

IMMORTAL TORINO

How Superga Robbed Italian Football
of its Champions



Roberto Pennino

I M M O R T A L
TORINO

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Prologue

The mother of all football disasters

IN 1949, 18 players of Torino Football Club, Italian champions for the past four seasons, along with 13 officials, journalists, and pilots, lost their lives in an aeroplane crash. It was especially tragic because they had already arrived in the airspace near Turin. The weather was a sinister partner. Relentless rainfall and dense fog obstructed the pilots' visibility. Regardless of where they believed they were, the plane would crash into the Superga basilica just outside the city. According to legend, the impact could be heard in the city centre, but that's the fascinating nature of collective memory: was it really so? Or was this impact later consciously or unconsciously added to the story? Umberto Motto, a former Torino player, insists that he was on the Superga hill at the time of the disaster and yet heard nothing. What is the truth?

After more than 70 years, most eyewitnesses of the 'Great Torino' have passed away, and the newspapers of that time have been used to wrap the fish of the following day. Only by delving into the archives can one still feel the impact that the loss of Italy's finest footballers had on their contemporaries, by reading the words of the journalists of that era.

Torino Football Club, long ago renamed Il Grande Torino, captured the imagination of many. Everyone agrees on that. Each year the team was strengthened with new talent so that the mosaic that president Ferruccio Novo envisioned could become the best club in Italy. It must be a team that played attractive, attacking football when possible, and fought hard for a good result when necessary.

The Torino players formed the pulsating heart of Italian football and, according to some, already played a form of total football before this concept even existed, with sometimes six or seven players storming the opponents' goal simultaneously. They were called the 'Invincibili', the Invincibles. Such legendary teams come with a defining player. Valentino Mazzola, the captain, was one such player. A total footballer who could lead his team and inspire them to do great things by setting the standard. He was a defender, a midfielder and a forward. And once even a goalkeeper when defending a lead. No one could say for certain whether he was originally left-footed or right-footed; he did as he pleased with both feet. When 'il Capitano' rolled up his sleeves, the 'quarto d'ora granata', the blood-red 15 minutes, would begin. Suddenly the entire team would go the extra mile, so that the opponent would be rendered helpless.

On 1 May 1949, Torino's squad flew to Lisbon for a match against Benfica, with the Portuguese star Xico Ferreira being honoured with a testimonial. Another Italian team very nearly travelled to Lisbon, just as it had been a close call whether Torino's president would grant permission for the voyage, which the players saw as a pleasure trip. The club had, to add another layer of hair-

splitting, also received an invitation to play an exhibition match on the island of Sardinia on that wretched 4 May 1949.

But the football gods decided differently: Torino accepted Benfica's invitation, while Lady Luck made life-and-death decisions on an individual level. Why did one injured player stay at home while another injured team-mate travelled to Lisbon, without even playing one minute? And how could it be that the return flight was from Lisbon to Turin via Barcelona, when a round trip Milan–Lisbon, Lisbon–Milan had been booked? The story behind the rise and fall of this star-studded team is so much more than the sum of all its impressive figures and records.

The few survivors, former Torino players who experienced everything from A to Z, have selflessly contributed to the telling of this fascinating story, with one common goal: to pass on the story of *Il Grande Torino* to future generations. The footballers who lost their lives in an unbelievably tragic manner were not only the football stars of their time, but they were also a beacon of hope in a devastated and humiliated Italy, post-Second World War. Together with cyclists such as Fausto Coppi and Gino Bartali, also champions of their time, they were symbols of reconstruction. They showed the world that Italy was a force to be reckoned with again in the sporting arena.

The story of *Il Grande Torino* contains an element of Pompeii. The plane crash forever froze the situation of 4 May 1949, while in reality various developments were underway, indicating that the team would partly disintegrate. In fact, the coach had already signed a contract with city rivals Juventus. That's how it goes when

suddenly there's no more future: only the romantic version is retold, while the rest of the story disappears into the mists of time.

For this book, deep digging was done. This story also shows the other side of the coin: the points of conflict, the shattered dreams, and those who stayed behind after the plane crash and had to continue, despite their grief. Because a plane crash is like a stone in a pond, with many ripples around it. Incidents like these resonate for generations. This account is not only one for football enthusiasts, but for anyone interested in history and the role it plays in everyday life. The plane crash involving the Brazilian Chapecoense team in 2016 has proven that even nowadays a fate such as that of Il Grande Torino can still affect people deeply.

Roberto Pennino, Spring 2024

1.

Barassi's Exclamation

ON 6 May 1949, Turin is shrouded in black. According to unofficial accounts, a crowd of between 500,000 and 700,000 mourners has gathered to say farewell to 18 footballers (and 13 officials and journalists) who met their end in the Superga air disaster two days earlier. Since Turin didn't even have that many inhabitants in 1949, this means that many from outside the city have travelled to Turin to personally pay their respects to Il Grande Torino. Rows of mourners, stunned, grieving and crying, lament the 18 caskets bearing the names of the players. It's a surreal sight. The tragedy almost too enormous to understand.

Not even a week earlier, those same footballers had successfully defended their first place in the league table at San Siro, against Internazionale, who couldn't narrow the points gap with Torino. It was an intense match that yielded no goals, leaving the standings unchanged. Torino still had a four-point lead over Inter, and with four matches to go this was a reassuring situation. Mathematically, the fifth consecutive national title was not yet secured, but in Turin and its surrounding areas, no one doubted that, by the end of the season, the title would again be won by the men who had already done so four times before.

The 0-0 'win' in Milan had the additional benefit of allowing the Torino squad to travel to Lisbon for a charity match against Benfica. The proceeds from that match would go to Xico Ferreira, captain of the Portuguese team and a personal friend of Torino captain Valentino Mazzola. Not losing against Inter was the condition set by Ferruccio Novo, president of Torino, to allow for the trip to go ahead. Mazzola himself had been unable to contribute to this result due to mild flu. But with captain Gabetto and the outstanding goalkeeper Bacigalupo, the men from Turin had held their own. No additional motivation such as a trip to Portugal had been needed.

A trip abroad was far from normal in the 1940s. For most players it was a dream come true to board an aeroplane and defend their club's honour outside the national borders. Due to the lack of official international competitions, Torino, who were gaining a stronger reputation every year as one of the best clubs in Europe and perhaps the world, were a much sought-after and much-requested opponent for test and testimonial matches. Invitations poured in, but the president wouldn't accept all of them. The national competition was the most important, especially now that some players were around 30 years old. The lucrative midweek friendly matches were taking an increasing toll. As smoothly as the Torino machine had been running in the 1947/48 season, it proved much more difficult one year later. That's why Novo had come up with a revolutionary plan: to build seasoned teams that could perform at the highest level, both in the national competition and in exhibition matches. Just in the 1948/49 season, the plan seemed to be succeeding. But while its execution was heading in the

right direction, the plane crash extinguished everything. Novo had taken everything into account, except fate.

With four league matches left to play, the final whistle sounded for Il Grande Torino on 4 May 1949. In an instant the club was deprived of everything it held dear and everything it could have been. Nobody knew what to do next. First, the painful formalities of the players' funerals had to be endured. For this, even members of parliament and the future prime minister, Giulio Andreotti, had come to Turin, as had many other dignitaries.

Ottorino Barassi, the president of the Italian Football Federation, delivered an emotional speech, listing the first and last names of all the deceased players one by one, as if they could still appear at his call at any moment. He ended with the name of the most famous player, the key player of the team, around whom all the successes had revolved: Valentino Mazzola. In consultation with the other clubs, the federation decided to award the national title to Torino. The final four matches would be played, but the name of the new champions of the 1948/49 season was already etched in stone. It was now up to the players who hadn't been on the plane to honour the 18 players that had died with a sporting requiem on the pitch.