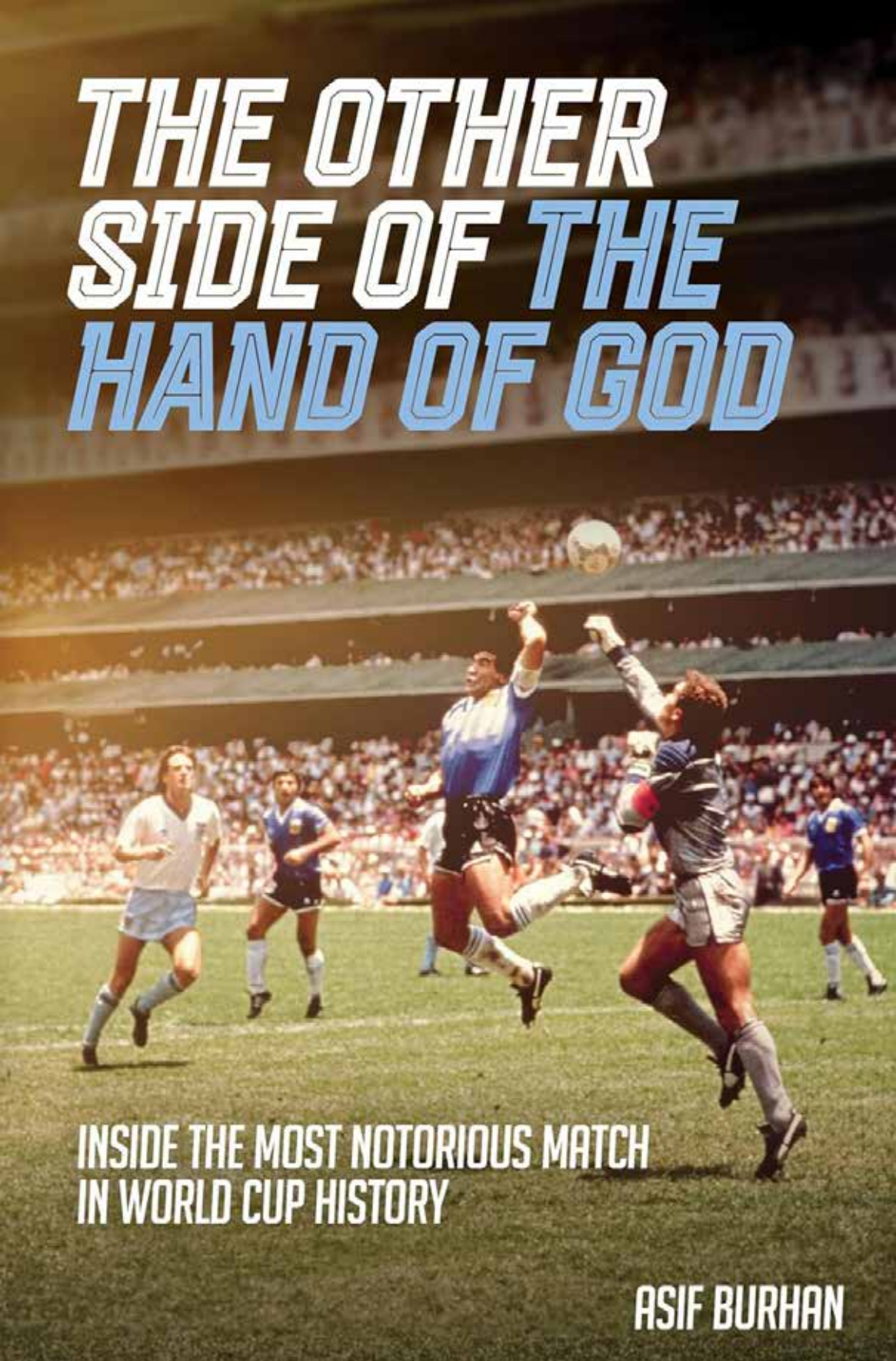
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HAND OF GOD



INSIDE THE MOST NOTORIOUS MATCH IN WORLD CUP HISTORY

ASIF BURHAN

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pitch

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Just over a month before the start of the 1966 World Cup, the FIFA President Sir Stanley Rous visited the Mexico City suburb of Santa Úrsula, 16 kilometres south of the capital. He was there to witness the inauguration of a new stadium.

Built on the site of a lava plain created by the eruption nearly 2,000 years earlier of the nearby Xitle volcano, the stadium was the brainchild of Emilio Azcárraga Milmo. Azcárraga was the man who would eventually take over his father's business, Televisa (TElevision Via SAtellite), which bankrolled and exclusively broadcast the 1986 World Cup around the world.

Pedro Ramírez Vázquez won an architectural competition to design the new stadium. His proposal had the advantage of having a fully cantilevered roof, with no supports holding it up from the inside, which was the case at Wembley Stadium, fully enclosed for the first time ahead of the 1966 World Cup.

Vázquez's initial blueprint meant for the stadium to have rectangular sides parallel to the playing surface but subsequently this was altered. The ground would be more of an oval, with each of the four sides slightly curved but, without an athletics track, the first rows of seating would still be close to the pitch. This so-called 'quadric plan', unobstructed by pillars, allowed for the best possible view from every single seat in the stadium.

And it would have many. The new ground opened with a capacity for 107,494 spectators, making it the largest purpose-built, all-seater football stadium in the world, The opening match between Necaxa and Torino on 29 May 1966 finished in a 2-2 draw.

In a competition run by the Mexican postal service, suggestions for a name of this new stadium were sent in, with the most popular winning out. The one contained in most entries was a name paying homage to the country's ancient civilisation, the Estadio Azteca.

Ahead of the 1986 World Cup, the capacity was enlarged and the stadium hosted nine matches, including the third of the four quarter-finals at the 13th edition of the tournament. Despite hosting two World Cup finals, it is this match that is immortalised outside the entrance of the stadium.

On a black metal plaque in gold lettering beneath the logo of the 'Mexico '86' World Cup are inscribed the following words: 'The Estadio Azteca pays tribute to Diego Maradona for his extraordinary goal scored in the Argentina-England match with which they advanced to the semi-finals – 22 June 1986.'

In 2026, the Estadio Azteca in Mexico City will become the first stadium in the world to stage matches in three World Cup finals when Mexico, after staging the tournaments in 1970 and 1986, co-host the 23rd edition of the world's greatest competition alongside Canada and the United States. This time, it will not be centre stage. Once the largest all-seater stadium in the world, the requirement of individual bucket seats and the need to have more hospitality areas have reduced its once colossal 120,000 capacity to a proposed 87,523.

In 1986, the Estadio Azteca became the first stadium in history to stage the final in two World Cup tournaments. It was a feat unmatched until 2014 when the Estádio Maracanã in Rio de Janeiro, completely renovated since its first World Cup in 1950, became the second.

Aside from four matches involving the hosts Brazil back in 1950, the Azteca has also played host to the only six-figure crowds

in the tournament's history, as 13 of its 19 World Cup matches have attracted attendances of over 100,000.

The quarter-final between Argentina and England was watched by an official attendance of 114,580, the seventh-largest crowd at any World Cup. It is the biggest by far to witness England play in the tournament, almost 20,000 more than those who were at Wembley to see them win the 1966 World Cup. The 1986 World Cup quarter-final recorded the highest-ever attendance for a match not involving the host nation outside the final.

Those six-figure crowds always seemed magical to me growing up in a pre-Premier League age when a crowd of over 40,000 in the First Division was a novelty, reserved for a local derby or a game played over the Christmas period.

The official film of the 1970 FIFA World Cup, *The World at Their Feet*, features a small boy practising his skills entranced by the prospect of world-class footballers playing at the Estadio Azteca. He seemed to speak for me when he dreamed that 'if I could get to the Azteca Stadium, just see the Azteca …'

I had watched matches at the old Wembley Stadium, sitting among crowds of 75,000 upwards, but that was still 40,000 (the population of a reasonably sized town) less than the Azteca attendances. Wembley was the self-styled 'Home of Football' and seemed vast, so how grand must the Azteca be? I had to find out for myself.

The perfectionist in me was never going to be happy travelling over 5,000 miles to watch a game at a half-full Azteca. For years, I pored over the crowd figures of Mexico's international games in *World Soccer* magazine. With World Cup qualifying often a formality for *El Tri,* there was little interest in most of their competitive matches, except one.

Whenever their ever-improving neighbours from across their northern border were in town, the encounter took on an added significance beyond mere World Cup qualifying. Historically, the Mexicans always defeated the United States, who did not qualify for a World Cup finals for 40 years between 1950 and 1990. Then in 1994,

the United States hosted the World Cup and eventually established their first professional league since the end of the NASL (North American Soccer League). Before long, a strange thing started to happen, the United States started to beat Mexico on a regular basis, at least when they played at home.

From the turn of the century, the United States defeated Mexico ten times in 15 matches, including their first-ever meeting at the World Cup finals in 2002. The United States also won their home qualifier for the 2010 tournament, strategically played in Columbus, Ohio, a city with a low Mexican population, minimising the numbers who might turn up to support the away team.

However, at the Azteca, Mexico remained unbeatable against the United States. Nine previous meetings had brought eight wins and one solitary goalless draw. Yet, the United States, fresh from stunning the world that summer by ending Spain's 35-match unbeaten record at the FIFA Confederations Cup, were opponents to be taken seriously and talked optimistically about ending the Azteca curse.

It was August 2009. I flew from London to Mexico City via Paris. It was my first experience of high altitude. Like a madman, after checking into my hotel, I immediately ventured to an even higher plain, to the neighbouring city of Toluca, another World Cup venue in both 1970 and 1986. At 2,680 metres (8,790 feet) above sea level, Toluca is the highest-ever venue to stage a World Cup finals match. I was there for more than historical curiosity. That afternoon, their high-flying local club side CD Toluca were playing an Apertura league match against Pumas UNAM at the Estadio Nemesio Díez, known to everyone as the Bombonera (the chocolate box).

What strikes you most about watching football in Mexico is how authentic the experience is. You would be hard-pressed to find a country more passionate about the beautiful game. Outside the stadium, as well as the usual concession stands, stalls of people selling football cards peppered the exterior of the ground.

The Bombonera, which hosted seven matches in 1970 and 1986, including Mexico's first-ever World Cup quarter-final, against Italy,

is quintessentially English. Four steep, asymmetric rectangular stands come down within spitting distance of the touchline and are hemmed in by rows of suburban housing. Stanchions impeded the view in every direction and chicken wire separated the players from the baying fans. Although it has since been renovated, in 2009 it still looked every inch the stadium in which Julio César Romero and Enzo Scifo first cut a swathe during the group stage of the 1986 finals.

Toluca won 3-0 and went on to finish top of the regular season standings but this match was just an appetiser for the main course at the Estadio Azteca four days later. After the obligatory visit to the pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacán, I visited the modern-day temple to the gods of football.

Now, a train line runs directly to the Estadio Azteca, but in 1986 it fell short, requiring fans to complete the remaining 6km south from Tasqueña metro station down the Calzada de Tlalpan thoroughfare by taxi or rickety minibus.

The new Estadio Azteca station now sits on the opposite side of the Tlalpan to the stadium. To cross the highway, one must traverse the road on a pedestrian bridge carrying you over the highway and offering the visitor their first elevated view of the famous monolith over the top of the adjacent buildings.

The exterior is in the brutalist architectural style, with exposed vertical concrete struts criss-crossed with shallow ramps circling the structure. The stadium was built to withstand the frequent seismic activity that is a constant threat to every building in the area. One such earthquake, measuring 8.0 on the Richter Scale, devastated the city eight months before the 1986 World Cup but left the Azteca relatively unscathed.

Walking around the concourse, I came across the iconic *El Sol Rojo* (Red Sun) monument designed by renowned American sculptor Alexander Calder ahead of the 1968 Summer Olympic Games. The three-legged steel structure is, at 25.7 metres high, the largest sculpture created by Calder. A giant red disc sitting on a stark

three-dimensional black tripod has been stylised into the logo of the stadium, appearing on all of its ticketing and merchandise.

Calder's monument, for decades a meeting point for fans all over the world, had been restored earlier that year by American Express, whose emblem now sits around the circular base. However, in 1986, the original *El Sol Rojo* was used to frame any exterior shot of the Azteca, its indescribable shape as unfathomable to television viewers as the spider shadow on the centre of the pitch.

After purchasing my ticket to the match from a scalper on the concourse at a little over face value, I paid to experience the obligatory stadium tour. Having just missed the only English-language slot of the day, I joined a group of about 15 other Hispanic fans on the Spanish-speaking tour.

We visited the bowels of the stadium first. The subterranean changing rooms where Maradona had led his team-mates in a medley of terrace chants moments after defeating England seemed familiar to me. As did the ramp leading up towards the pitch and the heat of the midday sun illuminating the grass. To the side of the field, a lawnmower was parked having just trimmed the pitch, its fresh clippings still in the grass catcher. I hung back to pocket some of the hallowed turf, which I smuggled back to England but have long since misplaced.

The female tour guide took us on to the pitch – something that would never be allowed in a major stadium in Europe – into the penalty area closest to the tunnel. This happened to be the one. The one where Maradona had scored his two goals against England. As the tour guide spoke in Spanish, I stood away, attempting to locate the spot from which Maradona had jumped to punch the ball past Peter Shilton. Sensing why I was there, she suddenly looked at me and said in English, 'And this was the goal where the "Hand of God" was scored.'

Two days later, I returned on the suburban train to Estadio Azteca, but this time with a lot more people. Crossing the narrow pedestrian bridge was now a slow process and the walk to the stadium was an

assault to the senses. The nasal sounds of plastic horns being blown, a year before anyone in Europe or South America became familiar with African vuvuzelas; the sight of lurid green shirts on Mexican fans in the technicolour summer sunshine that was, just south of the Tropic of Cancer, already burning through my clothes.

Having bought my ticket from unofficial sources, my fear was that I had somehow been duped into purchasing a fake and my once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to watch a game in the Azteca would be denied me, and I instead would end up facing a police interrogation in a language I did not comprehend. Luckily my ticket was accepted, its stub removed and I was through on to the stadium esplanade made so familiar to me by endlessly watching archive footage of the 1970 and 1986 FIFA World Cups in Mexico.

Hawkers displayed their wares on the ground, with most fans eager to purchase square pieces of cushioning decorated with an infinite number of designs and club crests.

Once I had found my entrance gate, I began the long, long climb to the top. During the tour, we had been taken to the top by a lift but that was not an option now. The stadium's exterior was encased by a series of gently sloping ramps that wound their way to the top of the bowl.

Sitting halfway up the vast upper tier, the stadium seemed to have changed little from 23 years earlier. The sinuous curves of the stands instantly recognisable to the boy who had been endlessly fascinated by every picture he could find in books and magazines on the 1986 World Cup.

The seemingly fluorescent green grass, more vivid under the light of a fierce Mexican sun. The digital scoreboard, repeatedly featured in 'Hero' during Argentina's matches was still operational with its 1980s dot matrix display relaying information along the bottom of the second tier. The square goal nets that became so familiar to viewers of the 1986 World Cup were still there, now black instead of white. Looking down on them, they seemed to be as far from the goal line as the edge of the six-yard box in the opposite direction.

There were some notable differences. In addition to the installation of red plastic seats in the lower tier, two giant video screens had been installed underneath the thick rim of the grey concrete roof, which had reduced the overall capacity from 115,000 to 105,000. On the upper concourse, where I had purchased one of the cheap seats, there were no actual seats as such. The steps of the bowl were dissected by small right-angled pieces of metal screwed into the concrete to act as seat dividers.

Each place had a number but no one paid much effort to find the number designated on their ticket. The majority of the locals brought a cheap foam cushion in with them to give their backside a reprieve from sitting on the naked concrete. Others used the free newspapers or other leaflets they had been given by traders outside the ground.

The first roars bellowed around the bowl as the fans recited the traditional football chant first popularised during the 1986 World Cup following its use in a Carta Blanca beer commercial: 'Chiquitibum a la bim bom ba, chiquitibum a la bim bom ba, a la bio, a la bao, a la bim bom ba, México, México, rah rah rah.'

A mid-afternoon heat haze gave the in-person matchday view from the stand a similar fuzzy quality to the transatlantic satellite coverage on analogue television in 1986. The first sight of the gringos from the north elicits ear-splitting whistles. The playing of the 'Star-Spangled Banner' national anthem is met with a similar shrill response.

As the Mexican national anthem is played, every single man and woman, young and old, performed the *saludo a la bandera* (salute to the flag), holding their right arm, palm down, straight across their chest. The hymn, a call to all patriots to fight for their homeland, infuses the crowd with a fervour that never subsides during the entirety of the game.

The match was everything that I had hoped it would be. The United States took an early lead after Landon Donovan's clever pass released Charlie Davis to score with a smart finish. As he celebrated

by using the corner flag as a microphone, Mexican plastic horns were hurled at him.

The threat of an historic first defeat on home soil to the neighbours from the north merely whipped the hysteria up several notches. It took just ten minutes for Mexico to equalise, Israel Castro striking home a fulminating shot from outside the area that crashed in off the underside of the crossbar. It would be Castro's only-ever goal in international football.

Mexico came out all guns blazing in the second half, attacking the end at which I was sat, seemingly several thousand feet above the action. All the power of the Azteca came at me in the second half as *El Tri* unleashed wave upon wave of attack towards the goal Tim Howard was defending.

The intensity built and built until the 82nd minute, when the new star of Mexican football, Andrés Guardado, surged past Donovan on the right and cut the ball back for substitute striker Miguel Sabah. He controlled the ball and set himself before thrashing the ball over Howard into the roof of the square net.

The result sent the locals home satisfied that they had maintained their supremacy over their northern rivals, even though the United States would qualify as group winners, one point ahead of Mexico.

The crowd figure was as large as I had hoped for – 104,499. It is the first, and probably only, six-figure football attendance I will ever be part of and made me feel like I had lived my own authentic 'Mexico '86' experience. The Chiquitibum chants echoed through the concrete skeleton of this historic monolith on the way down the ramps and beyond.