

A shirtless man with a beard and tattoos is holding a cardboard sign. He has a white mark on his left cheek. The background features a white shirt with signatures and the word 'HEAVEN' and a blue shirt with a red circular logo.

SIMONE ABITANTE

PLEASE
don't TAKE *me* **HOME**

**A LOVE STORY WITH
FULHAM FOOTBALL CLUB**

PLEASE DON'T TAKE ME HOME

A LOVE STORY WITH
FULHAM FOOTBALL CLUB

SIMONE ABITANTE



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Why Fulham?

*Soundtrack: 'The Rhythm of the Night' –
Corona*

BEING AN Italian in London, I got used to this question when declaring my love of the Whites of west London, 'Why Fulham?'

People, even nowadays, keep asking me why I support Fulham.

People, even nowadays, keep receiving the same answers. The easiest one is simple, 'Why not?'

The more romantic one, 'Because it's like love and most of the time there's no explanation, it happens, that's it.'

Got it?

My true, passionate, berserk, total love for Fulham FC kicked off between 2000 and 2001 when I was a full-testosterone, adrenaline-charged young Italian guy moving to London from a little village in the north of Italy.

Before talking about it though, let's rewind back a little because a strong feeling like the one I developed for Fulham is something that goes beyond compare and logic and needs explanation.

Being born on 1 November 1975, I was not even seven when the Azzurri claimed an important part in my future life when winning the 1982 World Cup. I still have clearer

memories of those games than other much more recent ones. I know the starting XI by heart and pictures of what happened are printed forever in my mind: Paolo Rossi nicking goals in the box, Marco Tardelli's iconic screaming celebration after netting in the final, Maradona's shirt trashed by a young badass in the making, Claudio 'Gheddafi' Gentile¹, the perfect example of when your destiny is not in your surname.

That same summer a certain Michel Platini signed for Juventus and I became a Bianconero. In a black-and-white-striped shirt, with the magic number ten on the back, he resembled my life dream. I had found a favourite player and Juventus was my chosen team.

As a kid I was playing football every day. I quickly joined the club of 'who broke a window with a ball at least once in his life' and quickly after also another one, less desired, 'who broke a bone playing football'. Ouch!

My uncle then took me to a football ground for the very first time. I'm from Vicenza and Lanerossi Vicenza in the mid-1980s were still a very respectable club, playing in Serie A. During the late 70s they were even nicknamed 'Real Vicenza', finishing second, behind Juventus and 'our' Paolo Rossi being crowned top scorer. When he died in December 2020, his funeral was held in Vicenza's main dome.

The city's ground is dedicated to former player Romeo Menti, who died in the Superga disaster on 4 May 1949 when the aeroplane flying back Torino FC's players and staff crashed on the hills of the city of Turin.

I love our stadium because it's quite English. It's built right in the city, surrounded by houses and inside you're close to the pitch. Its capacity is around 20,000 and the atmosphere has always been great.

—

1 Gentile in Italian means gentle

In Vicenza we're very passionate about football. In the 2019/20 season, with the club in the third tier, there were 8,000 season ticket holders!

Back to my uncle, and at the time he was also a season ticket holder but a quiet one who used to sit in the side stand. He was not a terrace man, let's put it like that.

My brother though, 13 years my senior, actually liked being in the crowd of the *Curva Sud*, what in England would be called the South Terrace or South End. So, together with his friends, one Sunday, the day of football in Italy before the pay-per-view puzzle, they grabbed this young football fanatic and took him again to the Stadio Romeo Menti in Vicenza.

Those days you could get a cheaper ticket to the *parterre*, similar to a lower end, and then be helped up to the upper end in the actual *Curva Sud* where the hardcore fans used to be.

That was amazing and crazy at the same time for me; thousands singing, shouting, smoke flares, huge flags, scarves, a couple of guys playing drums, and it looked to me like a nice party. Booze and joints completed the picture but at the time I had to be told what they actually were. I totally loved the experience and wanted more.

The excitement was superb and for a little boy aged 11 in an era where PlayStation, internet and social media were far away from people's imagination, being taken to a game was luxury.

I went again with my uncle and I'll be always thankful to him for that, but remaining seated on the family-packed side of the pitch was simply not for me.

Instead, I wanted to be up there standing, jumping around singing, actively supporting my team among my friends, getting behind the players with all my voice, disregarding the weather conditions.

That wish came true when my great friend Mirko asked me to join him and his uncles, God save the uncles, in getting

a season ticket. We were 16 by then and thankfully my mum agreed with it. That was 1991 and the under-18 season ticket cost me something like £80, a bargain.

Those were also the days I discovered English football and the then-called First Division, soon to become the Premier League. Peter Schmeichel was a Manchester United player as was a young Ryan Giggs. Vinnie Jones wore Chelsea colours in mid-table and the red and white Arsenal got my early sympathies while the John Fashanu myth started up here in Italy thanks to a TV show called *Mai dire Gol*².

During the mid-1990s most of the world's best footballers were playing in Serie A, which was also the most watched league in the world. Juventus won their last Champions League in 1996 while the English Premier League was growing fast.

And the mid-90s were also the most successful years in Vicenza's football history.

After being promoted to Serie B in 1993, only two years later they got back to Serie A and finished in an extraordinary ninth place. The following season, 1996/97, was incredible. In the opening game Vicenza won 4-2 away to a Fiorentina team managed by Claudio Ranieri and including Gabriel Batistuta, Rui Costa, Francesco Toldo and Luís Oliveira. By the end of November they were even topping the Serie A table.

Impressive performances also saw them beat Juventus, Inter Milan and AC Milan on the way, improving on the remarkable achievement of the previous season by ending up in eighth.

That would have been enough for club and supporters but the icing on the cake arrived at the end of May when, at home, they beat Napoli 3-0 to win their very first Italian Cup 3-1 on aggregate. A fantastic achievement for the *Noble Provinciale* as the club was often called.

—

2 Never say goal

I was there and that was mental. We invaded the pitch at the final whistle and were celebrating together with the players after that totally unpredictable trophy win.

It was one of the best nights of my life, and carousels of cars shortly followed through the city streets and even the police got nicer. As I was waving my own red and white flag with my upper body outside the car window while controlling the pedals with my feet, my mate actually managed the steering wheel from the passenger seat. 'Hey, genius, get inside your car, now,' they scolded me. It all ended with some blushed cheeks and a loud laugh from the three of us.

That win meant Europe the following season and Vicenza enjoyed another memorable campaign, getting to the semi-finals of the old European Cup Winners' Cup and making a name for themselves even outside Italy.

Unfortunately it ended in tears. After beating Chelsea 1-0 at home, Vicenza went one up at Stamford Bridge and scored a second goal, which would have definitely been enough, only for it to be ruled out for a non-existing offside. That was it; the star-studded Blues came back with Poyet and Zola, the Magic Box, with a certain Mark Hughes scoring the fatal third goal towards the end. A usually average Ed de Goey was Chelsea's saviour in both games.

Now you know when my sporting hate for the other team in Fulham began.

I often go back to that game thinking about the what ifs. Chelsea played Stuttgart in the final, although many pundits at the time said Vicenza–Chelsea was the real final as the Blues had a very strong team and Vicenza were playing an incredible fear-nothing, attacking style of football.