

# THE SPECTACLE OF A HEROIC LIFE

## The case of Diego Maradona

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In a special issue of *El País*, a leading Spanish newspaper, devoted to the analysis of the universal craziness of soccer, we read:

In Argentina, a country traditionally crazy about soccer, and to which this sport has provided the major expression of national pride, Diego Maradona is and will continue to be a hero as important as the legendary liberator from colonial rule, General San Martín.

(Carlin, 1999: 29)

In fact, many years ago Juane, an Argentinian rock star singer, declared that “Maradona is only comparable to General San Martín with a temperature of 40 degrees crossing the Andean mountains for the liberation of Chile” (*Página 12*, 1 December 1994, p. 2). Most Argentinians will agree with this characterization and will include him in a kind of heroic triangle in which Maradona is not only similar to San Martín but also very similar to another Argentinian hero and mythical figure, the tango singer Carlos Gardel who died young and tragically in 1933.

Since his discovery by the general public, soccer aficionados and journalists in 1971, at the age of 11, Maradona has been defined as an exceptionally talented player and, indeed for many, “a new genius”. In the 1970s when the ideologies and methods of coaches, crystallized in the values of physical effort, tactics and discipline, dominated world football, and Pelé, the great Brazilian player, and Cruyff, the charismatic Dutch striker, abandoned soccer, the number of players able to win a decisive match on their own was dwindling. The spontaneous abilities of players were overruled by the belief in collectivism and the tyranny of a style of playing designed by managers and coaches. Systems were discussed, discovered and experimented with, and the crucial role of individual players was dismissed. Maradona was in this context, both locally and internationally, an unexpected appearance, a “divine gift” according to one of my informants. He perceived him in the following way:

Maradona united technique and imagination, and since he was a child he has amazed the entire world. He is a different player because he always makes beautiful moves, simple or complicated, and, most of all, because he cannot be predicted. Any part of the field is like a natural place for him; his left foot is able to change a movement in a fraction of a second creating a new situation, and when the adversary thinks that he stops, he will run, and when he thinks he will run, he will stop. He will always make unexpected moves. He has been playing in all the grounds you can imagine, defying the laws of gravity and equilibrium, and he has been, since childhood, offering happiness to millions and millions of football lovers and supporters of the teams he played with.

Maradona has been a “winner” since the start of his career. As a very young player with Argentinos Juniors, a club from Buenos Aires, he won everything in local competitions. He then began his journey to the first division with the same club, shortly before his sixteenth birthday. His precocity and talent made possible his debut in the senior national team before he was 17 years old. In 1979, in Tokyo, at the age of 18 he won, as a captain of the team and indisputable leader, the title of the World Junior Cup with the Argentinian national team. Later he went to Boca Juniors in Argentina, won the league in 1981, moved to Barcelona FC in 1982, where he won the Copa del Rey in 1983, and to Naples two years later. In Naples he became an idol, helping the hometown team to win the Italian league in 1987, the first time a southern team had done so. Naples repeated their League title triumph in 1990, won the Italian Cup in 1987 and the European Cup in 1989. At the peak of his career Maradona was the captain of the Argentinian team, winners of the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. The Argentinian national team “depended” on him, and he never refused to play, becoming the symbol of Argentinian football in the 1980s. Maradona was a global player, a nomad, living in a new age of football, like his predecessors as world’s best football players: Pelé, Di Stéfano and Cruyff, and, like them, he was also a winner.

His life was also marked by scandal. It was well known in Naples in 1990 that Maradona had taken drugs and participated in dubious parties. On 17 March 1991 Maradona was randomly dope-tested after a home match against Bari. The tests proved positive. Maradona’s urine was found to contain cocaine. There were only small traces of it, the remnants of the drugs he had snorted a couple of nights earlier. He was immediately suspended by the Italian football authorities. He left Naples, tired and tearful, on 1 April 1991. Four weeks later in Buenos Aires the Federal police raided an apartment where Maradona was in bed after a day of drinking and drug-taking with some women friends. His life since has been marked by drugs and cocaine. He left football temporarily and made a return in October 1993 with Newell’s Old Boys, a first division team from Rosario in Argentina. Maradona played a few games. The Argentinian national team had unexpected problems in qualifying for the 1994 World Cup

in the United States of America. Football experts and above all supporters clamoured for the return of Maradona. Maradona surrendered to this, in many ways, irrational demand and he committed himself to a physical effort that an addict could not normally afford. Maradona joined the national team and travelled to the United States of America. Maradona led Argentina to a convincing 4–0 win over Greece and a hard-earned 2–1 victory over Nigeria. After this second match he was chosen for the dope test. The test was positive, and he was suspended. It was reported that when Maradona was told he cried, “I killed myself training, I killed myself training, and now they do this to me” before breaking into sobs. Maradona summarized what he felt when, at a press conference, two days later, he said: “They have cut my legs off.” The game against Nigeria was his last one: he left football for ever.

One of my informants summed up Maradona’s career in the following way:

Winning is not the only thing in soccer or sport; there is all that drama. The life of Maradona is a constant melodrama, full of scandals, emotional crisis, drug consumption when he was taken in 1991 in Italy and later on, in 1992, in Argentina. Always the psychodrama involving him and his group of permissive managers and opportunist friends. Maradona’s life is full of the stuff of how we live: exceptional talent but fragile morality; endless tradeoffs between what we want and what we get, or what we pay for what we want. I cannot think of many films, plays or television shows that are honest about how a set of important stars are conditioned by the circumstances of their lives. Maradona’s life was in this sense exceptional and open to constant scrutiny. He was not a prisoner of fame; he used fame in a self-destructive way. He knew all the risks he was taking while playing football and consuming drugs. His career was not only spectacular but a public spectacle.

Heroic sports figures must be seen in their cultural context in order to understand their social meaning and to observe their communal impact (see Holt and Mangan, 1996). In this chapter, my analysis of Maradona as an example of heroic masculinity will touch upon the logic of creating differences and how this impacts on discourses concerning agency, personhood, morality, and identity. A sports hero can be any person admired for given qualities or achievements and regarded as an ideal or model. A sports hero is an idol and an icon who belongs to a specific time: the time of heroes. The time of heroes, opposed to other times which encapsulate daily routines or scheduled rituals, represents in the mind of the adoring public a glorious dream-like time during which the daily mediocrity of normal life is suddenly transcended. The world of sports heroes is a world of creative enchantments because, in some moments, like flashes of intense light, athletes become mythical icons representing mastery over mortality (Novak, 1993, p. 163). The heroes stand *alone*, alone against a world of opponents and alone against an underworld full of dangers.

The solitude of heroes is of great value in their transformation into cultural icons (see Rank, 1990).

In many cases sporting heroes are a source of collective identity and pride in both national and supra-national settings and, paradoxically, very local settings – the cities of Naples or Barcelona, or a neighbourhood of Buenos Aires. The case of Maradona, as I observed above, is a clear illustration of “transnational” heroism. He was a God-like hero in Naples while he was playing for the Naples Football Club and in Argentina while playing on the national team. I have not carried out fieldwork in any other city apart from Buenos Aires. Thus, the analysis of Maradona’s heroic status will be limited to Argentina.<sup>1</sup> This chapter reflects two periods of my research. In 1988 I was working on the meaning of football for Argentinian national identity and masculine constructions; the first part of the chapter is based on the way football heroes are represented as *pibes* (young boy players). In July 1994 I went back to Buenos Aires after Maradona’s second drug scandal. The second part of the chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the impact of this dramatic turnover of his career. The two parts, I hope, will permit the reader to understand the mythical standing of Maradona. The examination of concrete performances makes it possible to see how every performance (and every man) has some significance for the audiences that adore him.

### **The *pibe* and the *potrero*: Maradona as a symbol of a national style**

No identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives and contradictions. The emergence of contrasting styles in sport, particularly in football, is intimately related to a search for national identity. Football was introduced to Argentina by British immigrants in the 1880s, and this initial period of amateur football in Buenos Aires was dominated by British clubs. The emergence of a truly *criollo* (creole) foundation began in 1913 when Racing Club, a football association started by Argentinian natives and Italian immigrants, without a single player of British origin, won the first division championship for the first time. Two styles were thus contrasted, the *british* and the *criollo*. “Britishness” was identified with being phlegmatic, disciplined, methodical, and concentrated on elements of the collective, of force and of physical power. These virtues help to create a repetitive style, similar to that of a “machine”. The *criollo*, due to the Latin influence, was exactly the opposite: restless, individualistic, undisciplined, based on personal effort, agile and skilful (see Archetti, 1995, 1996).

The conceptual oppositions between British and *criollo* physical virtues have become enmeshed in common perceptions of football. The British (English) physical virtues are still associated with “force and physical power”, while the virtues of the *criollos* are those of agility and virtuoso movement. The metaphor of the “machine”, as opposed to individual creativity, is constant in contempo-

rary Argentinian football imagery.<sup>2</sup> “Britishness” is still associated with the industrial, and the *criollo* with the pre-industrial social system. During a game, when faced with the British machine or repetitive play, the typical *criollo* response would be the “dribble” or the *gambeta* in Argentinian Spanish. This manifestation of style is eminently individual and cannot be programmed. It is the opposite of the industrial, collective game of the machine. A crucial event in the life of Maradona will clearly illustrate this reasoning.

For sheer drama Maradona’s performance in Argentina’s quarter-final clash with England was to hang in the memory of millions of Argentinian (and world) fans long after Mexico ’86 was over. The press presented the match as a struggle not so much between two countries (or two teams), as between two outstanding players – Maradona and the English goalkeeper Peter Shilton. Five minutes into the second half of the match, and with no goals scored, Maradona scored one of the most controversial goals in the history of World Cups. He went to a ball together with Shilton, and the clash involved not only bodies but hands: Maradona scored with his hand (what he called later “the hand of God”). The linesman and the referee did not see the infringement of a basic rule in football; they agreed it was a goal. For Maradona that was all he needed. Four minutes later, Maradona scored again, this time with a goal that was to go down as one of the best in footballing history. Burns described it in the following way:

In the words of Brian Glanville, it was a goal “so unusual, almost romantic, that it might have been scored by some schoolboy hero, or some remote Corinthian, from the days when dribbling was the vogue. It hardly belonged to so apparently rational and rationalized an era as ours, to a period in football when the dribbler seemed almost as extinct as the pterodactyl.” Picking up the ball inside his own half and keeping it so close to his boots as to make it seemed glued to them, Maradona proceeded to carve his way through the English side, with the effortless movement of a racing skier in slalom ... Having shrugged off Fenwick and without for a instant losing his control of the ball, Maradona found the time to assess Shilton’s position. The English goalkeeper seemed desperate to second-guess the Argentine’s next move, so Maradona kept going, leaving his strike to the last possible moment. The split-second delay prompted a final rearguard action by Butcher. He tried to break Maradona’s momentum with an attempted tackle, again to no avail. The Argentine checked himself and effortlessly passed the ball from his right foot to his left before casually slipping it past Shilton.

(1996, p. 160)

Brian Glanville, one of the best football journalists in any language, understood the “essences” reproduced in this second goal: Maradona was suddenly a

dribbling schoolboy or a Corinthian hero (a devotee of amateur sports) and, in the second goal, he was *alone* dribbling past the entire English defence. What he did was done alone without any help from his team-mates. His raid into the English lines was a lonely performance. At that moment, moreover, Maradona was not only the creative *criollo* player defeating the English machine, but in doing this he was a young boy, a *pibe*. In the Argentinian mythical account of playing, the *pibe*, without any form of teaching, becomes the inventor of the *criollo* style in the *potrero* – a small patch of irregular ground in the city or in the countryside which has not been cemented over. The *pibe* is placed in a mythical territory that inherently empowers those who belong to it. This image, commonly accepted by Argentinians of all times and ages, partly emphasized the infantile beginning of Argentinian football (as is manifest perhaps in any game), but also points to the importance of freshness, spontaneity and freedom during play. These values are commonly associated with childhood and are usually lost with the advent of maturity and resulting adult responsibilities. The authentic Argentinian player will never stop being a child. Football allows a man to go on playing and remain a *pibe*. One could say that the imaginary world of football reflects the power of freedom and creativity in the face of discipline, order and hierarchy. The best Argentinian players do not come from the playgrounds of primary or secondary schools or from the clubs, the spaces controlled by teachers and trainers. The *potrero* is portrayed as exclusively open and free. Consequently, the great players are considered the pure products of this freedom, which allowed them to be creative and improvise without the constraint and rules imposed by experts or pedagogues. *Pibes* came to be seen as liminal figures in the construction of Argentinian masculinities, and *potreros* became territories associated with the experience of freedom and creativity. The foreign British and English styles offered an image very much opposed to that of the liminal figures of the *pibes*. Maradona is the best *pibe* Argentina ever produced, and he was called before his second goal against England and, of course, after: *el pibe de oro* (the golden young boy).

To be, and remain, a *pibe* is a powerful image because, in football, the most creative period for some players is associated with immaturity. My informants do not deny the role of experience and the passing of the years (*el paso de los años*), in the development of physical automatism and tactical sense. These qualities are also considered important for expected performances. But a *pibe* is, by definition, an unpredictable player finding unexpected solutions in the most difficult moments of a game. The magic of Maradona is always understood as a performing skill, for it produces inexplicable effects and illusions – paralysing opposing players and charming his audience. This is defined as a powerful, bewitching quality. This image of the childish, unruly *pibe* serves to portray football as a game to be fully enjoyed only when total freedom is granted, and achieved. Conversely, football is ideally perceived as a perfect game for children.

The imagery of Maradona is even more complete because he is the product of one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires, where *potreros* still exist. He was born in Villa Fiorito in 1960, and Casas and Chacón (1996, p. 5) write, “everything started in Villa Fiorito, a forever forgotten neighbourhood where prosperity never arrived, in a remote day ... in a humble house.” It is easy to presume that in Villa Fiorito the streets were without asphalt and there was a plethora of *potreros*. The most original Argentinian player comes from the *potrero* of Fiorito which is now used as a mythical name, as the essence of *potrero* (see Fontanarrosa and Sanz, 1994, pp. 53–4). We are not told to which school Maradona went (this is not important), and we are told that when he joined his first serious club he was already a crack player (Gilbert, 1996, p. 17). What has not been learnt in the *potrero* cannot be taught elsewhere. Carlos, one of my informants in the first piece of fieldwork, reminded me in 1988 that “Maradona is pure *potrero* even when he is not playing football. Well, I can put it this way: he still lacks civilized manners, and he has obvious problems in accepting boundaries and control. In the *potrero*, you learn how to be free and to improvise.” He commented that Maradona was born in a neighbourhood where fathers and mothers take buses to work when it still is night and do not return home until it is dark once again. He added, “*Pibes* without shoes who play football in the *potreros* see in the ball a symbol of a future that can be different. It is not only the joy of playing; football is a way of changing their fate.”<sup>3</sup>

Juanjo, one of my best informants during my fieldwork, summed up the meaning of the second goal of Maradona at Aztec Stadium in Mexico that historical day of June 1986:

You can say that this day – and during twenty seconds – Maradona was able to produce the most important performance in the history of Argentinian football. It was done against the English machine, it was done against England, and it was done against the most rugged defenders of the world. It was the victory of the *criollo* style. It was not against Brazil or France or Italy; in such games his performance would never have had the same emotional impact. I can say that it was like pure magic because his moves were difficult to realize but also an illustration of Maradona’s destiny that day. He also demonstrated that dribbling is the essence of our style of playing. He dribbled and dribbled, and in fact these few seconds are still in my memory like a prolonged time; it is still part of me, and as pure images they have persisted for years and years. I will never forget the second goal against England. It was an eternal performance. He demonstrated why we call him *el pibe de oro*. He is made of pure gold, and nobody will replace him in the pedestal of remembering and gratitude. I thought after this goal that to speak about Maradona will be not only difficult but

impossible, and I said to myself that this is understandable because he is like a feeling. Yes, Maradona is a feeling.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that on the global scene the production of local territories and identities is difficult to sustain because of the dispersed nature of globalism and nationhood, and the life-worlds of local subjects tend to become deterritorialized, diasporic and transnational (in other words, the life of Maradona). Argentinian football supporters and sports writers tend in the opposite direction. The heroes ought to be local. The modes of belonging to the *potrero* and the *pibe* in no way contradict a simultaneous sense of belonging to the imaginary territory of a nation. The two become intrinsically connected on the playing fields of a nation. Maradona, thus, is transformed into a mythical Argentinian sport hero, and not only his football exploits, but also his entire life, concern the citizens of the country. This dependency and the tragic consequences of it will be explored in the next section.

### **The 1994 World Cup in the USA: the fall of Maradona**

We can imagine that heroes are normal beings who just do the right things in precise moments. Maradona's second goal against England is a kind of performance that can be understood according to this logic. However, I have suggested that heroic sport figures must be seen in their cultural context. The cultural meanings of *pibes* and *potreros* make it possible to understand the national impact of Maradona. The drug scandal in the 1994 World Cup belongs to another human dimension of the heroes: their fall and decadence. Maradona was suspended for several years in September 1994. He commented that with this sanction his "legs were cut off but also his body was expropriated. I am empty ... I was killed as player and as a man" (*Clarín*, 3 September 1994, p. 47). Suddenly Maradona was left alone, and nobody could help him against "their enemies" and his own personal ghosts. He then saw himself as a kind of falling Che Guevara, his confessed idol, alone in the jungles of Bolivia fighting an impossible war against a powerful army. In his case the Bolivian army was replaced by the authorities of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (*ibid.*). Let us go back to Buenos Aires in the first week of July 1994.

The front pages of two Buenos Aires newspapers on 1 July are a synthesis of national feelings and cultural emotional reactions. In *Clarín* it was a picture of Maradona with a single word: Pain. In *Página 12* Maradona was symbolically replaced by a *pibe*, a sad, crying *pibe*, who, with an Argentinian flag in his left hand, expressed the title indicated: Mourning. The sad *pibe* not only represented the world of suffering supporters but, as I pointed out before, the mythical foundation of the Argentinian style of playing. Maradona was "killed", as he himself said later, and the Argentinian nation was in sorrow, mourning its fallen idol. A journalist described how Buenos Aires reacted:

The real sadness and craziness was clearly perceived in the streets of Buenos Aires. In bars and restaurants, supermarkets, small neighbourhood shops, in intense discussions in the busses and the underground. A general reaction was dominant among common people: we will forgive Diego; we will always forgive Diego Maradona. The arguments presented were diverse. Some saw the dope test as a plot against Maradona and Argentina; others identified the main author, Havelange, the Brazilian president of FIFA, who always defined Maradona as his adversary because he was critical of many of his decisions. But all of them, without a single distinct voice, asserted that Maradona was the essence of joy in the practice of football, and if he used Ephedrine he was not responsible; others were responsible.

(*Cronista Comercial*, 1 July 1994, p. 2)

Before coming back to the images of pain and mourning I would like to comment on the question of responsibility which appears clearly in the description made by the journalist. We must capture the multifaceted meaning of the *pibe* and the different dimensions related to the social construction of the stereotype so well crystallized in the figure of Maradona. One important feature is the small body, particularly in terms of height. In addition to body shape, the content of bodily performances, as we have seen above, seems to be another important feature. The image of a typical *pibe* player is based on an exuberance of skill, cunning, individual creativity, artistic feeling, vulnerability and improvisation. In this sense it is easy to understand that the image of a powerful, disciplined and perfect athletic body is absent. A third related feature is the kind of daily life *pibes* lead. In the case of a *pibe*, a considerable amount of disorder is expected, and tolerated. Chaotic behaviour can be the norm. They have a tendency to recompense, penalize or forgive others in an exaggerated way, to convey arbitrary judgements and choices, to display stupid and irrational heroism. They also have a capacity to “die”, metaphorically (by being imprisoned or becoming a drug addict, as in the real life of Maradona), and be resurrected, and a special talent in critical games to make the unexpected move, ensuring victory to the team. Thus, a *pibe* is creative, free of strong feelings of guilt, self-destructive and, eventually, a bad moral example to other players. In the global moral evaluation of this kind of player the ultimate criterion is the creativity of their bodies. My informants, like the informants of the journalist writing about “responsibility”, and I imagine supporters in general, tend to forgive the lack of moral and social responsibility of the *pibes*. In this sense, Maradona is not alone. The amount of joy provided by the *pibes* is more important to the public than any consistent moral statement they might make. Tomás, one of my informants, explained to me that:

to be a *pibe* is not only to be liberated from several responsibilities. To be a *pibe* means that one does not feel the pressures from the authority

of family, parents, and school ... but also to be a *pibe* implies that it is easier for others to see only the positive aspects and forgive the imperfections. It is common to say here, “but he is a *pibe*, just a *pibe*; let him be a *pibe*”. Maradona is a *pibe* and will remain a *pibe*. He represents this state of perfection and freedom, when we disregard the most negative traits of an individual. This spontaneity, to be fresh and to do things just right without thought of negative consequences, is a quality we appreciate. A great football player must have these qualities.

The imperfections of Maradona, in Tomás’ interpretation, are contrasted to what is expected of a mature person. Yet for him, Maradona, a real *pibe*, is not perfect as a man, but he is perfect as a player. His perfection is attained, and maintained, because he is still a *pibe*. Many voices opposed to this representation were also heard during this critical month. A psychiatrist, Jorge Kury, critically analysed the Argentinian devotion for *pibes* and Maradona:

this accepted ideal shows some features that express an infantile origin, shared by all men, but in the case of our modern idols (word derived from ideal) this characteristic is very exaggerated, provoking situations like the one experienced by Maradona. If the social models could be more measured and mature, our life could be better, without so many disappointments.

(*La Nación*, 16 July 1994, p. 24)

Related to lack of responsibility and, in spite of this, the certainty that strong sanctions from FIFA were expected, supporters reacted with an incredible sense of guilt. The general idea was that Maradona was obliged to make his comeback in football in order to save Argentinian honour and to increase the chances of winning a third World Cup. It was thought that Maradona reacted to popular pressure with a tremendous physical self-sacrifice and in doing this, at the end, he was immolated. He sacrificed himself in order to provide joy and hope. Tomás explored this when he said to me:

I assume my guilt and, if it could be possible, I would ask for mercy from Maradona. I feel that I demanded so much from him and that he gave me more than I gave him. Now, when I know that perhaps he will never return to a ground and even worse, that I will never cry his name in an important game – against Brazil or Italy, for instance – I feel, like him, that my heart has been destroyed.

Ideas of destruction and self-destruction were associated with tragedy and the definition of Maradona as “a tragic figure” or “a tragic hero”. Tomás believed that Maradona was a sort of tragic hero because he surpassed limits and when this was no longer tolerated he was punished without mercy. He also said that

he was put in this situation, and, in the last instance, the people and the supporters of Argentina destroyed him. He insisted that Maradona was defying the limits of our ordered life, and the fact that most men are ordinary now implied that his behaviour was a provocation for many. I felt, discussing with Tomás, that he was trying to convey the idea that in almost every tragedy the atmosphere is one of doom from the beginning, and that what Argentinians experienced as a national tragedy needed a tragic hero: Maradona. At the same time, the belief that the tragic hero is “one of us” was present. He is not necessarily virtuous in everything; he is a man who reminds us of our own humanity, who can be accepted as standing for us. However, the ultimate effect of Maradona’s tragedy is to sharpen the feeling of responsibility, to make supporters fully aware that they have erred as the tragic figures have erred. We can say that the notable thing with this tragic event is that people feel that they have something to do with the situation and they are still desperately concerned with it. The anguish and the sense of guilt were increased because Maradona shared with common people the human condition. They transformed Maradona into a historical figure of the past, not only recent but contemporary, because he could not be brought back to the stadiums: he was taken as an exemplary character in drama. The fall of an idol breaks the fiction of the life and transforms it into a public spectacle.

I think that the sadness observed during the month of July in Buenos Aires (and I imagine in the rest of Argentina) had this component: supporters knew that this was the last act by Maradona as an active player. What emerged forcefully was the significance of tragedy as performance, as public spectacle, and as rite. I felt that the narratives collected showed that tragedy is an account of the fortunes of heroic characters in adversity. Maradona’s life began with joy and ended in grief. Moreover, Maradona was great in grief; even then he maintained his position as a hero, but Argentinians would have preferred him in happiness. We can conclude by saying that there is no real tragedy without the complex relations between being guilty and being innocent. Maradona was guilty, but he felt that he was innocent. His logic was shared by his audience. The audience missed a “son”; Argentinians were suddenly *huérfanos* (orphans) (see Osvaldo Soriano, 1994). Tomás expressed this imagining himself as a “father”: “he is like our son and we as fathers place our dreams on them; we prefer of course that they achieve something in their lives; we are afraid of their failures”.

I began this section pointing out that pain was a generalized emotional reaction. Disregarding age and gender, “*Siento dolor*” (I feel pain) was what many Argentinians said in public – in television programmes, radios, newspapers and magazines. It was a diffuse pain related to his act, to his past life and to his career as a player that ended this day. A strong discomfort was easily transmitted, and, of course, anguish, anxiety, disappointment, sadness and grief were intimately associated with “feeling pain”. It was a generalized reflection on the importance of pain in modifying the perception of things and evaluation of human condition. Pain was related to compassion. Compassionate statements

were heard, a shared compassion: compassion for Maradona but also compassion for oneself. A suffering community was visible showing in public loyalty and devotion to the fallen idol. My informants emphasized that “feeling compassion is much better than judging Maradona”, and that “compassion is a noble feeling” (*la piedad es un sentimiento mucho mejor y más noble que el enjuiciamiento*, according to Manucho). Compassion was also connected with the idea of suffering and enduring. A typical football supporter knows that his team and his players are not all regular and stable. Argentinians have developed what they call *aguante*, a capacity to endure and overcome bad moments in their supporting lives. This virtue, however, was contested and many Argentinians reacted strongly against the connection between compassion and enduring. Many concluded, like Juanjo, that, “we must learn to live without Maradona and try to forget his loss”.

### Conclusion

I have tried to show that the idealized Maradona is not just a given man, independent of his outstanding qualities; he is a part of a cultural system for producing differences. Some players will be transformed into heroes and cultural icons, and others never will achieve this status. The qualities of Maradona transcended the limits of nationality and, in this sense, can direct attention to a variety of ideas concerning how one should, or could, be a sporting hero. Ideological similarities between Argentinians and Italians have been advanced. This, however, has not been discussed in this article. I emphasized the importance of dramatic events for grasping the meaning of Maradona’s performances as a sport hero. I believe that it has been made clear that, in the dramatic spectacles I have described, we find ideas, opinions, and symbols that reflect upon themselves, the participants, and us, the observers. The display of the imagery and emotions associated with Maradona is central in such a perspective. Maradona himself expressed it thus:

If I succeeded in being a living myth, I did not search for this. I am very grateful for having been transformed into a myth, but I am just a normal human being. I do not see myself as a myth because, after all, I was only successful in some football struggles.

(Arcucci, 1999, p. 40)

### Notes

- 1 I have previously published two articles on the meaning of Maradona in Argentina (1997 and 1998). The original contribution of this chapter lies in the way I concentrate my analysis on “dramatic events” and give voice to my informants in the city of Buenos Aires, men of different age and class. On my methodological approach to the study of football I have presented my framework elsewhere (see Archetti, 1999).
- 2 Kanikar (1994) argues that the imperial British created the image of the “sporting boy”. The games recommended were team sports which required qualities of leader-

- ship, working together and loyalty. To be part of a team was conceived as being part of a perfect machine.
- 3 Maradona has refused several times to be identified with a national tradition. His talent, according to him, is an individual and “divine gift” (*Corriere della Sera*, 11 November 1985, p. 1). However, he usually accepts that he learned everything as a *pibe* in the Argentinian *potreros*.
  - 4 Juanjo confines Argentinian victory to a match of football. However, it occurred after the Argentinian defeat in the Falklands War in 1982. Players denied before the match that politics or revenge were at stake during this crucial game. Maradona has, however, reinterpreted the feelings of the players before the match. He said that, “to win over England in 1986 was more than to win over another national team: the victory was against a country” (Arcucci, 1999, p. 38).

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