefactor pumping in money to fund success, in the way football clubs have tended to achieve such a rapid climb as Licata's. All they had was Zeman, his innovative tactics and ability to spot as well as nurture talent.

Yet, despite all this, he managed to mould a team capable of unexpected success. To this day, that team is affectionately referred to as the 'Grande Licata' (Great Licata) and that period remains the highlight of their history. The players who played regularly for Licata during those years remain heroes, although few are thought of as affectionately as the star of that team, Maurizio Schillaci, the man who either created the goals or scored them. Zeman's attacking tactics wouldn't have led to much if Schillaci hadn't been there to put the ball in the back of the net or lay it off to the others running in to fill the gaps. It's only slightly exaggerating matters to claim that he had the same impact on Licata that Maradona had on Napoli, such was the brilliance he added to their game.

For all his success – or perhaps because of it – it was at Licata that Schillaci's descent into darkness began. He'd begun to smoke weed before matches, initially with the excuse of taking the edge off his anxiety. In time, however, this became bad enough that he occasionally took to the pitch not knowing which way he was supposed to be kicking.

It was only his immense talent that carried him through. That immense talent also brought him to the attention of much bigger clubs, and while the possibility of Licata making it to Serie B seemed remote, it was never going to be the same for their striker.

Schillaci started 1986/87 in fine form, scoring three goals in four matches. Financially, however, Licata were struggling, so when Lazio came in with a club-record bid that in today's money equates to €1m, there was never any doubt that he was leaving.

This wasn't a vintage Lazio team, which in part explains why they were looking at the lower leagues. They'd been relegated to Serie B two seasons earlier and were struggling to stay afloat. Despite all that, however, they remained a big club, and for someone like Schillaci it presented the opportunity of a lifetime, the chance for him to move closer to the highest level. Instead it would prove to be the beginning of the end.

It all started in a friendly fixture. Eager to impress, Schillaci tried his utmost but something seemed off, rendering him incapable of showing any flashes of the talent that Lazio had signed him for. For the player, the reason for the poor showing was an injury, but the Lazio medical staff seemed unable to identify the problem, much less fix it.

Not only did this seemingly phantom injury keep him out and prevent him from gaining any consistency, but it

also turned everyone against him. Schillaci had represented a rather big investment for Lazio but one that he couldn't begin to repay. Inevitably, this resulted in ill feeling towards him, transforming him into an outcast with an injury that seemingly existed only in his head.

That injury – which, it eventually turned out, wasn't a phantom one but a very real ruptured Achilles tendon – also left him with a lot of free time. Coupled with the frustration of not being able to show his worth, this could only cause problems. Vices started chasing Schillaci and, unlike opposition defenders, he couldn't shake them off. Parties, late nights and fast cars began to dominate his life. He amassed cars at the same rate that others buy, well, more than others buy anything, really. During that first year in the capital he bought 38. Given more money than he'd ever imagined, he simply didn't know what to do with it, so spent it frivolously.

Not only was it a recipe for disaster but it also attracted the wrong people around him. Unsurprisingly, then, it was in Rome that he had his first taste of hard drugs. Soon, he was unable to think of anything else but the next hit. Schillaci's career unravelled in Rome and pretty soon he was a forgotten man.

Not by everyone, however. After Licata, Zeman moved to Foggia then Parma, with both spells cut short. A return to Sicily with Messina was for him something of a last chance too, so he asked for Maurizio, a player he knew well and who was comfortable in his system. His plan was to partner him with a young talent who had come through the club's youth system, a talent who happened to be related to Maurizio: Toto Schillaci.

Given the liberty with which Zeman always let his teams play, together the two were sensational, with Maurizio

creating chances and Toto finishing them off. It was an inspired decision that enthralled those watching and left a trail of broken defences behind them.

At Messina the fans witnessed some of the best football that Maurizio played in his career, as he himself admitted. Perhaps inspired by playing at a higher level, or by the desire to prove his critics at Lazio wrong, he excelled and once more started showing his worth. Even the injuries that kept him out more than once weren't enough to hold him back.

But the star of that team was undoubtedly the other Schillaci. Toto was already worshipped by the fans for having led the team from Serie C2 – where he made his debut as an 18-year-old – to Serie B but that season was the culmination. He scored 23 goals and it was clear to everyone that he was destined for bigger things.

There were no such beliefs about Maurizio. For all the value that he brought to the team he was seen as just another supporting actor.

Often, success in a player's career depends on the momentum they manage to generate. They move to a club, do well enough to be noticed by a bigger club and proceed to do well there. The more this cycle can be repeated, the higher level that player gets to play at. If the cycle is broken, however, it can be fatal. In most cases that break makes it extremely difficult to restart the positive momentum and get it going at the same pace as before. Not only has the player's confidence taken a knock but so too has the belief of the wider game. This lack of enthusiasm means fewer opportunities and a lower desire to overlook any flaws.

So it was for Schillaci. He played well enough for Messina – who had managed to identify the source of and clear his injury – but it was never going to get him back to

where he was before the move to Lazio. Instead, he was seen as just another player who had failed to fulfil his potential and, whether he realised it or not at the time, his peak had come and gone.

A move to Juve Stabia – and a drop of three divisions – was all that was in store for him. The descent proved to be ruinous for reasons other than football. He'd dabbled with various drugs at different stages in his career but there, at the tail end of his career and away from the spotlight, the habit really kicked in. Cocaine first, then heroin, which started consuming his life until it became the only thing he cared about. He divorced his wife, lost all his money and ultimately practically all he owned, spending years either living in his car or trying to find refuge in parked trains at Palermo station. Football had led him to riches but it also set him on a path to the deepest of ruins.

Years after he'd last had him as a player, when the depths to which Schillaci had fallen made the news, Zeman wrote an open letter to talk about the former striker:

I saw Maurizio grow in those years when football was still poetry, particularly in the south. Maurizio was the fans' idol and a leader for his team-mates. As such, I'll leave the man to one side and talk about the player.

He was a great talent. Technically he was phenomenal. Going by his ability, skills and footballing intelligence, he could easily have played in Serie A at the highest level. In my 4-3-3 he played as a winger and he had everything you need for that role: speed, penetration, technique, an eye for goal and the willingness to sacrifice himself for others.

Maurizio was always kind with the others and for that reason everyone loved him. He helped everyone. It hurts to know that today he is all alone. Was he better than Toto? In the past I said that but, in truth, there's no need to make that comparison.

Moralising is often an easy by-product of such hard-luck stories and so too here. Indeed, how Maurizio could have been allowed to fall so low, especially by his famous cousin, seemed to be a recurring question of those who read Zeman's letter. And, indeed, it's a question worth asking.

For Toto, the 1990 World Cup proved to be the highlight of his career. Recurring injury problems curtailed his time with Juventus but his reputation still earned him a move to Inter. There too, however, he had little luck, playing just 30 times in two seasons (scoring 11 goals), with injury again playing a key, negative role.

That experience showed that his career at the highest level was over, so he made a move with an eye to securing his future – he joined Japanese club Jubilo Iwata. There he rediscovered his touch and, even though injuries remained an issue, he still scored prolifically and led them to the domestic title in 1997.

When he returned home, he found that the public sympathy gained during those magical nights in 1990 had lasted. He obtained roles, albeit minor ones, on television shows and even came third in the Italian version of *Celebrity Survivor*. But perhaps his most successful venture was a football school that he opened in his home city of Palermo.

It was there that the paths of the two cousins briefly crossed once more. Maurizio was given a coaching job but left soon afterwards. In one interview he admitted that the

stigma of hearing parents object to having their kids coached by a drug addict had partly led to his decision to leave. Sadly, subsequent interviews, when his story had achieved a bit more prominence, omitted that aspect and instead turned into a criticism of his cousin, whom he accused of paying him a pittance that was barely enough to cover the cost of getting to work.

Ultimately, regardless of where the truth of that part of the story lies, it's just a sad epilogue to an even sadder life, one that was perfectly framed by the ever-eloquent Zeman. 'Certain careers don't always reward the individuals as much as they deserve,' he said. 'Unfortunately, this also applies to life.'