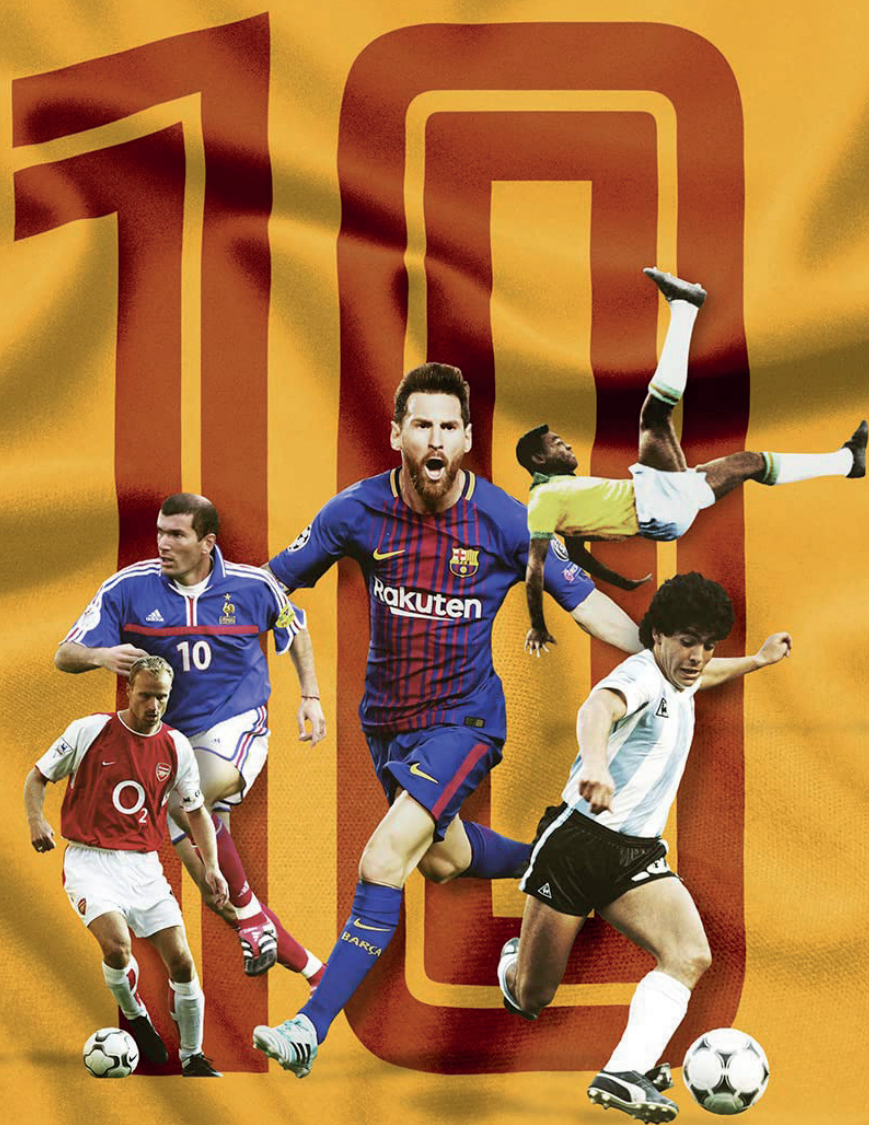


THE NUMBER



MORE THAN A NUMBER, MORE THAN A SHIRT

A N D Y B O L L E N

THE NUMBER

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ANDY BOLLEN



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Zinedine Zidane: Imperfect Perfection

WHEN THE French national team toiled during qualification for the 2006 World Cup, Raymond Domenech convinced Zinedine Zidane, along with Lilian Thuram and Claude Makélélé, to come back to aid their country. The team was going through a natural transition cycle after players such as Zidane, Thuram, Makélélé, Marcel Desailly and Bixente Lizarazu had retired. When the old boys returned, France were fourth in their group. Zidane was named captain and the French finished top.

In the finals, France remained unconvincing. Their opening group match with Switzerland ended in a 0-0 draw. Against Korea, they managed a 1-1 draw. Without Zidane, out through suspension, they beat Togo to qualify in second place. This meant more difficult opposition and they played Spain in the last 16. Franck Ribéry opened the scoring, then Zidane set up Vieira, scoring the third in a 3-1 win. France then faced Brazil, winning 1-0 – Zidane set up Thierry Henry and was voted FIFA's man of the match. In the semi-final France came up against Portugal. Zidane scored from the penalty spot taking them to another final, this time against Italy.

The world watched the final knowing this was Zidane's last game of competitive professional football, and it started brilliantly. In the seventh minute he scored a penalty – a Panenka-style chip which hit the underside of the bar on its way in. Marco Materazzi equalised, taking the game to extra time. Zidane came close in the first period of extra time but Gianluigi

Buffon saved his header. Then, in the 110th minute of the game, Zidane was red-carded for head-butting Materazzi. A global audience of more than one billion were dumbfounded. Zidane had hauled France to the final but, yet again, had reverted to type. How can someone so elegant be so flawed? His story ended in imperfect perfection but it ended the way it had to: the champion fallen from his pedestal. His playing career was over. Zidane was given a three-match suspension by FIFA and chose to do three days of community service coaching underprivileged children.

Throughout his illustrious club career, Zinedine Yazid Zidane only wore the number ten shirt while at Bordeaux. When he appeared for France he wore the number ten shirt with distinction. Peerless, with incredible technique, elegance and vision, he played the beautiful game so beautifully. Yet Zidane was a complex figure who received and tackled racial abuse from childhood to captaining his country. His outbursts merely reminded us he was human after all.

Zidane was one of the most gifted footballers of his generation but his journey to the top was steel-clad with an inner turmoil and volatility due to his Algerian heritage. This rage at the experience of being constantly treated like an immigrant affected his mentality and his game. But instead of hiding, he eventually learned to feed off it, embracing his ethnicity to become one of the finest players of the modern era. In 2001, following a prolific burst of transcendental play and success with Juventus, Zidane became the world's most expensive footballer when he signed for Real Madrid for £69.75m. At Madrid, his crowning moment was the stunning left-footed volley in the 2002 Champions League Final at Hampden against Bayer Leverkusen.

Zidane can instantly flip from the smile of a saintly serene 13th-century monk to the stone-cold stare of an assassin. Furious and tender; shy off the park, intense on it. Zidane

was a contradiction in terms. A skilled reader of the game, he controlled the tempo, always through the central position, like few others since Cruyff. When his team was not in possession it was like watching a shark relentlessly hunt down, harass and hustle those who had the ball.

In 2006, Turner Prize-winning artist Douglas Gordon and French artist Philippe Parreno co-directed *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*. They used 17 cameras to follow and focus only on Zidane during a Real Madrid game against Villarreal. The Scottish band Mogwai wrote the soundtrack, their film score adding to the hypnotic texture of the documentary movie. It's enthralling, stylish, fascinating and thought-provoking, as it creates an atmospheric narrative. The player's expression remains cold, removed, and flips from smiling to sneering when he is sent off. Like Zidane too, the film gives nothing away. We don't receive the answer; the enigma remains intact. Zidane, regardless of the 17 cameras, refuses to allow us in. The player himself was too modest to admit it but his life and career felt cinematic, a journey of unparalleled success, full of triumph and despair, and from a humble start, dealing with racism and adversity, to lead his various clubs and country to unforgettable moments of triumph.

On the international stage, two contrasting events perfectly sum up Zidane. Starring for France – even with a red card and a two-match ban early on – he was instrumental in carrying his nation to World Cup glory in 1998; then there was the head-butt on Materazzi as his career closed on the highest stage eight years later.

For a high-profile world superstar and lauded football figure, he continues to maintain an aura of mystery. Any study into the life, career and mindset of Zidane always returns to his upbringing. Zidane speaks with pride about his father, 'I'm very inspired by him; it was my father who taught us that an immigrant must work twice as hard as anybody else, that he

must never give up.’ When you learn where his family were from, everything fits. His story, his destiny, how he carried himself, his fate – it all makes sense.

Zinedine Yazid Zidane was born in Marseille on 23 June 1972, famously learning his trade on the streets of La Castellane. The main square of the housing complex where Zidane lived was called Place de la Tartane; this was his concrete field of dreams. From the age of five, Zidane copied his heroes from Olympique Marseille: Jean-Pierre Papin, Enzo Francescoli and Blaž Slišković, always with the ball, always honing his skills. Even when Zidane trained with France, he was often seen dribbling the ball around small cones to constantly fine-tune his game.

Architects may have loved La Castellane – in their eyes a modernist dream, but, as ever, they were not the ones living there. The area was built in 1955. Like most places struggling with economic hardship, families tried to protect their children and keep them out of trouble. But anyone from this immigrant suburb was susceptible; these were tough streets, rife with social and economic problems. This part of Marseille, in the 15th arrondissement, was no youth academy for potential football stars and more a breeding ground for gangsters, drug traffickers, prostitution and gun-running.

The housing project – a huge council estate – La Castellane was created to house refugees from the Algerian War. The original residents were mostly Algerian and Moroccan but today come from across the French-speaking world, particularly Africa and the Caribbean.

Between 1954 and 1962, Algeria fought for its independence against France. The Algerians had wanted independence since World War I but after World War II the cause gained real momentum due to the French reneging on promises of self-rule. In 1954 the National Liberation Front, the French Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), began a guerrilla war against

France and approached the UN to make Algeria a sovereign state. Around 500,000 French troops regained control but their actions did not play well politically and France lost the will to continue in the conflict. The war was ferocious – and costly. Charles de Gaulle eventually declared that Algerians had the right to determine their future. Algeria's independence created 900,000 refugees who fled to France.

Zidane was the youngest of five siblings. His parents were from a north Algeria village called Aquemoune, in Berber-speaking Kabylia, and arrived in Paris in 1953. Zidane is Muslim and of Algerian Kabyle descent. He told *Esquire* magazine, 'I have an affinity with the Arabic world. I have it in my blood, via my parents. I'm very proud of being French, but also very proud of having these roots and this diversity.'

His parents originally emigrated to Barbès and Saint-Denis but found it difficult to find work and settle, so moved to La Castellane in Marseille. His father worked in a warehouse and as a security guard in a department store. His mother stayed at home and raised the family of four sons and a daughter. There was always stability but also a strictness, which Zidane often credits with helping his career. The family were not poor in comparison to others but the environment was violent and fraught with danger. As a kid, Zidane would not see this as a disadvantage. This was normal. This was his life. These were his horizons and he knew every inch of the Place de la Tartane.

Aged ten, Zidane's football journey began when he signed his first papers for the local side, US Saint-Henri. After 18 months he and his brother Noureddine signed for SO Septèmes-les-Vallons, an established and well-run north Marseilles-based amateur club.

At 14, Zidane was selected for a prestigious France Football Federation three-day training camp at the Regional Centre for Sports and Physical Education in Aix-en-Provence. This proved a significant moment. He was spotted by the late Jean Verraud,

a former AS Cannes player, scout and coach. Zidane would later credit Verraud as the biggest influence on his career. Verraud pleaded with Zidane's parents to let him move to Cannes, to board and be part of the youth setup, promising he would also receive an education.

With his quiet determination and discipline, Zidane realised he had a chance. He displayed the same work ethic and principles his father had instilled, and applied the same dedication to improve his weaknesses: his left foot and his heading. Zidane's nature never changed. When he played he was hard, protective, someone likely to become enraged if insulted or wronged, but quietly spoken and understated. He remained patient, biding his time. Off the park, Zidane's friends and family described him as modest and uncharacteristically timid, yet on it he was dominant, brave and strong.

Zidane was soon attracting serious attention as he was a prodigious player, yet even then he was prone to hot-headed outbursts. As well as the ease with which he could take the ball around six opponents and dazzle with his ability, he had a shocking temper.

At that point, though, it would have been unfathomable to imagine the career ahead of him, one where he would become a towering presence in global sport and helped unite France. The nation voted him their most popular Frenchman ever. He became a reluctant hero but Zidane was uncomfortable; he was a private person. His upbringing ensured the adulation would not go to his head. He seldom spoke to the press and steadfastly refused to let anyone into his world and treasured his privacy.

Initially, Zidane's stay at the Cannes youth academy was troubled. In his first few weeks he was made to clean the changing rooms and boots, after he punched an opponent who had insulted his family and made reference to his ghetto upbringing. Such was the concern for the raw youngster from La Castellane and this unpredictability, it was agreed to remove him from the dormitory

with other trainees and bring him into the more tranquil family home of Cannes director Jean-Claude Elineau. Zidane later admitted this was central to his development as a person and helped him relax, open up and become more trusting of others. It also made him a better team player.

Meanwhile, Jean Verraud could see Zidane had exceptional speed of foot and later admitted to never seeing any other player dribble so quickly. Verraud also sensed a desire, 'He had this warrior side that you find in kids from underprivileged neighbourhoods. He was hungry.' He urged Zidane to channel this anger into positive energy, to adapt it into a workable part of his game. Verraud tried to calm him when he reacted to racist chants in games from opponents and supporters. During these years in the Cannes youth system, Zidane's game developed and by May 1989 manager Luis Fernández gave him his debut, aged 16 years and 11 months, when he came on as a late sub against Nantes.

Cannes paid Zidane a promised £500 bonus for making it into the first team; he sent the money home to his family. It took until the 1990/91 season before Zidane established himself as a regular. Then he was ready. He blossomed into a serious prospect, driving the side to fourth place, their highest Ligue 1 finish.

Zidane played for Cannes 61 times and was far better than the others technically but needed to improve his strength and physique. He demonstrated an assured sense of positioning, balance, and extraordinary skill. He read the game superbly, and, as an attacking playmaker, made the team tick. His height, 6ft 1in, was tall for this position, yet he managed to remain graceful with the ball stuck to his feet. He could bring a ball down, control, turn and find a pass in the smallest of areas.

In 1991/92, Cannes were relegated and Zidane was sold to Bordeaux for £6.3m, where he teamed up with Bixente Lizarazu and Christophe Dugarry. Yet unbelievably, when he arrived at Bordeaux, Zidane was full of self-doubt. One of Bordeaux's

coaches, Pierrot Labat, claimed he was lacking in confidence, 'Because he was a player who appeared introverted, he doubted himself. I attempted to instil confidence into him.' Zidane was part of this great Bordeaux side for four years, helping the club to the Intertoto Cup in 1995 and the UEFA Cup Final in 1996 where they were beaten 5-1 over two legs by Bayern Munich.

Zidane made his international debut in 1994 when he came on as a sub with his side 2-0 down in a friendly against the Czech Republic. He scored twice to earn a draw. The next day the French papers remained low-key and played his impact down – by claiming the nation had found their next Michel Platini.

Around this time, Zidane was spotted by Barcelona's coach Johan Cruyff. The Dutchman was struggling to reshape his dream team – and at odds with his nemesis, director Josep Lluís Núñez – and wanted to sign Zizou. Núñez refused to sanction the deal. Cruyff may have seen something of himself in Zidane, in terms of his ability and how he read the game. Both learned their trade on the concrete streets of their respective hometowns and both rarely hit the ground when they played, preferring to stay on their feet rather than fall.

Cruyff was not the only legendary player and coach keen on Zidane. Kenny Dalglish also wanted to sign him but his Blackburn Rovers owner Jack Walker famously refused by asking why Dalglish wanted Zidane when he had Tim Sherwood. In 1996, Zidane was offered to Newcastle for £1.2m, but after checking him out, the Magpies considered he was not ready for the English top flight. In the same year, he was named Ligue 1 Player of the Year.

The boy from La Castellane then headed to Turin. In 1996, aged 24, he signed for the Champions League winners Juventus for £3.15m. It was with the *Bianconeri* that he gained prominence as the classic number ten (though not wearing the actual number on his back) as he announced himself on the European and world stage as a playmaker.

But again, Zidane took time to adjust. Fans were impatient. Why had the club signed him? He was considered a flop and a waste of money. Zidane had spoken to Didier Deschamps before he moved, and the horror stories over fitness coach Gian Piero Ventrone stuck with him. ‘Deschamps did tell me about the training sessions but I just didn’t believe they could be as bad as all that,’ a knackered Zidane told the assembled media, in between bouts from his oxygen cylinders. ‘Often I would be at the point of vomiting by the end because I was so tired.’ It may please Tottenham Hotspur fans to know that Antonio Conte, as well as banning ketchup and mayonnaise, brought in a slightly older but still extremely ruthless Gian Piero Ventrone to get his team into shape. It was working and evident in their powerful finish to the 2021/22 season, which saw Spurs make it into the Champions League. (Gian Piero Ventrone passed away suddenly from leukaemia, aged 62, on 6 October 2022.)

L'Équipe's Vincent Duluc revealed that Juventus legend Platini came out in support of Zidane, ‘He went to Juve and it wasn’t easy for him. It was a difficult first six months. He played a withdrawn role in the team as a defensive midfielder.’ Duluc clarified, ‘Michel Platini gave an interview to the Italian press in November ’96 and said, “You’re going to eat your words. Zidane is a playmaker. Take another look, believe in him and watch him change,” and he did change at Juve when everyone put their faith in him.’

In his first season in Italy, Zidane won Serie A and the Intercontinental Cup, and was named Serie A Foreign Player of the Year. Zidane played behind Alessandro Del Piero and fashioned chance after chance for his team-mate. Del Piero believed Zidane was a great team player, ‘Zidane had an extraordinary talent, which contributed to his sole interest in helping the team. He was not a selfish player. He had a unique ability to be great and be a team player. I was lucky to play with him.’

In 1997, Juventus played Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League Final and were beaten 3-1, but Zidane continued to make his mark by driving Juventus to another title win in 1997/98. They made the Champions League Final for the third consecutive season, this time losing 1-0 to Real Madrid. Zidane was named FIFA World Player of the Year and won the Ballon d'Or.

The following year Juventus finished second in the league and, with Zidane red-carded for head-butting Hamburg's Jochen Kientz, they failed to make it out of the Champions League group stages. In 2001, Zidane was again named Serie A Foreign Player of the Year; then, after spending five years in Turin, he headed to Madrid for that world-record fee.

Zidane was elevated to global superstardom when France hosted their glorious World Cup in 1998. This was his first finals and Brazil were huge favourites. History is written by the victors; details are often disregarded. France won the trophy but before the tournament started, their coach Aimé Jacquet's ability to do his job was brought into question. He came under severe criticism from the French media. Many pointed to his leadership skills, and *L'Équipe* in particular argued through a cloud of Gitanes, shrugging as they highlighted the weaknesses in attack; surely goals were necessary to win tournament football? *France Football* was concerned too. Defensively and in midfield *Les Bleus* were strong but where were the goals coming from if not Zidane and Youri Djorkaeff?

France opened Group D with a comfortable 3-0 win over South Africa. Zidane took the corner which set up Dugarry for the first goal. Against Saudi Arabia, Zizou played a delightful pass to Lizarazu to set up Henry's opener in a 4-0 win. However, he was shown a red card for standing on Saudi's captain, Fuad Anwar. FIFA's disciplinary committee banned Zidane for two games, even though others confirmed Anwar had been racially abusive to the Frenchman. France beat Denmark 2-1 in their

third group game without their star man, who was sidelined until the quarter-finals.

We often forget about Zidane's disciplinary issues in 1998 – unsung hero Laurent Blanc would be unfairly dismissed in the semi-final and Desailly was also sent off in the final. Against Paraguay, the sports journalists were apoplectic. France needed a striker. They were correct; the French were taken to extra time in two of their knockout games, winning one with a golden goal. Zidane was back for the quarter-final against Italy and scored from a penalty shoot-out. *Les Blues* had reason to be thankful that he was; he changed the dynamic of the tournament.

In the last 16, France had faced Paraguay and had chance after chance, hitting the post and doing everything but score. Paraguay's keeper and captain, José Luis Chilavert, had a great game and marshalled his defence brilliantly. At the time, everyone, especially the fuming journalists, was thinking how useless France were without Zidane. The match stretched into golden goal extra time and it was Blanc who scored the first sudden-death goal in World Cup history, finishing in the 115th minute.

Zidane would return for the tense and goalless quarter-final against Italy, scoring France's first from the spot in a 4-3 shoot-out victory. Blanc was again the hero, stepping up to take the decisive spot kick which took them into the last four where the hosts faced Croatia. France won 2-1, with defender Lilian Thuram scoring twice, and they would meet Brazil in the final at the Stade de France.

The eyes of the world were on the tournament's golden boy, Brazil's 21-year-old superstar striker Ronaldo. However, in the pre-match build-up something had happened. When the initial team sheets were released chaos ensued when Ronaldo was missing from the starting line-up. He was soon reinstated and Edmundo dropped out – 45 minutes before kick-off. Rumours began to circulate. Ronaldo had suffered a seizure but was forced

to play by the sponsors, Nike. They had exerted pressure on the CBF – the Brazilian Football Confederation – as they had signed a huge sponsorship deal worth £105m. Journalists in the Stade de France took note. Something was amiss. The normally entertaining Brazilian pre-match warm-up did not occur.

A civil action was later raised and the information was revealed under oath. What came out was that Ronaldo was sleeping in the hotel after lunch and had suffered a massive fit. He was rooming with Roberto Carlos, who ran for help from team-mates. *O Fenômeno* was unaware of it and was subdued but appeared fine, if tired, when he came round. The Brazilian staff initially chose not to tell Ronaldo. Then they decided to tell him as they took him to a clinic for tests. When the squad headed to the stadium, Ronaldo was heading to the hospital, but unbelievably he returned and played. A few years later, the Brazilian news wires ran with a story about how an injection of the anaesthetic xylocaine had caused the fit.

For most football fans, whatever happened to Ronaldo before the final doesn't sit well. As Jacob Steinberg wrote in the *Irish Times* in 2018, on the 20th anniversary of the game, 'Years on, the events of the Paris evening remain shrouded in mystery and intrigue, the murky circumstances that led to Ronaldo first being omitted from the Brazil team sheet and then reinstated remain some of the most bizarre – and, some insist, scandalous – the sport has seen.'

Zidane would finally get his World Cup goals by scoring two headers. Midway through the second half, Desailly was sent off after his second yellow and with the French shutting shop, Brazil were caught on the counter with a late Emmanuel Petit goal. Zidane was the man of the match. More than a million people celebrated on the Champs-Élysées and along with his team-mates, Zidane would be awarded the Legion of Honour.

Zidane's performance in the final galvanised his side but also the country. Aimé Jacquet believed Zidane was a phenomenon

from the start, telling *The Observer's* Andrew Hussey, 'Zidane has an internal vision, his control is precise and discreet. He can make the ball do whatever he wants. But it is his drive that takes him forward. He is 100 per cent football.' On his ability and ball control, Rob Smyth of *The Guardian* captures it perfectly, 'In terms of ball retention he was probably the greatest player of all time, blessed with such grace and supernatural awareness that he could play a game of real-life Pac-Man and never be caught.'

Zidane was able to carry this responsibility, not only of playing football in the number ten shirt but of someone who found himself in the position of poster boy for a modern and multicultural France. The 1998 World Cup victors were made up of players of various ethnicities. The squad had become a true representation of France as a nation. Amid the trophy celebrations, there were memorable images of the face of the son of Algerian immigrants projected on the Arc de Triomphe, with the simple message 'Merci Zizou'.

Zidane's popularity irritated the leader of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen. He stoked the embers of populism by referring to Zidane as 'a son of French Algeria' and planted the seeds of racial disharmony. In a move that was strategic as well as malicious, another prominent National Front spokesperson deliberately claimed Zidane's father was a 'Harki' (in the Algerian Civil War, Harkis were Algerians who fought for France during the war and in Algeria they are regarded as traitors). In a rare statement, Zidane broke his silence to reject the claims. The insinuation had got under his skin and the insult against his father was a step too far, 'I say this once for all time: my father is not a Harki. My father is an Algerian, proud of who he is and I am proud that my father is Algerian. The only important thing I have to say is that my father never fought against his country.'

After the 1998 success, Zidane and Christophe Dugarry published a book called *Mes Copains d'Abord* (*My Friends First*)

in which Zizou was explicit about what the World Cup win meant, 'It was for all Algerians who are proud of their flag, all those who have made sacrifices for their family but who have never abandoned their own culture.' Despite his success, having won every top honour in football and his millionaire status, he remains humble, grounded, and a huge part of their lives. He bought his parents a spacious villa, 15 minutes from La Castellane, in a nicer area called Les Pennes-Mirabeau. His brother coached the local side, La Nouvelle Vague, and Zinedine provided money for their clubhouse and changing rooms, and is their life president.

Zidane is worthy of the number ten jersey because of his outstanding ability, mentality and his football achievements but he carried the weight of expectation of his nation and at least in one World Cup finals he delivered for his country. Off the pitch, he became something of a reluctant ambassador, used to ease racial tensions in France.

Football crowds have changed thanks to the Black Lives Matter campaign and players taking the knee. BLM and mental health awareness has helped, but in Zidane's era, the football arena was ferocious. If players couldn't match his skill, they would be told to get inside his head. Like a boxer who knows his world champion opponent has a troubled left eye, they batter and attack the weakness. If opponents infiltrated Zidane's dark side and he reacted, they might win.

Zidane was as hard as nails. A warrior who fought for the right to play each time he crossed the white line, with a desire and determination honed from those fledgling days on the streets of La Castellane. When he could control this anger, it was like a protective shield. But when it erupted, there could be bedlam. Notwithstanding the unparalleled skill and sheer natural ability, when his race or family were insulted retribution was nigh.

At Euro 2000 in Belgium and the Netherlands, France were world champions. Zidane starred, was voted Player of the

Tournament, and later admitted he was at his peak at this point. The French beat Denmark 3-0 in the opener, followed by a 2-1 victory over the Czech Republic, but then they lost 3-2 to the Dutch. In the knockout phase, Zidane scored a free kick in a 2-1 win against Spain and then he stepped up to score a golden goal from the penalty spot against Portugal in the semi-final. In the final against Italy, trailing 1-0, Sylvain Wiltord scored a late equaliser. When Robert Pires trailed down the left and cut back for Trezeguet's superb golden goal, France won the Euros.

Zidane had joined Real Madrid in 2001 for a world-record fee on a four-year deal. He was one of their *galácticos*. In an unforgettable moment at the end of the 2001/02 season, which felt written in the stars, he would remind us of his extraordinary talent when Real Madrid faced Bayer Leverkusen in the 2002 European Cup Final at Hampden Park in Glasgow. Not only was this Madrid's ninth victory but it was also their centenary season. Even Ferenc Puskás and Alfredo Di Stéfano were special guests. The two men had starred for Real, in the same stadium, combining to score seven goals in the 1960 European Cup Final in the 7-3 defeat of Eintracht Frankfurt, watched by 127,621 flabbergasted fans.

The weather for the evening provided a dream-like backdrop. The day was overcast, wet and clammy with thunder in the air, and the floodlights were on early. Zidane had issues of self-doubt to deal with. His two previous Champions League Final appearances with Juventus, in 1997, and 1998 had ended in defeat. He was returning from suspension and the pressure was on.

Before half-time, Zidane did what top players do: he switched to genius mode and hit one of the most memorable strikes ever witnessed in the final. As the ball looped high, spinning in from an awkward Roberto Carlos cross, Zidane remained focused and relaxed. He then volleyed the ball like it was the most natural thing in the world. Setting his body

right, arms out for balance as he waited for the perfect moment, he pirouetted, connecting with the ball. It was a strange few seconds, as though Zidane wasn't thinking too much about it, yet he clearly was. Like a drummer stopping in the middle of a complex solo for effect before bringing it home, he was telling everyone he intended to volley the ball. That's why the goal is one of the finest ever scored. We knew he was setting up to take the volley on. Everyone watching was fearful it might end up in row Z. But such is the mentality of the elite footballer, athlete or golfer, the magic is in their DNA. They can visualise the shot. Zidane unleashed a perfect left-footed strike that Bayer Leverkusen's goalkeeper Hans-Jörg Butt could do nothing about. By then it was a matter of mathematics, physics, angles, speed, power and momentum. Yes, the goal is special because of the balance, the power, the method, the fluidity and the finesse, but it's the mindset of the player willing to take it on. He's not going to volley this is he? He is. Goal!

Zizou modestly later revealed he was human after all, 'I tried to score the same way again later, even during shooting an advert, but it never happened again. Never. I tried in training, but it never happened. It was perfect the day it happened.' Others, though, such as Franz Beckenbauer, recognised the technique, 'Zidane is unique. The ball flows with him. He is more like a dancer than a football player.'

To highlight how key Zidane was for France, for the 2002 World Cup in Japan and Korea he suffered a thigh injury and missed the first two games. Defending champions *Les Bleus* were beaten by Senegal and Denmark and drew against Uruguay. They could not score a goal and failed to make it out of the group stage.

In 2003, with Luís Figo playing alongside him at Real Madrid, Zidane won La Liga and was named European Player of the Year, and when he was announced as the FIFA World Player of the Year, Alfredo Di Stéfano paid tribute, 'He

dominates the ball, he is a walking spectacle and he plays as if he had silk gloves on each foot. He makes it worthwhile going to the stadium – he’s one of the best I have ever seen.’ In 2004, as part of celebrations for UEFA’s 50th anniversary Golden Jubilee Poll, fans voted him the best European footballer of the previous half a century.

With Zidane back on form, the French headed to the 2004 Euros in Portugal. Zidane scored twice against England, but in the quarter-finals they were beaten by a Greek side who won the trophy with a game based on fitness, running and man-marking. They were not revolutionising football, but they were maximising their effectivity and ‘playing to their strengths’. Yet many treated the Greek triumph with disdain, some commentators comparing them to a well-drilled army team. After the tournament, Zidane retired from international football, though he would reverse that decision for the 2006 finals in Germany.

In May 2006, aged 33, Zidane scored in his final game for Real Madrid, a 3-3 draw against Villarreal. A crowd of 80,000 in the Bernabéu gave him an emotional send-off as they held up a banner saying ‘thanks for the magic’.

In the final summation, Zidane’s place in the pantheon of the game is certain. His individual brilliance aside, it’s noticeable how former team-mates remarked on his work rate, his value as a great team player and their reliance on him during key moments in games, and especially on big occasions.

After retiring as a player, Zidane achieved what few of the top players ever could and went on to have a successful career as a coach.

Initially, it was José Mourinho who persuaded Real Madrid to appoint Zidane as a special adviser in November 2010, the unusual title due to his lack of coaching badges. The Portuguese felt Zidane’s expertise as a high-profile statesman in the game would be perfect in an ambassadorial role; a face at Champions

League functions, a presence as he travelled with the first team, who could share his experience. But he also wanted him at meetings and involved technically, as his skill and experience around the club would rub off on the players.

By July 2011, Zidane was appointed as sporting director and then assistant coach to Carlo Ancelotti. In 2014 it became an issue when he was named head coach for Real Madrid's B side, without his badges. By 2015, Zidane had been granted his UEFA Pro Licence and in January 2016 he replaced Rafa Benítez as Real Madrid's coach. He would lead the club twice, from 2016 to 2018 and 2019 to 2021, winning three successive Champions Leagues, two World Club Championships and two UEFA Super Cups. Domestically, he bagged two La Liga titles and two Supercopa de Españas.

Throughout his life there has been Zinedine Zidane the football superstar and, to his family, there is Yazid. He has always been split between the two. In the book, *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, author and academic Charles Tshimanga explained, 'Zidane is the archetypal Arab. He reflects the many silhouettes of young French people struggling for a place in the social and cultural landscape. Since his head-butt and subsequent defeat, he has shared a reputation for incivility with the faceless Arabs and Blacks of the peripheral suburbs.' Tshimanga continued, 'The champion fallen from his pedestal has become no better than the undignified "indigenous" Arab, forever prisoner to his own instincts.'

If any kid, the child of immigrants, from a deprived area, dreams of making it, Zidane's story should be a huge inspiration. It's beyond rags to riches. In the same Andrew Hussey interview shared in *The Observer* in April 2004, Zidane clarified, 'It's hard to explain but I have a need to play intensely every day, to fight every match hard, and this desire never to stop fighting is something else I learned in the place where I grew up. And,

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for me, the most important thing is that I still know who I am. Every day I think about where I come from and I am still proud to be who I am: first, a Kabyle from La Castellane, then an Algerian from Marseille, and then a Frenchman.'

On his temperament, Zidane remains unapologetic, 'If you look at the 14 red cards I had in my career, 12 of them were a result of provocation. This isn't justification, this isn't an excuse, but my passion, temper and blood made me react.'