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Maradona, Soccer's God has Died



Photograph Source: Dani Yako – CC BY 2.0

Maradona has died, and with him died one of the greatest soccer players of all time. Daniel, a manager at Ground Support, a legendary coffee house in Soho, Manhattan, expressed it well, “For us, soccer fans, it is as if for the Catholics the Pope would have died.” In my travels around the world, I saw that he was the most popular sport player. Only in the United States, where soccer is not yet a very popular game, he was not as well known.

Maradona came from a very poor family, and he became a very rich man, but he dilapidated his fortune in alcohol and drugs. Although when he as a player he was in remarkable physical

form, at the end of his life he became overweight and was plagued with several serious ailments. I believe, however, that very few people ever provoked the kind of admiration that he did.

He will be always remembered for the extraordinary performance of Argentina against the British during the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, winning the final game against West Germany to become world champions. With his two goals against the British his legend was cemented forever. The notoriety of his first goal and the majesty of his second goal led the French newspaper L'Equipe to describe him as "half-angel, half-devil".

Because he scored the first goal by striking the ball with his hand, it became known as "Hand of God". Although the goal was technically illegal, it stood, much to the disappointment and anger of the British players. Four minutes later, though, he scored the second goal, which was voted "Goal of the Century" by FIFA, the international football organization. His second goal was like a revenge from the first one.

After receiving the ball in his own half of the field, he swiveled around, ran more than half its length, and dribbled past five English players before leaving goalkeeper Peter Shilton on his backside and sending the ball into the net. Zinedine Zidane, who watched that game as a 14-year-old said that Maradona "was on another level". The authorities of the Azteca Stadium, where the game took place, built a statue of him scoring the "Goal of the Century" at the entrance to the stadium.

Writing for Sportsnet in 2018, John Molinaro said, "Yes, it was Maradona's hand, and not God's, that was responsible for the first goal against England. But while 'the 'Hand of God' remains one of the most contentious moments in World Cup history, there can be no disputing that his second goal against England ranks as the greatest ever scored in the tournament. It transcended mere sports -his goal was pure art."

Jorge Valdano, Maradona's teammate, gave his own point of view. "I saw Maradona catch the ball in our own field," said Valdano, "and I started running next to him, so that all the Brits' attention wouldn't be placed only on him. I saw astonished how he started dribbling the Brits one after the other, who were almost falling down, such was Maradona's diabolical speed. After he left their goalkeeper on his backside and scored the goal, Maradona started running towards his right. He was being hugged effusively by our teammates. I, however, started going in the opposite direction. I had seen something magical, totally unprecedented, and I wanted to be another spectator and enjoy every minute of it."

Maradona is often placed with Pelé and Messi as the three best soccer players ever. However, of the three, Maradona is the only one to be able to carry the whole team on his shoulders. Proof of it? A player is as great as he can make his teammates play. When Pelé played, he had excellent teammates. And Messi was at his best when Andrés Iniesta and Xavi Hernández played in the same team.

Maradona, however, arrived in Naples to play with the local team Napoli in 1984. Prior to his arrival, Italian football had been dominated by teams from the north and the center of the country. No team from the south had ever won a league title. With Maradona, Napoli won a series of national and international tournaments that made him be considered a God for the Neapolitans, and a Maradonian Church, a new religion, was started by his fans in Naples. Nobody received as much adulation during his life as Maradona did in his. And this probably contributed to his downfall. In his later years his health deteriorated, and he was involved in several legal battles. He remains, however, as the greatest football player of all time.
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Dr. Cesar Chelala is a co-winner of the 1979 Overseas Press Club of America award for the article "Missing or Disappeared in Argentina: The Desperate Search for Thousands of Abducted Victims."