

Kevin Pogorzelski

DIVIDED CITIES

The World's Most Passionate
Single City Derbies

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Derby della Lanterna – Genoa, Italy

IN 1992, Liverpool, after a six-year absence from the European stage – banned in the wake of the 1985 Heysel Stadium disaster – welcomed foreign opposition back to Anfield, creating the first continental occasions my young mind retained. The visits of Kuusysi Lahti, Auxerre and Swarovski Tirol gave supporters European nights to bask in once again, but two sides in particular during the 1991/92 campaign sparked an overwhelming interest in the Italian port city of Genoa.

With the Reds meeting Genoa Cricket and Football Club at the quarter-final stage of the UEFA Cup in March 1992, I witnessed the first leg on the peninsula through the filter of television. Undiluted, the electric atmosphere within the Stadio Luigi Ferraris that night saw a stunning long-range goal from Brazilian full-back Cláudio Ibrahim Vaz Leal, better known as Branco. Despite my team suffering a demoralising 2-0 loss (that became a humiliating 4-1 aggregate defeat), it had captured the heart of ten-year-old me. In the next round, *Il Grifone* (The Griffin) would exit the competition to eventual winners Ajax. But by then another side marching its way through continental

competition had also caught my eye – city rivals Unione Calcio Sampdoria.

Parental indulgence on my birthday allowed me to stay up and watch the 1992 European Cup Final until its completion. Another wonderful free kick, by Ronald Koeman, secured Barcelona victory deep in extra time. Yet the enthralling technical display from the *Gemelli del Goal* (the Goal Twins), Roberto Mancini and Gianluca Vialli, had me spellbound. With both teams a huge part of my Italian football induction, there was no better place to start my journey across the biggest derbies.

World Cup-winning coach and former Genoa *libero*³ Marcello Lippi was a fan, claiming, ‘It is different to all the other derbies in Italy. The most special in Italy. The rivalry between the two sets of fans is based on mickey-taking, on pranks, like organising mock funerals for the opposition. It’s the least nasty of all the derbies and I’ve rarely seen any violence.’⁴ Not the best, nor the most important, but the most special.

It helped that the fixture did not exhibit the violent traits of many others I would visit. The encounter also differs from others around the world, where one team enjoys enormous support or is far more successful, like in Turin, where Torino’s heyday is long-forgotten and Juventus are now a giant of European football.

This rivalry splits the city by purer allegiances, no doubt drawn from family ties or location, or, if free to choose, a case of selecting the club which offers the least heartache

3 Traditionally placed with the centre of a back three, a *libero* was versatile enough to sweep up the ball behind his centre-back partners and also progress upfield with the ball to initiate attacks

4 Dunne, F., ‘Flags of our fathers: Why Genoa vs Sampdoria is more than a game’ (*FourFourTwo*, 2009)

over the coming years. Genoa's last major honour of any note came nine years before the *Blucerchiati* (the Blue-circled) formed, the *Rossoblu* (the Red-and-blues) capturing the 1937 Coppa Italia. Sampdoria had a stranglehold on local bragging rights across the city as I entered my teenage years. They reached the 1995 European Cup Winners' Cup semi-final and England captain David Platt plied his trade with them, but I never developed an affiliation to either club.

Genoa is Italy's oldest club, having been in operation professionally since 1893. Rather than a rivalry built over a long and eventful history, though, this is a tale of a bygone master and a young upstart who sought to steal the crown from their more decorated neighbours. Sampdoria was born from a merger of Sampierdarenese and Andrea Doria in 1946. With those roots journeying back as far as the 1890s, they consider the *Derby della Lanterna*⁵ the oldest and youngest derby in Italian football in equal measure. Since *Il Doria* formed, the fortunes of both sides have defined it as a clash between Genoa's history and Sampdoria's more recent success and it divides the city.

Il Grifone started as a cricket club to represent the English on foreign soil, achieving limited success until adding football to their sporting repertoire and securing an incredible six consecutive Scudetti⁶ under Englishman James Richardson Spensley between 1897 and 1904. Compatriot William Garbutt took the coaching reins in 1912 at just 29 years old and extended the Anglo-Italian connection, leading the *Rossoblu* to a further three Serie A titles. National

5 The fixtures label is derived from the ancient Torre della Lanterna (Lantern) landmark and lighthouse

6 Scudetto or Scudetti means 'little shield(s)' in Italian and the domestic championship Serie A is often referred to as this due to the winner wearing a shield emblem with the Italian national flag on their shirts the following season and was first presented to Genoa in 1924

dominance was short-lived, though, with the last triumph, in 1923/24, their most recent to date.

Despite regular trips to the footballing hotbed of northern Italy, visits to one of my favourite Italian cities appeared cursed. The worldwide Covid-19 outbreak condemned an attempt to watch the 100th encounter between the pair in May 2020, and my first trip was no different. Doomed before we had set off, I almost researched whether the phrase ‘if you didn’t laugh, you’d cry’ had originated from the peninsula.

It was not the first time the authorities had attempted to ruin my best-laid plans to enjoy some Serie A action. In October 2013, Udinese were due to travel to face AC Milan when the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) decided they must play the match behind closed doors for territorial-based insults hurled at Napoli the week before. While there is value in treating chants towards southern Italians the same as racial abuse, it was farcical, given the latter’s significance. Go to any stadium, anywhere in the world, and you will hear derogatory songs based on the opposition’s hometown. Same-city derbies may be the exception, but even then chants are aimed at certain areas of that city. Common sense prevailed and a ban on supporters was lifted, meaning I got to enjoy a lacklustre game settled by a solitary Valter Birsa goal.

Five months on it was the Genoa government, not FIGC, causing more anxiety for my companions and I, changing the original 12.30pm Sunday kick-off. Both sets of supporters threatened to boycott the match and protest outside due to the unpopular start time, which forced the FIGC to switch the game to Monday night, at just 48 hours’ notice.

To mask fans’ contempt at being used to satisfy overseas television markets, the head of the Genoa Municipal Police, Giacomo Tinella, claimed that the hosting of the Ligurian region’s biggest market close by that day was the reason for

the outrage. Sampdoria's Tito Cucchiaroni ultras, though, confirmed that the threats had nothing to do with shopping plans. Their statement read, 'It is a day and a time slot, which is disrespectful to the fans who go to the stadium. If they think they are going to get a spectacle to fill their television cameras with, then they've got it all wrong.'⁷

* * *

You often find a variety of fan groups at Italian clubs, unlike at Liverpool, for example, where the Spirit of Shankly dominates. At Samp there are the San Fruttuoso 1987, Valsecca Group 1991, Fieri Fossato and many, many more, including the oldest Fedelissimi 1961. Along with Tito Cucchiaroni, the Fedelissimi are their most famous ultras and self-proclaimed first, after Beppe Andreotti, one of the most charismatic figures in the Gradinata Sud, created them on 27 November 1961. In recent years, however, they have taken a back seat to the younger generation. While retaining a prominent role creating an intimidating atmosphere for opponents, they moved within the Gradinata Sud during battles for political power.

Tito Cucchiaroni, named after former Argentine winger Ernesto Cucchiaroni,⁸ now dominate the Gradinata Sud, and are recognisable from their *A Clockwork Orange*-inspired banner depicting the famous image used to promote the long-banned movie's release in 1973, four years after their formation in 1969. If you keep your eyes peeled wandering the city, you may also see the words *Uniti Legneremo Tutti*

7 Gladwell, B., 'Genoa-Sampdoria set for Monday' (ESPN, 2014)

8 Ernesto 'Tito' Cucchiaroni played for the club between 1959 and 1963, and became an instant favourite of the Sampdoria supporters after scoring twice in his first *Derby della Lanterna* and playing a crucial role when they finished fourth in the 1960/61 season

I Rossoblu A Sangue (United, we will beat the red and blues until they bleed) on graffiti-marked walls, often associated with the group.

Regardless of allegiances, Sampdoria fans refer to Genoa supporters as *Bibini* (turkey, in the local dialect), as a griffin adorns the *Rossoblu* crest, while their cross-city rivals know them as the *Ciclisti* (Cyclists). The name pokes fun at their colourful shirt combination of blue, white, black and red, which resembles a traditional cycling uniform. Both are signs of the good-natured rivalry referenced by Lippi.

* * *

Broadcasters would agree which Serie A fixtures they would televise until Christmas, giving confidence to overseas visitors making travel arrangements. Unable to attend the first encounter, we booked flights, confident that the fixture was often a weekend game, but we were then due to return home while the match was taking place. Therefore, FIGC had to take some responsibility for confirming the original start time mid-January and allowing the ultras just two weeks to voice their disapproval, and deciding to rearrange the match just over 72 hours before kick-off, one day before we would depart. It would have been a simple decision if I was going alone, but not all of those travelling shared my passion.

Two years earlier, colleague Guy Townsin had invited me to join him and others on a ‘football weekend’ taking in Borussia Dortmund against Bayer Leverkusen. This was the third trip together as a group, and it was becoming an annual event.

Twenty years my senior and with three young daughters, Guy’s world is as saturated with football as mine, albeit directed more towards the English pyramid than European football. An avid supporter of childhood team Peterborough

United, and Portsmouth, where he now lives, Guy has more 'favourite teams' than I have pairs of shoes. On arriving at each new stadium or city, Guy is hard to contain. A built-up anticipation transforms him into a childlike ball of excitement, bounding yards in front of you like a puppy exploring unknown territory. Convincing him to stay one extra night in Genoa was not an issue.

Somerset-based Ed Coupe, and Dan Massey from Norwich, though, took more convincing. I had yet to gauge whether Ed had a deep, burning passion for the sport, let alone a particular team. However, his well-defined role in the group was fundamental to its success. Quick-witted, with a dry sense of humour and a mischievous smirk that puts you at ease, Ed provided plenty of controversy and humour, and took care of a lot of the drinking. Dan, while just as witty, is harder to read, whether in person, by text or phone. If he were to scoop the jackpot on the lottery in front of you, I doubt his mood or demeanour would change. Only on rare occasions, when completely at ease, or a little tipsy, would you see a full smile. As a Norwich City season ticket holder, the trip was as much about experiencing one of the magnificent spectacles of Italian football as enjoying the wonderful food the Ligurian capital has on offer.

Everyone agreed that it would be a shame not to see the event. Then we had to persuade British Airways to rearrange our flights at a reasonable cost, but we should not have bothered!

Our original flights had cost around £80 each, so I hoped that, with single tickets just £76, there would only be a slight price difference and administration fee to pay, as a few months earlier they had changed our departure time from 7am to 9.55am for no apparent reason, but no. They demanded £120 per person to switch us to a return flight 24

hours later than intended. Attempting to charge us almost double the price of a single ticket meant there was no further discussion needed, and we booked new return flights. The Best Western Metropoli were far more accommodating and extended our stay for just €35.

The taxi journey towards the city centre was unremarkable. After touching down at Cristoforo Colombo Airport around 2pm, a thick blanket of grey cloud and unrelenting drizzle combined to suppress any scenery en route, and arriving at our destination we had the strangest of altercations with our driver, who refused to accept €20 for a journey that only registered €18 on his fare meter. It was the first time I had encountered a driver refusing a tip, but assumed it was an old Genovese custom we failed to understand. We headed straight out in search of alcohol. With only fleeting memories of a DJ, complete with disco lights, spinning tracks in one of the city's smallest bars as I entertained the few locals scattered around with dance moves better left at home, the video footage that existed is now long-destroyed.

With an extra day to fill, the others had earmarked a trip down the coastline to Camogli, a small fishing village 30 minutes east of Genoa by train and famed for its seafood restaurants. Despite growing up near the coast, I did not share the others' love of seafood. With the country still gripped by winter, most local businesses were closed. We missed the sun warming our faces and illuminating the pastel-coloured buildings, but benefited from fewer tourists cramming the cobbled streets and eateries. A day that began peacefully ended in less pleasant circumstances, though. With my tendency to get frustrated at breakneck speed by indecision, I called a premature end to my night, although I also blame a seasonal cold or flu that had taken hold on arrival in Italy.

As the evening drew to a close back in Genoa, we sought somewhere for dinner.

Walking round emptying streets as the temperature dropped and growing colder, I attempted to pull up the zip on my coat higher than was possible while displaying feverish symptoms, as Guy deliberated where he wanted to eat. After surveying the fifth or sixth restaurant menu, I dragged them into the next available eatery on the harbour. As we sat down at our table, the waiting staff set the table for dinner, unsurprising given the time of night, and Guy launched into a painful conversation, explaining we might eat once we'd had a drink. Although it was clear they preferred the dining option, I snapped, uttered some expletives, and exited the restaurant in a diva-like fashion back into the icy Italian night with only one destination in mind: bed. Within minutes I was wrapped in my duvet, with the spare included for good measure, attempting to sweat out whatever it was I was suffering from and comforted by the *Derby d'Italia* between Juventus and Inter⁹ on the TV, which I had been eager to watch as we circled Genoa for the tenth time and that added to my disappearing act.

The night before the derby in 2022 was much quieter and more informative, if finishing just as late. During a traditional Genovese meal, at the delightful Trattoria Da Genio on Salita San Leonardo, I received an entertaining journey through the rich history of Sampdoria by the owner, Michele Rifaldi. After we had finished our meal, delaying Stacey's desire to get to sleep, Michele's eyes lit up after we explained our reason for visiting Genoa and he ushered us into a back room of the restaurant.

⁹ Although commonly known as Inter Milan in English-speaking countries, Football Club Internazionale Milano are referred to in this book simply as Inter, with that becoming the custom in recent years

The walls were filled with framed pictures, some signed, of historic *Blucerchiati* players, and he started going through each one with an individual tale. I could join in the reminiscing when he reached the 1980s and British players such as Trevor Francis, Graeme Souness, Liam Brady, Des Walker and David Platt appeared. I think I even saw a picture of ex-Manchester United starlet Lee Sharpe.¹⁰ An hour had passed by the time we left, while Stacey took great pleasure filming us conversing on her smartphone and found amusement in my broken Italian and our energetic gesticulations.

With our falling-out forgotten and the others more concerned with my health, we headed out on the morning of the match to sense the pre-derby mood across the city. However, I maybe expected too much, despite its position as *the* derby in Italy. Over the past three decades I had become accustomed to the Merseyside derby, where Liverpool is full of supporters in club colours. With football tourists descending UK towns and cities to sample Premier League action, the globalisation and commercialisation of British football might have contaminated my expectations, yet there was no sense of anticipation building in Genoa.

Most supporters in the Marassi would be match-going regulars who, like me, spend their disposable income watching their team, rather than on countless new kits offered by clubs. It was also a regular working day. School children, often keen to don their colours even on non-matchdays, were studying and businesses going about daily life. Fashion-conscious Italians are often more concerned with how they appear in public, unlike many of the British tourists seen wandering

¹⁰ Sharpe spent the first half of the 1998/99 season on loan at Sampdoria from English club Leeds United and made three Serie A appearances

the streets of a European city with replica shirts stretching across expanding waistlines.

With the weather having improved, we got to see Genoa in its full glory, walking along the historic palatial residences of Via Garibaldi and heading to Spianata Castelletto for a wonderful panoramic view of the city. Without needing to turn my head, the historic port and Ligurian Sea dominated the view in front of me, the historic lighthouse from which they have dubbed the fixture visible above the many apartment blocks in between. It was clear to see why the Genovese people call the city *La Superba* (The Superb), although friends have disagreed with my assessment.

I like somewhere with a bit of grit and humility. As the capital of Liguria, with a population of around 600,000 in the metropolitan area, Genoa has a prime position in the centre of the Italian Riviera. The connection that the harbour brought to the rest of Europe ultimately gave birth to the first sports society on the peninsula and changed the culture of an entire country, in a similar way as the birthplace of Italian football, that spread like wildfire across Italy. Like both Genoa and Sampdoria, though, the city has struggled for several years and shows little sign of turning around its fortunes.

Out of sight, though, was the Stadio Luigi Ferraris, still some 1.5 miles east of where we stood gazing.

The Marassi, built in 1911, is one of the country's oldest stadiums, and takes its official name from a *Grifone* legend who died during the First World War, and was used only by Genoa during their dominant early years in Italian football. It is that history and emotional attachment to one side of the city that makes it difficult to comprehend allowing Sampdoria to call it their home straight after their formation in 1946 and is the only venue to host fixtures between the pair.

While there were much bigger concerns for the country towards the end of that decade, you wonder whether Genoa even considered the new club as a legitimate threat to their city supremacy, but the first match between the teams should have served as a warning. A long-range Giuseppe Baldini strike went down in history as part of a 3-0 victory for *La Samp*.

Two seasons later, the *Blucerchiati* recorded a 5-1 triumph over their housemates, which remains the largest winning margin of any top-flight Italian derby. Then, in April 1951, Sampdoria dealt the *Rossoblu* the ultimate humiliation. *Il Doria* led through goals from Vittorio Bergamo and Adriano Bassetto. Genoa thought a late Bror Mellberg equaliser had saved them demotion to Serie B only for an 88th-minute winner from Mario Sabbatella to relegate them.

For lots of fans, travelling away to support your team adds an element of exhilaration, such as the prospect of overcoming home advantage, which is increased when a local derby comes around. The widespread ground sharing across Italy, though, always made me wonder whether fans in the likes of Genoa, Milan or Rome get the same thrill of victory at what is their own home.

On the third weekend of the 2013/14 campaign, Sampdoria were the hosts and well beaten 3-0 by Genoa. That proved a high point for *Il Grifone*, who sacked coach Fabio Liverani after six games. Improvement under replacement Gianpiero Gasperini had lifted Genoa into the top half, though, and Sampdoria were just as unlikely to be threatened by relegation, sitting in 13th place and only looking to avenge their early season capitulation. When I returned on 1 May 2022 the situation was very different. With four games left to play, the *Rossoblu* were second from bottom and four points from safety. Sampdoria were just

five points better off than their city neighbours. Victory for *Il Doria* would all but guarantee their Serie A survival and almost certainly relegate *Il Grifone*. The stakes could not have been higher.

With just one Serie A title between them in the last 60 years, the fixture is now renowned for determining the rivals' fates at the opposite end of the table. In 1977, Genoa returned the favour from 26 years earlier, aiding Sampdoria's descent towards Serie B by inflicting a 2-1 defeat then losing at home to fellow strugglers Bologna and Foggia to condemn the *Blucerchiati*. A quarter of a century later, the executioner's axe was back in *Il Doria* hands, this time in Serie B. Goals from Bratislav Živković and Mirko Conte helped send *Il Grifone* sprawling into the third tier and the result was made sweeter when Sampdoria then secured promotion to the top flight.

Back across town, the pendulum swung again in 2011 when, in the penultimate match of the season, an injury-time winner from Mauro Boselli all but relegated *La Samp*. At *Il Grifone*'s last match of the season against Cesena, supporters revelled in their relegation. Genoa fans held a five-minute silence during the game to mourn their passing before a 30,000-strong funeral procession later that afternoon carried a coffin draped in *Blucerchiati* colours through the city. With the amount of suffering inflicted upon each other since 1946, it is unsurprising that this is unlike many of the derbies in Italy which are characterised by violence and deep animosity. This fixture, despite its ferocity and passionate support, has a humorous side.

Ahead of the game in February 2014, the weather took a significant turn for the worse. From our rooms we listened to the torrential rain growing in intensity as it hammered at the windows. Although the stadium was within walking distance, it forced us to seek a taxi. At first they refused

attempts outside our accommodation to hail a lift for 'traffic reasons'. After reception secured us transportation, the taxi driver sped through the flooded streets with no consideration for the conditions, and then only dropped us at Brignole Station, a 20-minute walk from the Luigi Ferraris.

Joining the increasing numbers heading along Via Canevari wading through puddles that almost consumed your entire footwear, within minutes (if not seconds) our jackets were soaked beyond having any waterproof capabilities anymore, with us all wishing we had dressed more appropriately. As we hurried north, there was a brief respite from the weather, taking shelter under one of Genoa's many bridges, the short tunnel illuminated with the red glow of brake lights and congested traffic creeping forward at a ridiculously slow pace. The chance to end the rainfall streaming down our faces reduced our own forward momentum and just as we reached the end of our refuge, a loud firecracker exploded. Enhanced by the tunnel, I felt it pulsating through me, filling me with anticipation that the colour and passion of the *Derby della Lanterna* was nearby. First, though, was more rain.

Out of the corner of my eye (or maybe Guy's), we spotted an elderly woman ushering us to enter the doorway in which she was standing. Assuming that food and water would be on offer, we darted into the most welcome sanctuary. Until we raised our sodden heads, we did not realise that we were in someone's lounge and found ourselves seated on a sofa and assorted chairs. In the room's corner, other guests sat by a homemade bar. That convinced me they had not tricked us into some kind of captive-style scenario like you often see in horror movies, and we removed as many of our drenched layers as was appropriate with our hosts providing some small towels to help us get dry and took our order. Although there

was just over an hour until kick-off, the opportunity to enjoy a freshly made warm panini and a couple of large beers was unlikely to present itself again. Therefore, we sat listening to the growing number of explosions outside and watching the shadows of those passing a small window at the front of the property before we confronted the cold, wet February night once more.

As we did, another blast welcomed us and reignited my expectancy, just as the rowdy chants from a pocket of Genoa supporters that my mediocre Italian could not translate also did. Turning right on to Via James Richardson Spensley, we caught our first glimpse of the stadium, so far hidden by housing running adjacent. It was hard not to see the English influence in its design, with the red-brick façade and more rectangular style compared with many of the oval Italian arenas. With a jet-black sky, the floodlights provided the Marassi with an angelic glow, and the rain continued to fall almost horizontally to the ground. Inside, spectators are closer to the playing surface than any of those spoiled by including an athletic track. It was too wet for Guy to enjoy his customary lap of the stadium, while the steely glare Dan gave through a small gap in his well-fastened hood suggested that adding more steps to his sodden journey was not an option. We had also stumbled upon the very point at which we had to enter, so it was foolish to delay, but I had a sense that conditions had lessened the visual spectacle.

When I returned in 2022, though, the weather allowed Stacey and I to witness the full colour of the derby, with the sun on our backs as we walked from the centre along Corso Carlo Armellini. When we reached the Piazza Manin, we found a huge orange smoke plume rising beside bar Maninvino, as multiple firecrackers being detonated were accompanied by enthusiastic singing.

Without hesitation, we went to investigate and found a couple of hundred Genoa fans had congregated outside. After purchasing a couple of beers, we entered the crowd and spotted a couple of empty chairs and a table, asking whether they were free. They invited us to sit, our accents bringing the usual questions from a group of men in their early 20s. Despite Genoa's predicament, they were in high spirits and, once I explained the reason for our visit, Simone Sanguineti's interest in us increased, even setting an alarm on his smartphone for the potential release of this book, and he introduced us to friend Federico Gusberti. Both were Genoa-born. Federico now worked in Milan and, Stacey thought, bore a resemblance to comedian Bob Mortimer.

The obvious discussion point was Serie A survival and, having expected to meet Sampdoria fans, I proclaimed, 'You could relegate them today, no?' The look on Simone's face drew attention to my mistake, and he responded, 'You mean us.' With just five points between the pair, I told them I thought a Genoa win had the potential to save them and drag Sampdoria into the relegation battle. I assume my quick thinking worked as they furnished us with more beers from their own supply, before another member of the group, Valerio Biolzi, interrupted, keen to show us they drink a 7.7 per cent strength ale called Ceres and departed from view with a call of 'Forza Genoa!'

Simone believed that even victory was unlikely to save Genoa from relegation as Juventus were next up, yet they were hopeful of a quick return to Serie A and had won a bigger battle already that season. In September 2021, long-serving president Enrico Preziosi had sold the club to US investors 777 Partners and, despite significant debt, hoped it signalled a revival of *Il Grifone's* fortunes. At the very least, Federico

expected more engagement than Preziosi had shown during his last few seasons at the helm.

To our right, Genoa supporters had gathered en masse on another stairway that was essential to navigate the hilly landscape, under a homemade banner reading ‘DRAGHE ZENA’.¹¹ That was soon invisible behind another, expressing that ‘A GENOVA IL GENOVA’ (Genoa is Genoa), which works much better using the local spelling of the city. I could hear the joyous atmosphere in the upbeat sound of their singing and hilarity breaking out of the surrounding conversations. The amusement peaked with a fan climbing halfway up a lamppost, and using the end of a flagpole to attach a Genoa sticker over the glass, a sticker Simone would then hand me as a memento. By then, general madness had broken out on the stairs, crammed with bodies jumping up and down, waving flags with vigour and holding smoke canisters aloft. While someone was sending fireworks into the sky, that had minimal visual impact. I leant towards Stacey and, just as I uttered ‘we need some more firecrackers’, an enormous explosion went off alongside her and made her jump, which made the entire table break out into laughter. We had to leave Simone and friends, though, as we wanted to sample the opposite side of the divide, grabbing a quick picture together and moving back downhill towards the Marassi.

All the pre-game excitement had me wondering whether I could have got tickets with the Genoa supporters. I had gone straight to the Sampdoria website when the start time was confirmed. In 2014, the Gradinata Nord (where the Genoa fans are located, whether home or away) was only available to members, at least when facing Sampdoria, so

11 Zena is the word for Genoa in Ligurian dialect

we decided on modestly priced €27 tickets in the Tribuna Inferiore, holding away fans for regular fixtures, which was close enough to enjoy their exuberant displays. However, given the proximity of the two sections, as we passed through our gate with relative ease we found ourselves squeezed into a small corridor heading into the Nord. We moved with the crowd unnoticed on to the terrace with less than 30 minutes to go. The noise pitchside was so loud it felt like the stadium foundations were shaking. The chants within the confined space reached a level that ignited my childlike excitement. At one point, though, we heard the rather unnerving roar of supporters, as if celebrating a goal. Unable to check the time, my mood switched to a fear that we were missing the action. After ten minutes attempting to gain access, the pressure of bodies within the hallway was becoming ever more uncomfortable. Then a few heads, maybe 15 rows in front, turned to the crowd and announced the stand was now full (and some!). A heavy steel door closed behind them to confirm that it was time to head towards our assigned seating.

On both occasions, Genoa ultra groups, such as the Fossa dei Griffoni (the Pit of Griffins), Via Armenia 5r (5r Armenia Street), Ottavio Barbieri¹² and Vecchi Orsi (Old Bears), packed the terrace, attempting to create a visceral wall of noise of intimidation for opposition players and fans. The Fossa dei Grifoni are accepted as their first ultra group and the catalysts of the ferocious support Genoa receive today. Formed in 1973 from the supporters' club, Ottavio Barbieri, during one of the darkest periods of the club's history with *Il Grifone* struggling in Serie C, was the main Genoa ultra

12 Midfielder Ottavio Barbieri was born in Genoa on 30 April 1899 and spent his entire playing career with the club between 1919 and 1932, appearing over 300 times and winning two Serie A titles, eventually coaching the side twice between 1939 and 1946

group until folding in the summer of 1993. Battles with then-president Aldo Spinelli, the police and local press resulted in some members leaving to join or form a growing number of ultra movements.

What I found interesting was how few clashes there have been between Genoa and Sampdoria fans. Violent incidents with other ultra groups have resulted in off-the-pitch incidents Genoa would like to forget. On 29 January 1995, a Genoa supporter fatally stabbed AC Milan fan Vincenzo Claudio Spagnolo and, with the game abandoned at half-time, riots ensued all around the stadium. Such was the rarity of such events that a monument to Spagnolo exists outside the Marassi, bringing together the city as they mourned at the 24-year-old's funeral, just as they had in October 1993 when Sampdoria lost president Paolo Mantovani – who oversaw their transformation into a Serie A powerhouse during his tenure.

After establishment, *Il Doria* seemed determined to set off at pace to match the trophy haul the *Rossoblu* had amassed during a 53-year head start. It wasn't until the mid-1980s that Sampdoria had their own set of major trophies to hold aloft. During a decade of often stunning football, mostly under legendary coach Vujadin Boškov, the *Blucerchiati* won four Coppa Italias (two before the Serbian's arrival), a European Cup Winners' Cup in 1990 and, most crucially, the 1990/91 Scudetto, something so craved by Genoa since 1924, to put a star above the crest on their shirts to signify ten titles. *Il Grifone* had to live off victories over their neighbours.

With Sampdoria flying high in November 1990 and heading towards title success, the *Rossoblu* were winless against them for 13 years. Against the odds and with *Il Doria* having home advantage, coach Osvaldo Bagnoli's men pulled off a victory that is still fresh in fans' memories.

A questionable penalty, converted by *Blucerchiati* striker Gianluca Vialli just after half-time, seemed to end any hope of a win, after bringing the sides level following an earlier goal from Genoa captain Stefano Eranio. Up stepped Branco, though, to send a 25-yard free kick arrowing past the Samp goalkeeper. The moment was immortalised on Christmas cards gleefully distributed to *Il Doria* following friends and family over the next month. Sampdoria would soon be Italian champions, but victory allowed *Rossoblu* to briefly rule the city.

The fixture is not without its unsavoury moments, though. During a clash in the 1980s, infamously known as the *derby delle scimmie* (monkey derby), Sampdoria ultra Claudio Bosotin took a monkey into the stadium wearing a Genoa shirt and paraded it in front of his fellow supporters. The intention was to mock Genoa's Brazilian attacker, Elói, for his perceived lack of quality, and that his walk was not dissimilar to the animal. Whatever the origins of the joke, there were obvious and unsavoury racial undertones. Bosotin played a similar trick with a donkey outside the ground on another occasion. It was very much the aim to poke fun at your rivals, with the occasional insults hurled across the Luigi Ferraris pitch.

Genoa soured relations in 1989 when Barcelona beat Sampdoria in the European Cup Winners' Cup Final in Bern, Switzerland. The supporters ran amok around the city, celebrating and spraying walls with fun-loving slurs, but *Il Doria* fans did not see it that way, expecting fellow Genovese and Italians to at least not want them to lose a first continental final.

It is in moments of tragedy, though, that you see a better reflection of the rivals' relationship. On 14 August 2018 the collapse of the Morandi Bridge killed 43 people

and left hundreds homeless, bringing into focus how ultra groups in Italy are a social network before mere supporters. Those on both sides joined forces to create the Genoa Together charity, which worked on several initiatives to help fund education programmes for orphaned children, and the first *Derby della Lanterna* of the campaign was an outpouring of collective emotion. A show of solidarity across ultra groups up and down the country saw them mobilise to deliver aid parcels during their visits throughout the 2018/19 season.

When Stacey and I reached Via Tortosa, the Luigi Ferraris was in view, as were thousands of Sampdoria fans packing the 200m stretch of street running towards Corso Alessandro De Stefanis, which also runs alongside the stadium and is filled with fans on matchdays. With the sun shining, conditions were perfect for most of the fans to be sporting the traditional royal-blue home shirts, with a mixture of modern versions and retro offerings that have become popular, but very little else.

As I squeezed past towards Bar Kafesito, I could feel the crunch of plastic cups underfoot and the occasional chink of a beer bottle or two. Rather than the rhythmic singing of the *Rosso blu* fans earlier, there were momentary, if repeated, shouts of ‘Genoa merda!’ (Genoa shit), extending to ‘Bastardo Genoa’ and something unrecognisable as I walked up to the bar and ordered four beers – expecting to choose but being handed eight per cent Tennent’s Super. Outside, the crowd was thinning out. With just 30 minutes until kick-off, I could hear many supporters singing their hearts out in expectation that their team would send Genoa down. Already a little tipsy from the earlier beers and downing two of the super-strength beers in hand, we made polite conversation with a handful of Sampdoria fans who realised we were not local,

but I soon made my way into the stadium after pointing Stacey in the direction of our hotel.

With Italian clubs investing in automated turnstiles back in 2014, they had seemed to have reduced their in-house stewarding, allowing the crowd to police themselves regarding seating, and the rightful occupant would never arrive to turf you out. A 29,868 attendance was just short of capacity, though, meaning it was unlikely to happen.

Watching and waiting for the pre-game choreography from the front row of the upper tier, it was clear that the Gradinata Nord was slightly over capacity, although the driving rain left the first few rows empty, as their fellow supporters created every inch of additional space to help shield them from the terrible conditions.

Just before the players emerged from the belly of the Distini stand opposite the dugouts, another curious component of the fixture. The Genoa supporters unfurled their tifo,¹³ depicting two medieval knights in chain mail armour on either side of a castle, complete with a golden griffin hanging from the roof of the stand and floating above them. At the bottom of the terrace, directly behind the goal, a handful of fans held a banner reading 'A TUA DIFESA' (In Your Defence), completing the call to arms theme.

What caught my attention, though, was a huge Saint George's Cross flag emblazoned with 'F.C. GENOA 1893' pinned to the furthest inside wall. In the early 1980s Sampdoria fans would fly British flags, sometimes adorned with 'TREVOR' in homage to English striker Trevor

13 Tifo is the phenomenon whereby fans of a sports team make a visual display of any choreographed flags, signs or banners in the stands of a stadium, with its roots in Italy and southern Europe, most commonly seen in important matches, local derbies and rivalries, primarily arranged by ultras or a supporters' club to show their love to the club, but sometimes sponsored or arranged by the club itself

Francis.¹⁴ But after the Heysel disaster, many ultra groups in Italy started disassociating themselves with the British, yet both clubs kept links to the English emblem within their club crests. To my surprise, the Distini, along the side of the pitch, was getting involved in the choreography, ‘LA LEGGENDA HA IL VOLTO DEGLI EROI E IL CUORE DEL SUO POPOLO’ (The legend has the face of the heroes and the heart of his people) spread across two-thirds of the middle tier, although the top tier soon unrolled flags all the way to ground level covering the banner. It started with bland red and navy-blue stripes at either end, before two more with ZE and NA appeared above pictures of historic Genoa players and coaches in a traditional pre-match pose. I made out the faces of Branco and Eranio, who were part of that famous 1992 victory over Liverpool, but only striker Diego Milito on the opposite side. With several of the 22 men pictured in black and white, I congratulated myself for recognising three.

There was now an enormous gaping hole in the middle of the four banners, timed to descend as the current players entered the arena. It turned out that this was the work of the I Figgi do Zena (Sons of Genoa) ultras who, since their formation, have always preferred a more subdued viewing position. In the Gradinata Sud, the Sampdoria fans were taking aim at local officials, with their own statement stretching across the supporters reading ‘NON DI SONO GIORNI E ORARI AL VOSTRO SISTEMA SEMPRE CONTRARI LIBERI DI ESSERE SAMPDORIA’, loosely translated to ‘there are no days or hours in your system always’, referring to the intention to hold the fixture at 12.30pm, and something about Sampdoria being the

¹⁴ Francis spent four years with Sampdoria after being signed from Manchester City for £700,000 and helped Sampdoria win their first Coppa Italia, in 1985

opposite and free from any imposed rule upon them. Front and centre of this protest, and the only other banner in sight, was the name 'FEDELISSIMA', highlighting the group's involvement in the rearrangement or wanting those around them to know who created it.

At the opposite end of the Marassi, the Genoa fans were adding the final touches to their display. Two huge Saint George's flags filled each corner of the top tier and remaining fans held shimmering blue sheets of material and let off the odd blue smoke bomb. Below them, even more reflective material covered the top two-thirds of the stand, creating a dozen or so rows of blue and white stripes. A sudden roar from all four sides of the Luigi Ferraris signalled the players' arrival, and the Distini completed their tifo by dropping a fifth and final flag, displaying a proud golden griffin in the Genoa kit, puffing out its chest and looking towards the sky, and the famous Lanterna visible in the background.

As they crossed the pitch, the players arched their necks to inspect the spectacle. The fans to our right had now finished their protest and were waving hundreds of large Sampdoria flags – not those small handheld pieces of plastic rubbish often distributed by clubs enforcing a spectacle, but unique homemade offerings. The top tier had ignited red smoke flares that were covering the playing surface in a thick fog during an energetic rendition of anthem 'Ma il cielo e sempre piu blu' (But the sky gets bluer and bluer) by singer-songwriter Rino Gaetano, penetrating the Genoa efforts.

The visitors' pre-match routine had taken less to organise, but took the spoils for best Gradinata on the night. With the smoke clearing and tifos packed away, the players awaited the referee's whistle and the Genoa supporters now displayed their own homemade flags and banners. Attempting to pick out the various ultra groups, I spotted a 'BRIGATA

SPELONCIA' flag hanging from a TV camera station and then realised that throughout the tifos they had hidden the huge 'YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE' banner, which hangs from the top tier by the Via Armenia 5r ultras during every fixture in tribute to Anfield's famous terrace, the Kop. This had afforded them a respectful round of applause on defeating Liverpool at home. It surprised me that, unlike Borussia Dortmund, who also adopted the famous anthem, there was no quick rendition from the home crowd.

Arriving much later in 2022, there was no cramped corridor to squeeze along, and it left me to skip up the interior stairs towards the terrace just in time for the fan choreographies. With the players still going through some pre-game training routines, Genoa's fans had already started. A huge flag, half red and half blue covered the entire Nord, with a club crest in the centre surrounded by their nine Scudetto shields. One side read 'UN GRANDE' and the other 'CUORE COSI' (such a big heart). In response, the Sampdoria fans held a blue banner across the Sud with 'PASSIONE E ORGOGLIO DI QUESTA CITTA' (passion and pride of this city) in white lettering, while the tier from above unfurled an equally large flag covering the terrace mirroring their classic shirt, with front hoops and shield, and 'La' and 'Sud' written in each corner. This time the Sampdoria fans were making use of the Distini, but with a much less impressive version of the flag rippling over the fans behind the goal.

Il Grifone's fans held aloft their flag for so long that you almost forgot it was still flying as the home supporters started whistling the Genoa team announcement, which only stopped to welcome their own side on to the pitch and then provided an impressive rendition of the classic master of ceremonies routine of calling the forename of a player and

allowing the supporters to complete the surname formalities. The Genoa ultras unrolled their flag to reveal another display across the Nord, made up of individual placards, replicating the red and blue halves, but with Genoa in joined-up font emblazoned in white cardboard. Above it was a white banner, stand-wide, with 'questa lunga leggenda e rossa e blu' (this long legend is red and blue). At the other end of the stadium, though, the Sampdoria fans were holding their scarves high and belting out an emotive version of 'Ma il cielo e sempre piu blu'. Multiple pyrotechnics exploding from within the Genoa ultras could not spoil the sound. These seemed to spark the discharging of several around us, while a middle-aged man next to me lit a huge cigar and I wondered if he had gone too early celebrating Genoa's demotion.

Within the opening minute of the first encounter, Matuzalém had a goalbound effort blocked, and it was clear that Genoa were after the lead their supporters demanded, but Sampdoria rallied, Manolo Gabbiadini having a similar attempt thwarted. Angelo Palombo also saw a free kick fly just wide and Roberto Soriano headed over, all within ten minutes. It was surprising that any attacking took place inside the first quarter of the match, with an astonishing 13 of the 34 fouls that would take place committed. Rather than the referee's decision to penalise players bringing a sense of calm, it was a Sampdoria goal that had such an effect. On 24 minutes, Shkodran Mustafi played a ball from halfway into the feet of the debuting (although returning on loan from Catania) Maxi López. He quickly offloaded to Éder, who played a one-touch lofted ball over López and his marker. The Argentine striker reacted first and fired a low, first-time shot that deflected off an outstretched Nicolás Burdisso and bobbed over helpless Genoa goalkeeper Mattia Perin.

The whole Samp bench, except for coach Siniša Mihajlović, created a wave of shiny black, knee-length coats as they sprinted the length of the pitch to celebrate with the players and fans. Gabbiadini looked full of enthusiasm despite the drab weather and, with Genoa struggling to restrict his contributions, Andrea Bertolacci was cautioned for a robust challenge on the youngster. With feelings impaired by trailing, the Genoa supporters around us were incensed that the challenge would even warrant a yellow card. Just as it appeared the first period would peter out through a series of needless fouls, the Genoa attack came to life. Captain Alberto Gilardino with a tame header and Bertolacci with a long-range drive had efforts saved by Angelo da Costa, and then they believed they had equalised. Bertolacci scuffed a right-footed shot which defender Luca Antonelli stabbed home from four yards. Before he could raise his arm in full to salute the Genoa supporters going wild, he was waving it furiously at the assistant referee, who had signalled for offside.

The first half of the match in 2022 was eerily similar to eight years earlier. The home side went close when Antonio Candreva whipped over a low cross from the right flank, which Stefano Sensi side-footed wide, and the visitors responded. Nadiem Amiri sent a dipping effort at goal that Emil Audero could only palm into the ground, allowing striker Mattia Destro to head a fraction over the crossbar. The surrounding supporters were expressing their displeasure with the referee soon afterwards, as he halted play to warn Candreva about persistent fouling. Something had pumped the veteran winger up for the game and he played a part in *Il Doria* taking the lead on 25 minutes, just as they had in 2014. The Italian sent over a high ball that the *Rossoblu* defence failed to deal with and, when left-back Tommaso Augello

returned a low high-speed cross, loanee Abdelhamid Sabiri burst through two Genoa players unnoticed and volleyed home from ground level just two yards from goal.

Those around me soared almost synchronised in celebration as a tremendous roar rolled around the Luigi Ferraris and, as the ecstasy relented, I noticed a woman in front of me embracing her companion as tears ran from her eyes. I would have loved to know whether they were in the hope that the goal would send Genoa down or that *La Samp* were closer to survival, especially with three quarters of the match remaining. Sampdoria stood their ground as Genoa continued to dominate possession before a scrappy period of head tennis in the home box exposed the quality on offer, as did a wayward shot from the edge of the box by Milan Badelj that ended the attack and also brought hostile cries of 'Genoa, Genoa, vaffanculo!' Neither side could build any momentum, such was the amount of misplaced passes and fouls in midfield, although only Audero was cautioned during the opening period. The half ended with a little excitement when another Candreva cross found Sabiri at the back post, but Genoa custodian Salvatore Sirigu made a terrific save. Next, Caleb Ekuban and Destro both fired efforts into the side netting in injury time.

Desperate for the toilet but also dehydrated from standing all day in the Genoa sunshine, I raced into the darkness of the Marassi bowels, also keen to find a fresh vantage point for the second half. On the way back towards the pitch, though, I got sidetracked by refreshments signs and unnecessarily went searching for another beer. I was quickly wedged into a narrow corridor with several others, not sure where I was heading and looking over the shoulders of a couple of fans watching the first-half highlights on their smartphone. When I reached the end of the hallway, what

I found was a shock. The stadium refreshment kiosk was a shoebox-sized hole carved out of a brick wall. A handful of young men were pouring bottle after bottle of beer into plastic cups and little else, so I requested two and handed over €10, holding out a hand to receive some change and only meeting a shake of the head.

* * *

Taking advantage of the 9pm start back in 2014, the supporters had made the most of nightfall with multiple pyrotechnic displays at the break, which delayed the start of the second half for a moment. When the smoke had cleared, Sampdoria forced Perin into another save from Roberto Soriano, convincing coach Gasperini to place no further confidence in the starting 11. On came winger Giannis Fetfatzidis for defender Sebastien De Maio in an obvious change of formation. The diminutive Greek had not arrived to add defensive physicality to their efforts and was noticeably the smallest player on the pitch at 5ft 6in. Yet few more attacks were created until the 65th minute when Bertolacci played a clever pass through the Sampdoria defensive lines to Moussa Konaté. The Senegal international controlled the ball instantly with his right foot and drilled low past Da Costa with his left. This time it took both players and supporters longer to realise that Konaté had strayed offside, leaving the *Rossoblu* fans to endure the taunting from the *Il Doria* following.

A second disallowed goal had Sampdoria fans believing that they would avenge that early season defeat, while Genoa's players took their growing frustrations out on their opponents. Matuzalém, Giuseppe Sculli and Paolo De Ceglie were all booked for needless fouls during the final attritional ten minutes. When the whistle blew, the Sud

erupted and flags were waved frantically as the players' arms interlocked celebrating with them. Sampdoria moved into 13th, two points behind Genoa, in the only race either were still interested in.

At the end of the match it was great to see most of the Gradinata Nord still present displaying their unwavering support, defying the celebrations at the opposite end, which were impressive. Some local rivalries I have witnessed have seen fans of the losing side often exiting long before the clock reaches 80 minutes. Even if the waves in their direction from the players looked half-hearted, Genoa had technically won the league clashes 3-1 on aggregate. We, well maybe not Dan, felt compelled to watch the drama play out and were some of the last to leave despite two sides of the stadium having emptied, but Genoa fans were still letting off smoke flares.

In May 2022 there was much more drama as the match reached its conclusion. Other than a shot over the crossbar by goalscorer Sabiri straight after the restart, Sampdoria struggled to threaten the Genoa goal, maybe realising that their rivals had not kept a clean sheet in eight games. I had now moved to the upper tier expecting a better view of the Samp attacks, but most of the action remained at the far end of the ground. However, all *Il Grifone* could muster was a deflected strike from club captain Domenico Criscito and another wasted effort from Badelj, slicing the ball well wide from the edge of the box again on 80 minutes.

Ageing Sampdoria hero Fabio Quagliarella arriving seven minutes later appeared to prompt the Genoa fans to toss several flares on to the pitch. That brought a significant delay to proceedings, as they first had to be removed and then there was a wait for the pitch-level smoke to clear. The *Blucerchiati* supporters around the stadium booed the

actions of their city cousins, before the Gradinata Sud broke into furious screams of ‘Doria, Doria, Doria’. As the fourth official raised the electronic board to signal a minimum of six minutes of added time, the Gradinata Sud came alive, sensing the three points and that their hated neighbours were teetering on the brink of relegation. The songs and chants coming from the terrace were louder and more purposeful, firecrackers got lost among the commotion, and flags were waved with more vigour.

Then, halfway through the additional time, Destro contested a cross with defender Alex Ferrari and the ball rolled out for a corner kick. As we awaited the delivery, a Sampdoria player fell to the ground, delaying the set piece further, and whistles rang out from both sets of supporters. When referee Fabio Maresca then signalled for a VAR (Video Assistant Referee) review, it could only mean one thing and the Genoa screeches turned into cheers. A brief look at the video monitor and the official awarded a penalty for the ball brushing Ferrari’s forearm, although there was also a high foot during the earlier collision. What was laughable was the yellow card for the 28-year-old Ferrari as it was an accidental handball. The Sampdoria fans fell almost silent for a moment as the experienced 35-year-old Criscito waited patiently for the opportunity to secure another vital point.

There was no one else the *Grifone* supporters wanted standing over the ball, having converted five penalties from five already that season. When Maresca put the whistle to his lips, 97 minutes were showing on the advertising hoarding clock. Criscito took a few steps forward but placed a tame left-footed attempt at the perfect height for Audero to push away. The Sud celebrated louder than any goal scored that campaign, as I watched the defender drop to his knees and pull his shirt over his head.

There was still time for one last attack, but it came to nothing and left the Genoa players staring at the sky in disbelief as the final whistle sounded. The noise coming from the animated Sampdoria fans was incredible and parties that would last long into the night began. The Genoa supporters were once again remaining behind to cheer their players off the pitch, preoccupied by comforting skipper Criscito, who was sobbing uncontrollably among team-mates near the halfway line.

Much like 2014, as I headed back towards my accommodation via a route under several bridges, there was the familiar sight of brake lights trickling away from the stadium and singing from within the Luigi Ferraris echoing in the background, although this time at a much higher volume, given that two-thirds of the supporters were inside celebrating. Several waiting in the traffic responded to the horns of overloaded mopeds speeding past, either in cheering for *Il Doria* or trying to provoke distraught *Rossoblu* fans.

You might think that I would feel shortchanged, with just two goals across 180-plus minutes of football, although it was a significant accomplishment getting to witness the first encounter. Yet both fixtures delivered, even with dreadful weather first time around. Had the football matched the quality of entertainment off the pitch, they would have been quite something. With both sides' glory days long gone and struggling in mid-table or worse, the football was, like most derbies, a little low on quality, but excellent nevertheless.