

# INSIDE DIEGO

A photograph of Diego Maradona, the Argentine footballer, kneeling on a green grass field. He is wearing a white and light blue striped Argentina national football team jersey and white shorts with blue stripes. He has his hands clasped in front of his chest and his head tilted back, looking upwards with a joyful expression. The background is a blurred stadium setting.

How the  
Best Footballer in  
the World became  
the Greatest of  
All Time

Fernando Signorini, Luciano Wernicke and Fernando Molina

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**DIEGO**

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## Chapter 1

# Winter Confessions

*(‘Confesiones de invierno’ – Argentine pop song)*

I REMEMBER it as if it were today. I know it sounds incredible, but I assure you that that moment was etched in my mind in that harsh winter of 1972. In Lincoln, my hometown, there wasn’t much to do on a Sunday. You couldn’t even watch television, because a transmitting antenna had not yet been installed to bring the capital’s channels closer to that town, located about 300km west of Buenos Aires, nor did cable signals exist yet. After the unavoidable siesta, although I could better define it as mandatory, those of us who loved football had only one way to connect ourselves with the First Division championship, which at that time was called Metropolitano: the radio. The ball entered my head through the ears, propelled by the voices emitted by the transistor device. Armed with only the words chosen by the narrator, I tried to imagine the goals, the saves, the magic. A few days later, I used to buy the legendary magazine *El Gráfico* and, through its beautiful photographs, discovered if the plays that I had projected in my mind approximated, albeit vaguely, what had really happened in the unreachable

stadiums of Buenos Aires, Avellaneda or Rosario. But what caught my attention that cold June day was not the description of a goal, or a specific action, but a name. I had tuned into Radio Rivadavia to listen to the account of the match between Argentinos Juniors and the leader of the tournament, San Lorenzo. At the end of the first half, the host of the programme, José María Muñoz, gave way to the different chroniclers who had to report what had happened in other coliseums. At that time, all the matches of the date were fulfilled simultaneously. However, after two or three minutes, he interrupted the correspondents, fascinated by what was happening in the central circle of the *Bicho de la Paternal* court: an 11-year-old boy dazzled the fans by juggling a ball.

‘Zavatarelli, who is that boy who does such wonders?’ Muñoz wanted to know.

‘He’s a kid from the children divisions of Argentinos Juniors, José María,’ replied Dante Zavatarelli, the journalist located next to the lime line.

‘What is his name?’ asked the commentator.

‘Diego Armando Maradona.’

‘Diego Armando Maradona,’ I repeated in the living room of my house in Lincoln, perhaps to sculpt in my head those words that I had found attractive. While Muñoz had been bewitched by the boy’s talent, I had been struck by the sound of his name.

Years later, received as a physical education teacher at the Nuestra Señora de Lincoln School and working as a trainer for the first football team of the Rivadavia Club in the same city, I heard again that trio of words that combined harmoniously so many times that I ended up familiarising myself with it – as it must have happened

to millions, I think. First, as the new hope of Argentinos Juniors, although already in the professional team. Then, as the leader of the youth team that won the U-20 World Cup in Japan in 1979, led by coach Cesar Menotti, and finally as the star of the 1981 Boca champion, already on television, because finally a municipal official had thought to place an antenna that would feed the leisure of the *Linquenños*. Thanks to the images on TV, I managed to put a face to the musical name, and also discovered that Muñoz had fallen short with his praise. The boy not only dominated the ball at will, but he was an expert in the art of scam. A youth master of outstanding cunning, of an exquisite mischief that is no longer seen on the courts, or at least I have not seen again. Nobody fools anybody anymore.

In December 1982, after the World Cup in Spain and the disastrous Malvinas War, I had the pleasure of seeing, on a field, that tangle of curls with prodigious feet that had so enraptured me from a distance through a cathode-ray tube. It was at the Camp Nou, on a cold Catalan night. Diego scored the only goal for the *Blaugrana* team with a prodigious touch that outwitted the great Basque goalkeeper Luis Miguel Arconada, defender of the Real Sociedad and the Spanish national squad nets. A very similar touch, almost traced, to the one that Diego himself would draw four years later against Belgian Jean-Marie Pfaff in the World Cup in Mexico, to score the opening goal for the light-blue-and-white team.

Shortly after that first visual, distant and certainly unidirectional contact, destiny –which sometimes acts cruelly but was excessively generous with me – crossed my path with that kid whom everyone in Spain called *Pelusa*, from a fortuitous encounter and a misfortune that, I must

admit, turned out to be lucky. From there, we moved forward together for about 14 years. We flew in fast Ferraris on safe highways and stumbled along stony and dangerous trails. We piloted racing boats and paddled in the thick mud. We won and we lost. Today, looking from the distance that time and experience grant, and after so many trips, so many championships, so many anecdotes, I feel that those 14 years were 140.

It is very difficult to chronologically tell the story of one of the most famous guys in the world. Millions have watched him play, heard him speak, read about him, watched one or more of the documentaries that have been produced about his surprising existence. But everyone has seen Maradona, read about Maradona, listened to Maradona, watched documentaries about Maradona. I'm going to tell you about Diego, the kid who trained with ambition, the human being who appeared when the cameras and flashes were turned off, the boy forged in the very poor neighbourhood of Villa Fiorito who travelled to the top of Everest without warm clothes or help from the Sherpas. Maradona ... Maradona was another person, with whom Diego only shared his last name.

When Napoli won the first *Scudetto* in its history, in 1987, a fan painted a superb phrase on one of the walls of the Poggioreale cemetery, the main one in the city: 'You don't know what you have lost.' I do not. I have lived it and I am going to tell it so that others do not miss it.

This book is written from affection, although with the rigour of a true friend: the one who accompanies and supports his buddy through thick and thin. The one who says 'yes' but he also says 'no'.