

VERONA CAMPIONE

The Miracle of 85



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1a Giornata

16 September 1984

‘WHO’S GOING to mark Maradona?’

Deep in the bowels of the Bentegodi, a pungent blend of sweat, camphor oil and adrenaline fills the home changing room. From the terracing above, the rhythmic chanting of 41,000 expectant fans is reaching a crescendo. They have packed into Verona’s cavernous stadium on the third Sunday of September for Diego Armando Maradona’s competitive debut in Italy. The stifling heat of August has faded, giving way to the pleasant warmth of a late Indian summer. Back in the changing room, the towering figure of Hans-Peter Briegel stands up. ‘I’ll take care of it,’ he says.

At a shade over 5ft 5in and weighing in at just over 11st, the mercurial Argentine is so stocky he is almost squat. With such a low centre of gravity, he is exceptionally powerful and mesmerisingly elusive with the ball at his feet. He can do things with that sphere of leather, rubber and inflated air that few others in the history of the game ever have, and, at 23 years of age, is now approaching his prime. After an explosive spell at Barcelona, culminating in the notorious Copa del Rey Final against Athletic Bilbao at the Santiago Bernabéu stadium, Maradona was in desperate need of a change of scenery.

Andoni Goikoetxea, ‘the Butcher of Bilbao’, had broken the Argentine’s ankle the previous September and Maradona was intent on revenge. At the end of a frustrating encounter in which Barcelona couldn’t find an equaliser to cancel out a 13th-minute Endika Guarrotxena Arzubagam opener, Maradona exploded. Lashing out in a series of kung-fu style kicks and wild lunges, his first victim was Miguel Ángel Sola, an unused

substitute who was knocked to the floor, then kned in the face by an incandescent Maradona, leaving the prone Spaniard unconscious on the Bernabéu turf. If it's any defence, Maradona had been relentlessly fouled throughout the match before his frustrations finally boiled over and he toggled to streetfighter mode. This was no Ronaldo-style spit-the-dummy tantrum. This was raw, out-of-control violence.

As the situation escalated, Spanish riot police were deployed to restore order on the pitch. In the recriminations that followed, Maradona was handed a three-month ban. It was not, however, a sanction that would ever be enforced, as the volatile Argentine fled to Napoli for a world record fee of 14bn lire (£6.9m). On 5 July 1984, an estimated 70,000 fans, each paying 1,000 lire, turned out at Napoli's San Paolo Stadium to welcome their new signing. The Argentine would go on to lift two historic *Scudetti* but glory in Italy would be hard-earned, even for a troubled genius like Maradona.

By the time the Maradona circus came to Verona on 16 September 1984 for the opening game of the 1984/85 campaign, Hellas had already launched their season with an impressive cup run, albeit against lesser opposition. Back then, the Coppa Italia, the pre-eminent Italian cup competition, was split into three distinct phases: a summer group stage conducted before the start of the league season; a first knockout round played in February; and a final knockout phase played in June, after the league fixtures had concluded. With eight groups of six teams in the opening phase, the top two teams from each group progressed to the winter knockout phase. Hellas eased through with their new foreign signings, Danish striker Preben Elkjær Larsen and German defender Hans-Peter Briegel, contributing five goals between them.

So, who was this German 'panzer' who volunteered for the task of marking the volatile Argentine – the greatest player on the planet – and how did he end up at Verona, a lowly provincial team that just a couple of seasons earlier were struggling in Serie B?

Hans-Peter Briegel was born on 11 October 1955 in Rodenbach, in the Kaiserslautern district in what was then West Germany. The son of a well-to-do family of farmers, Briegel was an impressive athlete, winning eight German athletics titles: three in the long jump, three in the triple jump and two in the pentathlon. But football was where his true passion lay. At 19, he signed his first semi-professional football contract with Kaiserslautern and in the 1974/75 season, played in midfield for the youth team. He made his first-team debut on 10 April 1976 at the Olympiastadion in Munich against a Bayern team that included Franz Beckenbauer, Gerd Müller and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge but it was Kaiserslautern who prevailed, winning 4-3 against their highly rated opponents.

He was a formidable physical presence and a powerful man-marker who was also capable of devastating counter-attacks but it was the arrival of Karl-Heinz Feldkamp at Kaiserslautern in 1978 that marked the turning point in Briegel's career. After seeing the young midfielder in action, Feldkamp was convinced that, despite his searing pace and power, Briegel was a natural defender, capable of suppressing even the most talented opposition striker, while, in possession, he was given the freedom to break free and attack. It was a tactical switch that paid dividends. As a defender, Briegel scored seven goals in 40 appearances in the 1979/80 campaign and eight goals in 43 appearances the following season.

In the 1981/82 season, Briegel's form for Kaiserslautern was even more impressive, with 13 goals in 32 appearances in the Bundesliga and four goals from ten appearances in the UEFA Cup. Indeed, it was in a quarter-final of that tournament against Real Madrid that Briegel enjoyed one of the greatest nights of his career. Real prevailed 3-1 in the first leg at the Bernabéu but in the return leg at the Fritz-Walter-Stadion on 17 March 1982, something quite remarkable happened. With Feldkamp once again relying on Briegel to break up the Spanish attacks, the Germans were inspired to an incredible 5-0 victory. It remains Real Madrid's heaviest ever defeat in European football. In the subsequent semi-

final, Kaiserslautern lost to a second-leg extra-time penalty against Swedish champions IFK Göteborg but Briegel would remember that victory against Real Madrid as the high point of his career to date.

Meanwhile, he was a regular presence in the West Germany side that progressed to the final of the 1982 World Cup, only to lose 3-1 against Italy, with iconic goals from Rossi, Tardelli and Altobelli.

Fast forward to the summer of 1984 and Briegel was with the German camp at the Intercontinental Hotel in Frankfurt preparing for the European Championship. His team-mates in that squad included the likes of Harald Schumacher, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, Andreas Brehme and Rudi Völler. Briegel had agreed to meet with Emiliano 'Ciccio' Mascetti, Hellas Verona's sporting director, who, speaking through an interpreter, outlined a basic offer that the ambitious Italian club were prepared to make to secure the signature of the German left-back. It fell short of what he was looking for and the two sides parted company without reaching any agreement.

Mascetti was a club legend who set the club record for appearances in Serie A and who, for over three decades, was Verona's record scorer in the top division, surpassed only in 2015 by a certain Luca Toni. A popular and respected figure, Mascetti took over as the club's sporting director following his retirement in 1980 and was at the heart of an ambitious project to secure and consolidate Hellas Verona's status in Serie A.

In an increasingly unscrupulous world, Mascetti was an honest broker, simply incapable of being rude or impolite. Above all, he was highly competent, assembling a formidable group of rejects and cast-offs from bigger clubs. It was then up to coach Osvaldo Bagnoli to get the best out of them and create a team capable of consolidating their position in Serie A. The two men enjoyed an extremely close relationship built on personal friendship and professional respect. In all the years they worked together, they only ever disagreed once on the evaluation of one player and when that happened, it came as quite a shock to both men.

In the summer of 1981, Mascetti brought 22-year-old playmaker Antonio Di Gennaro from Perugia and goalkeeper Claudio Garella from Sampdoria. They were the second and third components of the team that would begin the 1984/85 campaign, joining young *libero* Roberto Tricella, who had been in Verona since being released by Inter in 1979. In 1982, those three were joined by the Brazilian legend, Dirceu José Guimarães, from Atlético Madrid (the following year he would move to Napoli), Władysław Żmuda from Widzew Łódź, Luciano Marangon from Roma, Pierino Fanna from Juventus, Luigi Sacchetti from Fiorentina and Domenico Volpati from Brescia. With a handful of new additions each summer, Bagnoli's team was slowly taking shape.

In 1983, three strikers arrived Giuseppe Galderisi from Juventus, Maurizio Iorio from Roma and Joe Jordan from Milan. Defender Silvano Fontolan was brought in from Como and goalkeeper Sergio Spuri from Anconitana, as well as defender Mauro Ferroni from Sampdoria and midfielder Luciano Bruni from Fiorentina. Verona also came close to signing the Argentinian midfielder Ossie Ardiles. 'We can get him,' Mascetti informed Osvaldo Bagnoli. Ardiles was the right fit, exactly what they were looking for. Good feet, outstanding technique but also a good goalscoring record, important because 'a midfielder who doesn't score goals is not complete', as Bagnoli always said. 'We always looked at players to acquire with the Panini almanac in hand,' Mascetti admitted. 'If a midfielder could score goals, then we started to think about it.' In the end, the deal fell through.

In the summer of 1984, striker Maurizio Iorio would return to Rome and Scottish striker Joe Jordan was heading back to England after three seasons in Italy. On the pitch, Jordan's impact had been limited (just one league goal in 12 appearances in the 1983/84 season) but he was a popular figure in the dressing room, a big brother to the younger squad members like Giuseppe Galderisi and Maurizio Iorio. Ferdinando Chiampan, the club's majority shareholder, even thought that he would make an excellent sporting director –

but, of course, Verona already had Mascetti in that role. The injury-plagued Polish defender Władysław Żmuda was also on his way out and left-back Luciano Marangon had put in a transfer request, so Mascetti still had plenty of work to do before the summer was over.

Scots Gordon Strachan and Steve Archibald were both considered. Bagnoli even made a trip to see Strachan in the flesh and a £500,000 bid was proposed but the Aberdeen midfielder ended up at Manchester United. Bagnoli and Mascetti had also been following a talented young German midfielder who could do everything – attack, defend, run, tackle, assist, score. When they finally decided to make an offer, the confident young German informed them that he'd just signed a deal with Bayern Munich. That young midfielder was Lothar Matthäus and he'd go on to win the Bundesliga seven times, Serie A once (with Inter), the UEFA Cup twice and the World Cup with West Germany in 1990, winning the Ballon d'Or in the same year. By the early summer of 1984, efforts were focussing on another German to replace the free-spirited Luciano Marangon.

Now in France preparing for the first game of the Euros, Briegel's telephone rang. It was Mascetti asking for another meeting. This time, Briegel was prepared. He had asked his international team-mate, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, who had just signed for Inter, for his opinion. The feedback was good and a second meeting took place at the Hotel Saint-Germain in Paris. Accompanying Mascetti was the club's accountant, Liliano Rangogni, determined to seal a deal. On the opposite side of the table sat Briegel, the player's brother and a German lawyer. The negotiations were so protracted that Briegel left to do two training sessions that day and each time returned to find the discussions ongoing!

News of the German's imminent signing first appeared in *L'Arena*, Verona's local newspaper, on 12 June 1984, just as the European Championship was kicking off in France. Under the headline 'Briegel belongs to Verona', the sub-heading exclaimed: 'The yellow and blue club has pulled off

a sensational surprise move.’ It was certainly a massive coup for a lowly but ambitious provincial side but it wouldn’t be the last transfer bombshell of the summer. Just a few weeks later, Maradona would be introduced to a euphoric San Paolo. Against the backdrop of the knockout stages, the negotiations continued. The Veronese delegation eventually met all of Briegel’s demands and a two-year contract was finally agreed. Verona had got their *mann*.

Not only did Briegel effectively nullify the threat posed by Diego Maradona in the opening game of the season but the German also broke the deadlock with a 26th-minute leaping header from a pinpoint Pierino Fanna corner. In those days, the Bentegodi didn’t have a roof, which is just as well, as it would have been blown clean off by the noise that erupted around the stadium as the German scored. Striker Giuseppe Galderisi doubled the home side’s lead barely five minutes later, concluding a well-worked Verona attack that had left Napoli spectating.

In the second half, it was an Argentine making his Serie A debut for Napoli who pulled one back for the away side – but the player in question was winger Daniel Bertoni, not Maradona. Flashes of Maradona’s brilliance threatened but Briegel was relentless, using a flailing arm to deflect the ball when Maradona’s genius sent him sprawling on his backside. From the resulting free kick, the Argentine came close but it just wasn’t Maradona’s day. Deep in the second half, Hellas playmaker Antonio Di Gennaro got his head on the end of another exquisite delivery from Pierino Fanna to crown a famous opening-day victory at the Bentegodi.

With tempers rising on and off the pitch, Napoli captain Giuseppe Bruscolotti was sent off, the culmination of a running battle with Elkjær that had been simmering away throughout the afternoon. As the final whistle sounded, skirmishes broke out on the terraces between opposing fans, heralding a bitter rivalry that would endure for decades.

Post-match, it was Di Gennaro who captured the mood, speaking to Radiotelevisione italiana (RAI TV) in the tunnel

afterwards: 'On paper, it was a match like any other but a bit special because there was the effect of this ace who could give something extra to the team [...] but Verona has shown itself to be a great team because we played with our brains and that is very important for the championship.'

Maradona, too, was generous in his praise for the victors. '[A] good team, without doubt,' he observed. 'Bagnoli's men mark very well. It was really difficult to touch the ball [...] they're not afraid of anyone.' When asked specifically about Briegel, the Argentine complimented his 'impeccable' performance but concluded his remarks on a sour note. 'They wound me up,' he complained. 'I can't stand it. These Veronese continued to taunt me throughout the game. Maradona [referring to himself in the third person] doesn't like being mocked.' It was a theme that would blight the Argentine's time in Italy but his day would come.

Elsewhere, Inter, Juventus and AC Milan could only manage draws (against Atalanta, Como and Udinese respectively), while Torino, Sampdoria and Fiorentina took maximum points. With three goals and two points on the board already, it was Hellas Verona who emerged as unexpected leaders of Serie A on day one.

1A GIORNATA

Atalanta 1-1 Inter

Avellino 0-0 Roma

Como 0-0 Juventus

Lazio 0-1 Fiorentina

Milan 2-2 Udinese

Sampdoria 1-0 Cremonese

Torino 1-0 Ascoli

Verona 3-1 Napoli

CLASSIFICA

Verona	2
Fiorentina	2
Sampdoria	2
Torino	2
Milan	1
Udinese	1
Atalanta	1
Inter	1
Avellino	1
Como	1
Juventus	1
Roma	1
Ascoli	0
Cremonese	0
Lazio	0
Napoli	0