

Andy Bollen

CLASSIC DERBIES AND EPIC RIVALRIES

A Journey
Through the World's
Most Captivating
Football Clashes

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Derby della Madonnina

Teams: AC Milan and Inter Milan

City: Milan

Notable players:

AC Milan: Gianni Rivera, Franco Baresi,
Nils Liedholm

Inter Milan: Giuseppe Meazza, Sandro Mazzola,
Javier Zanetti

THERE'S A SMALL, golden statue of the Virgin Mary on the roof of the Duomo di Milano. The building started construction in 1386 and was finally completed in 1965. Italy enjoys a slower pace. Why rush greatness? The clash between AC Milan and Internazionale, thankfully, has a more upbeat tempo and is known as the *Derby della Madonnina* (derby of the little Madonna). Played between Lombardy's football giants, it remains one of Europe's finest and timeless derbies.

Since the Middle Ages, the regions of Italy have traditionally been like a collection of smaller nations. With diverse traditions, they were constantly fighting

and competing against each other. The advent of football eventually gave them a legitimate outlet to vent their anger. There was always this fervour – a convergence of history, passion and culture – which, leading up to any derby clash, reverberated from the cobblestone streets to the San Siro.

A group of homesick Englishmen were there at the start of Milan Foot-Ball and Cricket Club. They were formed at a meeting in a hotel called Hotel du Nord on 16 December 1899. For the first ten years of their existence, they held their meetings there, so the club's official headquarters was a tavern called La Fiaschetteria Toscana on Via Giovanni Berchet. Nottingham-born Herbert Kilpin founded the club. Not only did Kilpin set up what became AC Milan, but he coached and played for the team too. Also instrumental was a businessman and radical thinker, Alfred Edwards, from Shropshire. A former British vice-consul in Milan and a respected man about town, he was a society figure and well-connected. He became the first president. There were other players, like Samuel Richard Davies and David Allison, who was named club captain.

At this time, Italy was going through a rise in nationalism and the Italian Football Federation banned foreign players. By 1908 the IFF created two separate domestic titles – the Federal Championship which allowed foreigners and the Italian Championship which refused them.

As tensions mounted, a year later a group of disaffected players broke away from Milan and set up their own club, one which allowed foreigners to play, and formed Football Club Internazionale, aka Inter Milan. At the time the free thinkers, intellectuals and artists backed Inter, in support of their inclusion and openness to outsiders, and they were regarded as superior. They included eight Swiss players and, thanks to the support of wealthy artists such as Giorgio

Muggiani, they went on to race ahead of their rivals, with Milan not winning the title until 1951.

Both sides may now share the iconic Stadio Giuseppe Meazza in the city's vibrant west side but theirs is a complex rivalry that has evolved and changed over the years. Originally there was a distinct class divide; Milan's support were working-class, with a powerful trade union influence. But traditionally the rivalry between both clubs has been based on societal divisions. AC Milan were associated with ordinary Milanese blue-collar workers and are nicknamed *Casciavit* (the 'Screwdrivers'). Inter represented the bourgeois and the more conservative and elite. When the sides met it was a battle for the very soul of the city. The clash reflected the intricate tapestry of Milanese society. Their rivalry is based on jealousy and conflict and about winning more trophies, signing the biggest stars and bringing in the best coaches. It's simply an insatiable desire to be the better side and to win the bragging rights.

The first derbies were played at the Arena Civica, based on the Circus Maximus in Rome. Neoclassical architect Luigi Canonica was commissioned by Napoleon Bonaparte to build an arena worthy of the area. The brief was simple: showcase the wealth and power of the region. Napoleon, after all, was King of Italy at the time – it was 1805.

Inter played at Ripa di porta Ticinese in Navigli, and later at Via Goldoni. But as the side's popularity grew, the club required a ground able to satisfy demand and a pitch less prone to flooding. The surroundings suited them too, so they switched to the Arena Civica many times over the years.

At this point in their history, the divisions were clear. AC Milan were regarded as the left-wing working-class side and Inter as the wealthier, privileged right-wing club,

so the Arena Civica satisfied Inter's bourgeois sensibilities. (In 1928, Mussolini's fascist government forced Inter Milan to rename the club Ambrosiana Inter as they were steadfastly against Inter's policy of recruiting foreign players.) Inter played there for the first 20 years of their existence, winning the Scudetto in 1919/20 and 1929/30. When the grandstand at Via Goldoni collapsed in 1930/31, Inter moved permanently to the Arena Civica.

The Milan sides first clashed in Switzerland in a tournament called the Chiasso Cup, in October 1908. AC Milan won 2-1. When the inaugural Italian league, the *Divisione Nazionale*, started up in 1928, the clubs faced each other regularly and the rivalry became more intense.

Milan's president, Piro Pirelli, of the tyre fame, pushed for the San Siro stadium to be built in 1926 and, with Inter's popularity growing exponentially, and also due to wartime bombing, the council – the Municipality of Milano – purchased *Stadio San Siro* intending to modernise and extend the venue to create a worthy replacement to the Arena Civica. Inter still used the old stadium for training into the 1950s and today it is used by Milan side *Brera Calcio* who play in the eighth tier of Italian football, the *Seconda Categoria*. Inter Milan's last match at the old stadium was an *Inter-Cities Fairs Cup* (the forerunner to the *UEFA Cup*) tie with a 7-0 hammering of French side *Lyon* in December 1958.

In the last 40 years, there's been a strange relationship between *Ultras* from both sides. The fans save their hostilities for inside the San Siro. They even had a peace pact, a formal agreement signed in 1983. When the teams aren't doing it on the pitch, the *Ultras* from both clubs undoubtedly ramp up the energy and noise, becoming the stars of the show.

The postwar era was a boom time for Italian football. AC Milan eventually realised it was time to change their rules, and with the famous attacking threesome of 'Gre-No-Li', the Swedish players Gunnar Gren, Gunnar Nordahl and Nils Liedholm, they were on fire up front. The trio had helped Sweden win the gold medal at the 1948 Olympics in London. They were instrumental in the Scudetto win of 1951. Liedholm and Nordahl won the title in 1955, while Liedholm, who remained, won two more championships in 1957 and 1959. Nordahl loved Italy and was overall top scorer five times between 1949 and 1956. He remains Serie A's third-highest goalscorer and is the all-time top scorer in Milan's history.

In one derby in 1949, Inter won 6-5, coming back from 4-1 down. In 1957, Inter's 'clown prince' Benito Lorenzi became the star (or villain) depending on your team. A penalty was awarded to Milan. He pretended to be placing the ball down on the spot but also placed a discarded lemon under the ball. The referee and Milan players had missed the gamesmanship, but the fans saw him and were going crazy. Milan missed the spot-kick and Lorenzi could not stop laughing. The player received death threats and truckloads of hate mail.

Great rivalries between huge clubs throw up legendary names, such as players like Inter's Giuseppe Meazza, a prolific goalscorer who played in 40 derbies over 20 years. If that wasn't enough, he captained his national side to two World Cup victories and is considered one of the best Italian footballers ever. The San Siro is officially named after him.

Football clubs are always defined by their best-ever eras. Milan shone through in the 1940s but both sides starred locally and globally in the 1960s. Under the direction of Helenio Herrera and Nereo Rocco, respectively, both Inter

and Milan won five titles, four European Cups and three Intercontinental Cups. It was under these domineering, powerful coaches that the Milan derby started to seriously evolve into something of a spectacle.

In Inter's case, the 1960s golden era was due to the money and backing of oil magnate Angelo Moratti and the coaching of Argentine Herrera. With an emphasis on fitness and skill, he established a style of play based on counter-attacking. First, he turned them into a success domestically, and then a worldwide powerhouse.

At this point, both teams had great sides. Milan had Gianni Rivera, who looked like a movie star, and Inter had Sandro Mazzola, who looked equally cinematic, perhaps more like a hitman. Both were captains. Both played over 80 derbies and between them played 140 times for Italy. Both playmakers, Rivera and Mazzola starred in a rigid but effective use of *catenaccio*. Even the national team coach, Ferruccio Valcareggi, could not decide who to pick, so he used both. Rivera and Mazzola played a half each.

This is football, and rivals always ebb and flow. Instead of continuing to win, teams flip and hit a bad run. For the Milan giants, when one was doing well, the other imploded. AC Milan were relegated twice in the 1980s. One of those relegations was for the *Totonero* match-fixing scandal.

With AC Milan on the verge of bankruptcy and mired in scandal, Silvio Berlusconi bought the club in 1986. A much-derided figure and often mocked, he was ahead of his time in marketing and transformed AC Milan's fortunes by running the ageing football club as a media business. He set up AC Milan's dedicated TV channel and galvanised the club from top to bottom, with cutting edge medical and training facilities. Berlusconi's Milan signed top players who dominated European football until the mid-1990s.

We had the Baresi brothers, who sound like an easy-listening MOR band but, in fact, Giuseppe played for Inter and Franco for Milan. Franco was the epitome of the classic ball-playing defender: a sweeper, whose marauding attacking play brought goals too. He was voted Milan's Player of the Century, captained the side for 15 years and his number was retired when he stopped playing. Giuseppe also captained his side, played in defence, won two Serie A titles, two Coppa Italias and the UEFA Cup and is currently a technical coach at Inter.

Despite financing Inter to the hilt, their president Massimo Moratti could not deliver a title. The world transfer record was broken when Brazilian superstar Ronaldo signed in 1997, only to suffer a serious injury. Marcello Lippi was brought in but sacked after one season. To further exacerbate matters, ex-Inter stars Andrea Pirlo and Clarence Seedorf shone at their rivals. In season 2000/01, Milan whacked Inter 6-0. The image of Inter coach Marco Tardelli was in stark contrast to the one celebrating his World Cup Final goal in 1982. The soon-deposed coach held his head in his hands. Inter had to wait 17 years for the next title, in 2006.

Most neutrals loved Italian football in this period, especially when AC Milan had their glorious time under the Dutch trio of Ruud Gullit, Frank Rijkaard and Marco van Basten, winning the European Cup in 1989 and 1990.

Mention must be made of Javier Zanetti who made a record 858 appearances for Inter. The defender and midfielder also played 145 times for Argentina. He captained the side through five consecutive Serie A titles between 2006 and 2010 including one season – 2009/10 – when they clinched an extraordinary treble of Serie A, Coppa Italia and the Champions League.

When the 2015/16 Champions League Final was held at the San Siro, neither made it through. Unthinkably, both Milan sides, for the first time, failed to qualify for Europe.

Passion. Style. Noise. The *Nerazzurri* and *Rossoneri* provide a footballing opera, the San Siro bounces and vibrates with a raw, unfiltered emotion. The unremitting drama is often steeped in victory, tragedy and envy – here's to the fat lady continuing to sing.