

Mark Gordon



# ROBERTO BAGGIO

*The World Cup Years*



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## Chapter One

# The build-up to Italia 90

IT WAS Friday, 18 May 1990 and in three weeks' time, holders Argentina were due to get the 14th FIFA World Cup under way against African outsiders Cameroon. Stadia both new and refurbished were almost ready in the 12 host cities as Italy prepared to hold the summer tournament for the second time. However, the mood in one of those cities was far from that of one ready for a celebration of football.

Florence is known for its historic and architectural beauty. The buildings are as stunning as the artwork they house by the area's famous sons, such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. On this early summer Friday, it was an artist of a different kind who was impacting the view across the Tuscan capital.

The beautiful scenery over Florence, known as the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance, is dominated by the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio and the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. There was something extra in the air on that Friday and the rest of the following weekend. It was that of anger, which manifested itself in rioting, leading to fires burning in the street and

many being injured. The reason for the rioting was that Fiorentina had just sold Roberto Baggio to Juventus and the fans of *La Viola* were not taking it well.

To understand the fury that surrounded the then-world record transfer of Baggio, one needs to know the background to the rivalry between the two clubs involved. The animosity, unlike most club rivalries, is not based on geography. There are around 300 miles between the home grounds of the two sides. Just eight years before the contentious Baggio transfer, the two clubs went head-to-head in the 1981/82 Serie A title race. It was a battle that would go to the wire with both teams going into the final day level at the top of the table.

Fiorentina headed to Sardinia to face Cagliari, whilst rivals Juve travelled to Calabria to take on Catanzaro. The team from Florence drew their match 0-0 but the game did not pass without controversy. A series of refereeing decisions went against the Tuscan side, including a seemingly legitimate goal being ruled out by the match official. Meanwhile in Calabria, Juventus were awarded a penalty, which was duly converted by Irishman Liam Brady to give Juve the victory and *Lo Scudetto*.

The bitterness caused by that final day never waned, as Fiorentina fans referred to the championship won by *I Bianconeri* that day as the 'stolen title'. The feeling that some kind of heist occurred in that game continued the following season when banners within the Fiorentina supporters were displayed, adorned with

the words '*meglio secondi che ladri*'; the translation of which is 'better to be second than thieves'.

So, with eight years of resentment built up inside them, it was perhaps inevitable that the sale of Fiorentina's prized asset to the club they called 'thieves' did not sit well with the fans of the club who had borne that resentment within them for the best part of a decade.

The riots continued throughout the weekend – the 25 billion lire fee, the equivalent of around £8m, did nothing to ease the pain of Baggio's departure as it broke both transfer records and Florentine hearts. The protests got so serious that then Fiorentina president Flavio Pontello was forced to hide within the club's stadium whilst angry fans gathered outside, baying for blood and setting fires in the street.

As if all that was not enough, just two days earlier, Fiorentina had lost out in the final of the UEFA Cup to Juventus. The Turin side lifted the trophy after drawing 0-0 in Avellino, where they arrived with a 3-1 first-leg lead. Fiorentina were unable to use their home ground, the Artemio Franchi, as it was being prepared for the World Cup. They had been playing their home games in Perugia but crowd trouble in the semi-final meant they were forced into another move. If that final defeat inflicted a wound beneath the violet shirts of the Fiorentina support, then the sale of Baggio rubbed a healthy handful of salt into the open tissue. Baggio would later claim that he was compelled to agree to the transfer and that his wish was to stay with those fans in Florence.

Italian football expert and Fiorentina supporter Giancarlo Rinaldi recalls the first time he heard the name Baggio and explains how the build-up to the Juventus transfer felt from the perspective of the fans in Florence: ‘I remember where I was when I first heard Roberto Baggio’s name mentioned. I was in a pizzeria in Dumfries, Scotland which was owned by a Juventus supporter. He told me that Fiorentina had just signed a boy who was going to be something out of this world. The pizzeria owner told me that he was currently out injured but told me to remember the name Baggio. As his final season at Fiorentina unfolded, there was this growing feeling that Baggio was going to leave, as the club needed to sell him. They needed to capitalise on their biggest asset but there was tension building within the Fiorentina fans that I knew, and I also felt it myself. It begged the question, what were the club’s real ambitions?’

‘There was a real optimism that we had finally found a player that could drag us out of this sort of mediocrity. Not single-handedly, but Baggio had certainly played a huge role in taking us to a European final. But, before that final was played there were fears that Baggio would go and more importantly, there were fears he would go to the most hated of rivals, Juventus. There was a palpable atmosphere building up in the city and it was all anybody talked about. I know Baggio’s version always was that he was given very little choice and that the metaphorical gun was being held to his head. The suggestion was that if he

did not move it would financially destroy Fiorentina. I do not think the need to sell financially ever came out at the time and Fiorentina fans certainly did not seem to realise that. When he moved there was a feeling that he had betrayed the club and all hell broke loose on the streets of Florence. There was a lot of mixed messaging coming out that led to some people feeling it was purely down to Baggio, and that he had just done it for the money until gradually, over time, a different kind of message trickled out. Fiorentina have sold plenty of players over the years since and for more money, but none of the transfers ever hurt as much as that one did.'

Roberto had arrived at Fiorentina in 1985 as an 18-year-old after being signed from Vicenza, where he had played since the age of 13. The transfer could have fallen through when the player suffered an anterior cruciate ligament injury towards the end of his final season at Vicenza. There were only a handful of games remaining in the 1984/85 season when Vicenza visited Rimini. During the match Baggio slid into a tackle and immediately knew something was wrong. The instant pain he felt in his right knee was due to the fact he had completely torn his cruciate ligament whilst simultaneously damaging the meniscus. It was the kind of injury that had ended the career of players around that time and there was a fear that 18-year-old Roberto may never recover. He travelled to St Etienne, France for surgery where he was told that he was facing at least a year out of the game.

Despite the serious nature of the injury, Fiorentina stuck by the player that they had already committed to

sign, even though the deal was not complete before the injury occurred. Baggio felt so guilty about not being able to play for his new club that he could not bring himself to cash the cheques for his wages when they arrived. When the club contacted Roberto to ask why, he explained that he had put the cheques in a drawer at home as he did not feel that he had earned them enough to pay them into his account.

The form that later led to Juventus breaking the bank to sign him also earned Baggio a place in Azeglio Vicini's Italy squad as they prepared to host the World Cup for the first time since 1934. Vicini's was a squad with some serious attacking talent against whom the world's most expensive player would have to compete for a place in the starting line-up. Not only that, Vicini had previously managed the Italy under-21 side as they reached the final of the 1986 European Under-21 Championship. Vicini was thought to have a loyalty to the players he managed in that squad, which Baggio missed out on through injury.

As the host nation, Italy did not have a qualifying campaign to endure and so filled their calendar with preparatory friendly matches instead. The first of those friendlies came some nine months ahead of the Italian side's first Group A match of the tournament, against Austria in June 1990. Bulgaria were the opponents for the first match on the warm-up calendar in a game hosted at Stadio Dino Manuzzi in Cesena.

Baggio made it into Vicini's starting eleven for the game as he played in an attacking midfield role

behind a front two of Sampdoria's Gianluca Vialli and Napoli's Andrea Carnevale. Vialli, top scorer at the 1986 Under-21 Euros, had started the season well with three goals in his first five games in Serie A. Carnevale, meanwhile, was setting out on what would be a title-winning season in Naples alongside Diego Maradona.

At Fiorentina, Baggio had started the 1989/90 season in good form despite *La Viola* winning just one of their first eight games in the league. In the opening match of the Serie A season Roberto struck a superb free-kick equaliser as his side came back from a goal down to earn a point away at Bari. A draw at home with Genoa followed, before Fiorentina travelled to Turin to face Juventus. The hosts won the game 3-1 as Baggio came face-to-face with a player that he would become very familiar with the following summer. Salvatore Schillaci was that man and he scored Juve's second of the match to put them 2-1 in front. Fiorentina bounced back well from that first defeat of the campaign as they won at home against Lazio four days later. Baggio's 71st-minute penalty proved enough as manager Bruno Giorgi had his star man to thank for earning his side their first win of the season.

A trip to Naples was next up and a game against the side that would eventually go on to win the Serie A title that season, Napoli. It proved to be a dramatic afternoon at Stadio San Paolo with the respective number 10s on each side heavily involved. The man wearing 10 on his shirt for Napoli was the legendary

Diego Maradona. He had already sealed his place in Neapolitan hearts and record books by delivering the club's first league title in the 1986/87 season. That was not before leading his nation to World Cup glory in Mexico in the summer of 86. Maradona was the biggest name in world football but he started the game against Fiorentina on the bench. As Diego watched from the sidelines, Baggio took his opportunity to show off some of his credentials as a potential successor to Maradona's standing as 'best in the world'.

There were 22 minutes on the clock when Baggio collected a pass out of the Fiorentina defence by the Brazilian, Dunga. Roberto was midway inside his own half as he set off on a run which took him across the halfway line and as he gathered momentum, the Napoli defence closed in. Alessandro Renica was the first Napoli defender to attempt to halt Baggio's run but as the defender hung out a leg, Roberto skipped inside him. A sense of panic was setting in for the Napoli defenders and a desperate lunge by Massimo Crippa was never going to get the ball but he almost clipped the Fiorentina player's heels. Baggio was too quick for Crippa and his cynical attempt at stopping the Fiorentina forward left the Napoli defender sitting on the turf watching as Roberto made his way into the penalty area. As he entered the box, Baggio was met by the sight of Napoli goalkeeper Giuliano Giuliani, who was now the only player who could prevent the forward from scoring. As Giuliani approached him, Baggio opened his body and shaped to strike the ball

with his right foot to the goalkeeper's left-hand side. As the keeper's weight shifted to his left, Baggio went the other way, leaving Giuliani stumbling backwards as he tried to correct himself. It was too late for the goalkeeper as Roberto was already past him, taking a touch to settle himself before prodding the ball into the net. It was a magical moment from Baggio, who produced the kind of goal that perhaps only the man named Diego on the opposition bench could have hoped to emulate.

Less than ten minutes after his moment of brilliance, Baggio scored again, this time from the penalty spot. In response to Fiorentina's 2-0 lead, Napoli introduced their own magician at half-time. Maradona's first involvement in the game was to miss a penalty two minutes after the restart. A Stefano Pioli own goal got Napoli back in the game before Careca equalised with 14 minutes remaining. Maradona then crossed for Giancarlo Corradini to head home the winner with just three minutes remaining. It had been an epic match that Fiorentina probably did not deserve to lose. Baggio's opening goal would be shown in highlight reels for years to come as he shone brightly in the spotlight usually reserved for the great Maradona.

Bulgaria arrived in Italy a few days later for their international friendly against *Gli Azzurri*. Two goals and two assists for Baggio gave the Italians a 4-0 victory on the night as he carried his club form on to the international stage. It was an impressive start to

the squad's tournament build-up and individually, it provided Fiorentina's talisman the chance to try and cement his name in the mind of Vicini as a certain starter for future games. Roberto would be reacquainted with Bulgaria nearly five years later in a far more memorable World Cup match, whilst his penalty goal in the friendly was the first of a roller-coaster journey from the spot over the next nine years.

By the time Sampdoria arrived in Florence a month later, Fiorentina had just one win to show for their eight league matches. Samp were reigning Coppa Italia champions having lifted the trophy the previous season and they were keen to go one better by winning the Serie A title. Vujadin Boškov's Sampdoria were sitting in second place when they arrived at the Artemio Franchi, where they were put to the sword by Baggio and his Fiorentina team-mates. Defender Giuseppe Volpecina converted Baggio's corner to put the hosts in front before their lead was doubled in the first half by Sergio Battistini. Roberto Mancini pulled one back for the team from Genoa before half-time, with an expertly taken free kick. Not to be outdone, Baggio scored a free kick of his own in the second half to seal an important win for *La Viola*.

Baggio had a starring role in a 5-1 win over Ascoli a few weeks later as Fiorentina stabilised their position in tenth place, comfortably clear of any relegation concerns. Roberto had scored twice before half-time when Ascoli were in town and he would go on to complete his hat-trick in the second period.

Fiorentina became something of a specialist when it came to draws in the second half of their season. They would share the points in ten of their last 19 games in their league campaign. Baggio's good form continued as he added a further eight goals after the turn of the year. He ended the season having scored 19 goals in all competitions, as Fiorentina's struggles with drawn games saw them finishing in a disappointing 12th position. In Europe on the other hand, the UEFA Cup provided most of the season's highlights. *La Viola* started their European campaign with a 1-0 first-leg defeat to Atletico Madrid in the Vicente Calderón stadium. Renato Buso's header levelled the tie in the second leg, which led to the match going to penalties. Atletico missed three times in the shoot-out as Baggio scored the winning spot kick to send his side into the next round.

Sochaux of France were eliminated in the next round on the away goals rule before Baggio was again the hero, scoring the only goal over two games with Dynamo Kyiv to put Fiorentina in the quarter-final. Another French side, Auxerre, were the opponents in the last eight as a 1-0 home win in a game played in Perugia was followed up with another single-goal win in France to send Fiorentina into the semi-final. Marco Nappi's goal in a 1-1 draw with Werder Bremen in Germany was ultimately enough to reach the final, after a goalless draw back in Perugia in the second leg. That set up that final appearance against Juventus, which saw Juve lift the trophy. Within a week, the

season would come to an end with Fiorentina not only losing a major cup final to Juventus but also selling their star number 10 to their victors.

As the domestic season raged on, the national team's result against Bulgaria earlier in the campaign was an outlier in terms of their other build-up matches. Italy were struggling for goals and they only managed to hit the net twice in their next six matches, with Baggio starting in four of those. Roberto missed out on the squad that played Argentina and later had to settle for a place on the substitutes' bench in the final build-up game against Switzerland.

The lack of goals was becoming a bit of a concern as the strikers at the disposal of manager Vicini failed to replicate their club form whilst in the blue of the national side. In contrast, the defence was looking imperious, with only André Cruz of Brazil managing to score against them over the seven matches played in preparation for the summer of 1990. As the list of defenders that the Italian manager had to choose from contained Franco Baresi, Giuseppe Bergomi and Paolo Maldini to name but three, the hosts were looking exceptionally strong at the back. They just needed to find a spark in attack when the World Cup finally got under way.

The headquarters of the Italian Football Federation, Coverciano, is just four miles from the centre of Florence. When the national team gathered there to begin their tournament preparations, tensions were still high following Baggio's move to Juventus.

Protests at the training ground initially saw the area closed to the public before the decision was taken to move elsewhere to continue the build-up. The World Cup was just weeks away from kicking off and Roberto Baggio was the name on everyone's lips.