VENI VIDI VICI

WHEN ITALIAN FOOTBALL RULED EUROPE

DOMINIC HOUGHAM

VENI VIDI VICI

WHEN ITALIAN FOOTBALL RULED EUROPE

DOMINIC HOUGHAM

pitch

Contents

Introduction

IT WAS the best of times; it was the worst of times. English football in the 1980s was a strange beast. I became a teenager in 1978 and it was from that time on that I spent many Saturdays and Wednesdays going to games within London. It was a very different experience from today. You would get to the ground without a ticket – after all, you could just pay at the turnstiles – and then pick your spot on the terracing, maybe behind a crash barrier. If you were lucky, the terrace was covered, but that wasn't a given, especially if you were in the away end. And then you were at the mercy of the crowd, sent flying down in the surges that accompanied moments of drama, trapped in the back-and-forth swaying. Meanwhile, there was always the risk that a group of the visiting fans may have snuck into your end, just waiting for the right moment to create havoc.

Of course, especially to a teenager, a lot of the above made going to a game thrilling. The frisson of danger was part of the attraction. But as we aged, we moved on, tiring of the treatment received within grounds. Sadly, football didn't do the same, allowing dilapidated stadia and hooliganism to thrive. It was inevitable that this would only end one way, leading to the tragic events of Heysel, Bradford and Hillsborough. It was enough to make any English fan question whether it was all worth it.

But as English football sunk to unprecedented depths in the late 1980s, another nation's football rose to the fore. Suddenly Italian football was where it was at. We got glimpses of it on European nights, summaries of games on *Sportsnight*, where we could see these magical sides in action while English teams sat on the sidelines, banned. But what really cemented it first for most was the 1990 World Cup.

This felt like the first modern tournament. The TV coverage seemed brighter, with cool graphics that we hadn't seen before.

Games were being transmitted from incredible stadia such as the San Siro. We had Des Lynam and, of course, 'Nessun Dorma', which still brings chills. The Italian team looked so cool in their *Azzurri* kits, Baggio weaving his magic against the Czech Republic, and Schillaci wheeling away, eyes bulging, after every goal. Statistically it was one of the worst World Cups ever, but visually it was stunning, and England's epic semi-final, along with Gazza's tears, ensured it became remembered with rose-tinted glasses by a whole generation.

And then came the magical moment for many of us. Because of Gascoigne's Italian exploits, he secured a move to Lazio, sparking interest in how he would do there. Channel 4 decided to purchase the rights to show Serie A, so as 1992/93 got underway, football fans in England got the chance to watch top Italian football. For many of us, it was like a veil being lifted from our eyes.

Finally, we had the opportunity to see many of the world's greatest players on a weekly basis. Baggio, Batistuta, Van Basten, Baresi … and these were just some of the Bs! The stadia were awash with sunlight, there were flares, tifos, bouncing crowds. And then there were the kits, those iconic kits of the era. Fiorentina resplendent in purple. Milan in that beautiful Mediolanum-sponsored shirt. The coverage began of a Saturday with James Richardson sipping his cappuccino in a sun-drenched piazza. It was everything that English football was not at that time, enveloped in a hipster vibe, where fellow fans could give each other all-knowing nods on seeing Italian jerseys worn.

For 11 seasons, from 1988 to 1999, Italian clubs dominated Europe. Ten different clubs participated in the big three European competition finals. Transfer records were routinely broken as new owners, flush with cash, looked to outdo one another in a nuclear arms race to the top. Ballon d'Or winners plied their trades within Serie A. Italy themselves were penalty kicks away from winning the 1994 World Cup. It was simply the coolest league in the world.

And then the hangover kicked in. The rise of the Premier League, along with numerous financial and ownership scandals, left many of the clubs in precarious positions. Demotions occurred, *Calciopoli* struck and Italian teams found themselves no longer atop of the European pile, replaced by the likes of Barcelona, Chelsea

and Bayern Munich. The words financial meltdown had replaced financial muscle.

But what an 11 years they were. For those of us who lived through them, the memories will always be engrained. Maradona bringing joy back to the city of Naples. The highs and lows of Van Basten's time at Milan. Batistuta inflicting incredible violence onto any football that fell near him. And, my personal favourite, *Il Divin Codino* himself, the one and only Roberto Baggio, weaving through defences with grace and precision.

If you watched it and this book brings back happy memories, then I've achieved my aim. If you were too young, then I hope this book opens your eyes to these great teams and names. YouTube is there for a reason – find the highlights and soak it all in. You won't be disappointed.

Chapter 1

Hanot's Brainchild

Before we declare that Wolverhampton are invincible, let them go to Moscow and Budapest. And there are other internationally renowned clubs: Milan and Real Madrid to name but two. A club world championship, or at least a European one – larger, more meaningful and more prestigious than the Mitropa Cup and more original than a competition for national teams – should be launched.

Gabriel Hanot, editor of *L'Équipe*

IT WAS a bold statement, but the British press knew how to sell newspapers. And what better way than by declaring that Wolverhampton Wanderers were 'Champions of the World'. They had just beaten Honvéd of Hungary, who contained many of the players that had been part of the famous Hungarian team that humiliated England one month before, beating them 6-3 at Wembley. In the view of the English, any team that could do that must in fact be masters of the world.

Honvéd were a team stacked with talent: Gyula Grosics, József Bozsik, Zoltán Czibor, Sándor Kocsis and the great Ferenc Puskás. The Magical Magyars would lose only one international between 1950 and 1956 within a total of 69 matches. But on 13 December 1954, 55,000 fans packed into Molineux and many more watched live on the BBC to see whether the English champions, managed by the canny Stan Cullis, could match up against the Hungarian greats. Within 14 minutes, Wolves were 2-0 down, but at half-

time Stan Cullis asked the ground staff to water the pitch, despite the rainy conditions, presumably a ploy to restrict the Hungarians' passing abilities. It worked; Wolves used long-ball tactics to bypass the boggy midfield and ended up 3-2 winners.

While England celebrated Wolves' 'mastery', some within the rest of Europe begged to differ. The problem was how could anyone definitively determine who was the best side in Europe? Basing the decision of random friendlies seemed inadequate. What was needed was some kind of competition where the top teams in Europe faced each other in a knockout format. And that's exactly what a journalist by the name of Gabriel Hanot sketched out for his colleagues at *L'Équipe*, the French newspaper dedicated to sports coverage. One year later his proposal was put into practice and the European Cup was born.

* * *

The very first European Cup competition comprised 16 clubs, selected by *L'Équipe* as the most prestigious within Europe, although not all champions of their countries at the time. It was the Spanish who took to the competition like a duck to water. Or more specifically, Real Madrid did. They reached the first-ever final, played in June 1956 against French opponents Stade Reims in Paris, and won a 4-3 thriller. It began an unparalleled run of success for the Spanish giants, lifting the trophy five successive times.

Their run eventually came to an end in 1960, ironically at the hands of their eternal rivals, Barcelona. The first round of the 1960/61 tournament saw the pair drawn against each other, Barcelona having won La Liga the season before. The *Blaugrana* won 4-3 on aggregate, thus ending the reign of the *Madrileños* and ensuring there would be a new sheriff in town. But if Barcelona fans thought it would be them, they were sadly mistaken. The centre of European football instead moved west to their neighbours, Portugal.

Benfica, of Lisbon, had developed a strong side, and they swept through the 1961 tournament to face Barcelona in the final, at the splendidly named Wankdorf Stadium in Bern. The Spaniards were no match for the Portuguese, who ran out 3-2 victors. The European Cup had finally left Spain but remained on the Iberian Peninsula.

Obviously, a club as proud as Real Madrid wouldn't take such an event lightly. They tore through the 1962 tournament. Meanwhile, Benfica had added a certain Eusébio to their ranks. The two teams reached the 1962 final in Amsterdam, resulting in a titanic battle. After Real Madrid led three times in the first half, Benfica drew level. Then Eusébio made his impact, scoring twice to keep the European Cup in Portuguese hands.

Despite Real Madrid reaching two more finals before the 1970s, losing and winning, and Atlético Madrid losing in the 1974 final, Spanish football faded into the background. Benfica, though, remained strong for several seasons, playing and losing in three more finals during the 1960s. The remainder of that decade saw European dominance swing to two other countries, first Italy and then the UK.

Italian strength came from two teams based in the same city. Milan had previously lost a final to Real Madrid, but it was the *Rossoneri*, including the likes of Cesare Maldini, José Altafini, Gianni Rivera and a certain Giovanni Trapattoni, who beat Benfica in 1963 to give Italy its first-ever European trophy. But before they could begin a dynasty, their neighbours came along to steal the limelight. The world was about to be introduced to *Grande Inter*, Helenio Herrera and the term *catenaccio*.

Argentine Herrera had limited success as a player in France before moving into management aged 34. After spells in France and Spain, with particular success at Barcelona, Inter Milan came calling. At the time, Inter were living in the shadow of their neighbours. They hadn't won the Scudetto for six seasons, watching as Milan took three titles and Juventus two. Herrera wanted to implement a new system within the team to make them stronger in defence, as the bedrock of his side. He took the traditional four-man defence and added a *libero*, who would play just behind the four and sweep up anything that got through, hence the English term 'sweeper'. This would act as a kind of door-bolt, translated in Italian as *catenaccio*, which became the term synonymous with Herrera's approach.

The combination of this new system and a strong team of players, including Tarcisio Burgnich, Giacinto Facchetti, Luis Suárez, Sandro Mazzola and Brazilian Jair, led to a steady improvement in performance. His first season in charge saw Inter come third, then

second, before his third season saw them finally win Serie A. That success led to European Cup competition, where Herrera's approach proved just as effective.

The 1963/64 tournament saw Inter comfortably reach the final, where they faced Real Madrid. Two goals from Mazzola helped Inter to a 3-1 victory and their first European silverware. That was followed by the 1964/65 edition, where Inter controversially eliminated Liverpool courtesy of a 3-0 second-leg home win on a night full of accusations concerning match-fixing and tainted refereeing. The final took place in Inter's own San Siro, where they beat Benfica 1-0, thanks to Jair's goal. However, Inter failed in their attempt at a European Cup treble, faltering at the semi-final stage as Real Madrid exacted revenge on their way to their sixth title.

Undeterred, Inter again reached the European Cup Final the following season, a run that included yet another meeting with Real Madrid, with Inter this time victorious. Their opponents in the final were Scottish champions Celtic.

Inter had shown how defensive football could succeed, but Celtic were completely the opposite. They scored 16 goals over their eight games to the final, with some thrilling performances, so the final would be a perfect match-up of Inter's famed *catenaccio* against Celtic's swashbuckling attack. But the worst thing that could happen in such a match-up took place after just seven minutes when Mazzola converted a penalty for Inter, giving them the perfect excuse to shut up shop. The match became an exercise in attack versus defence, until finally Tommy Gemmell broke through for Celtic in the second half, followed by a winner six minutes from time from Stevie Chalmers.

So, with that, *Grande Inter* was effectively no more. With two European Cups and three Serie A titles added to their trophy cabinet, Herrera moved on to Roma. Spain, Portugal and now Italy had all enjoyed periods of European supremacy – it was time for another new country to rise.

* * *

Celtic's win over Inter marked the first time a team from the UK had won the European Cup, or even reached a final. For Celtic

fans, it was all the sweeter that they had achieved what no English team had yet done.

An English team had threatened to succeed once, though. The 1957/58 tournament had seen a strong Manchester United team reach the quarter-finals, where they were drawn to play home and away against Red Star Belgrade. The team had just won back-to-back English league titles under the guidance of manager Matt Busby and, with an average age of just 22, had been nicknamed 'Busby's Babes'. Such a young, talented squad should have meant years of dominance both domestically and internationally. Sadly, fate intervened in the most tragic of circumstances.

A 3-3 draw in Belgrade secured a semi-final spot. Returning to Manchester, the plane stopped over in Munich to refuel. Taking off for the final leg of the trip, their pilot abandoned take-off twice due to engine issues. Snow began to fall but it was decided to attempt it one more time. Hitting slush, the plane skidded through a fence beyond the runway, before striking first a house and then a barn containing a fuel truck, which exploded, killing 20 of the 44 people on board, followed by three more fatalities on the way to or in hospital. Eight were Manchester United first-team players.

It was left to Matt Busby, who only narrowly survived, to try to rebuild Manchester United. The new generation included such greats as Denis Law, Pat Crerand and a young Belfast lad by the name of George Best, and in 1967/68 they were ready for a serious assault on European supremacy.

Cruising through to the semi-finals, Manchester United faced Real Madrid, winning 1-0 at home, before a late Bill Foulkes goal at the Bernabéu sealed a 3-3 draw and a place in the final at Wembley Stadium against Benfica. The final ended 1-1, but in the first half of extra time a magical goal by Best knocked the air out of Benfica, who then conceded twice more in the next seven minutes.

So Bobby Charlton mounted the famous Wembley steps to lift the European Cup – Bobby Charlton who had survived the Munich air disaster, spending a week in hospital. And there to congratulate him was Matt Busby, who had twice received the last rites following the crash. The other survivor playing in the European Cup-winning team was Bill Foulkes, whose goal had sealed their place in the final. In the space of ten years, Manchester United had gone from tragedy

to triumph, but would never forget that team of such promise that had perished on a snowy Munich night.

The 60s was to end on a high for Italy, however, as AC Milan won their second European Cup in 1968/69. This success included wins over the champions of the previous two tournaments, Celtic in the quarter-finals, followed by Manchester United in the semi-finals. In the final, Milan met Ajax, the first Dutch team to reach the final, and who were soon to become a European powerhouse. However, on this occasion, Milan were dominant, winning 4-1, with Pierino Prati scoring a hat-trick. But this would be the last Italian success for over a decade.

* * *

The first half of the 1970s continued the trend of shifting European dominance as two new countries gained control. First came the Netherlands, as Feyenoord lifted the European Cup in 1970, defeating Celtic after extra time. This success was merely the appetiser for what the Netherlands had in store next. In Amsterdam, a revolutionary manager by the name of Rinus Michels was about to change how football was played.

In 1965, Rinus Michels was appointed manager of Ajax of Amsterdam, a team that included an 18-year-old Johan Cruyff. Together they would work on a new system of football – one that became known as Total Football – which at its crux relied on the interchangeability of players, requiring a technically diverse team and an intense press.

After taking Ajax to three successive Dutch league titles, Michels led them to the 1969 European Cup Final, the aforementioned 4-1 defeat to Milan. But just two years later they returned for the 1971 final, facing Panathinaikos of Greece at Wembley Stadium. This time Ajax won comfortably, 2-0, to keep the trophy in the Netherlands. But that was just the start.

Not since the first days of European competition and Real Madrid had any team managed to win a hat-trick of European Cups. Ajax set about changing that. Michels had moved on but his team marched on to the 1972 final, where Cruyff's two goals were enough to defeat Inter. Then Juventus were the victims in 1972/73 in Belgrade, Ajax winning 1-0 to seal their place in footballing history.

The third title would be the end of an era, though, as Cruyff left at the end of the season to join Michels at Barcelona, resulting in a 22-year wait for their next European Cup.

Many of the Ajax squad played for the Netherlands in the 1974 World Cup Final, a defeat to West Germany, whose starting XI also included a concentration of players from one club. That club was Bayern Munich, the next team to dominate Europe. Like Ajax, Bayern had a squad with some young talent, including Franz Beckenbauer, Sepp Maier and Gerd Müller. Defeated by Ajax in 1972/73, Bayern came back the following year and took the baton from the Dutch, securing the European Cup in dramatic style from Atlético Madrid, a last-minute equaliser earning them a replay, which they won 4-0. And just like Ajax, Bayern would go on to win a hat-trick of European Cups. Next, Leeds United were defeated in Paris, a game that was marred by crowd trouble as Leeds supporters felt a couple of major refereeing decisions had gone against them unfairly. Then Bayern beat Saint-Étienne, a favourite of 1970s hipsters, at Hampden Park to seal their third title in a row.

As European football, and the European Cup in particular, moved into the mid-1970s, a pattern had emerged of each major nation having a period of domination. After Bayern's third success, the question was: which way would the pendulum swing next? Although the Netherlands and Germany seemed all-powerful, there were signs of another nation beginning to emerge. One country was now about to go on an unparalleled run of success, led by one team in particular, while Italian football would enter the doldrums during this period, the era of *Grande Inter* fading rapidly into the past. The English were coming.