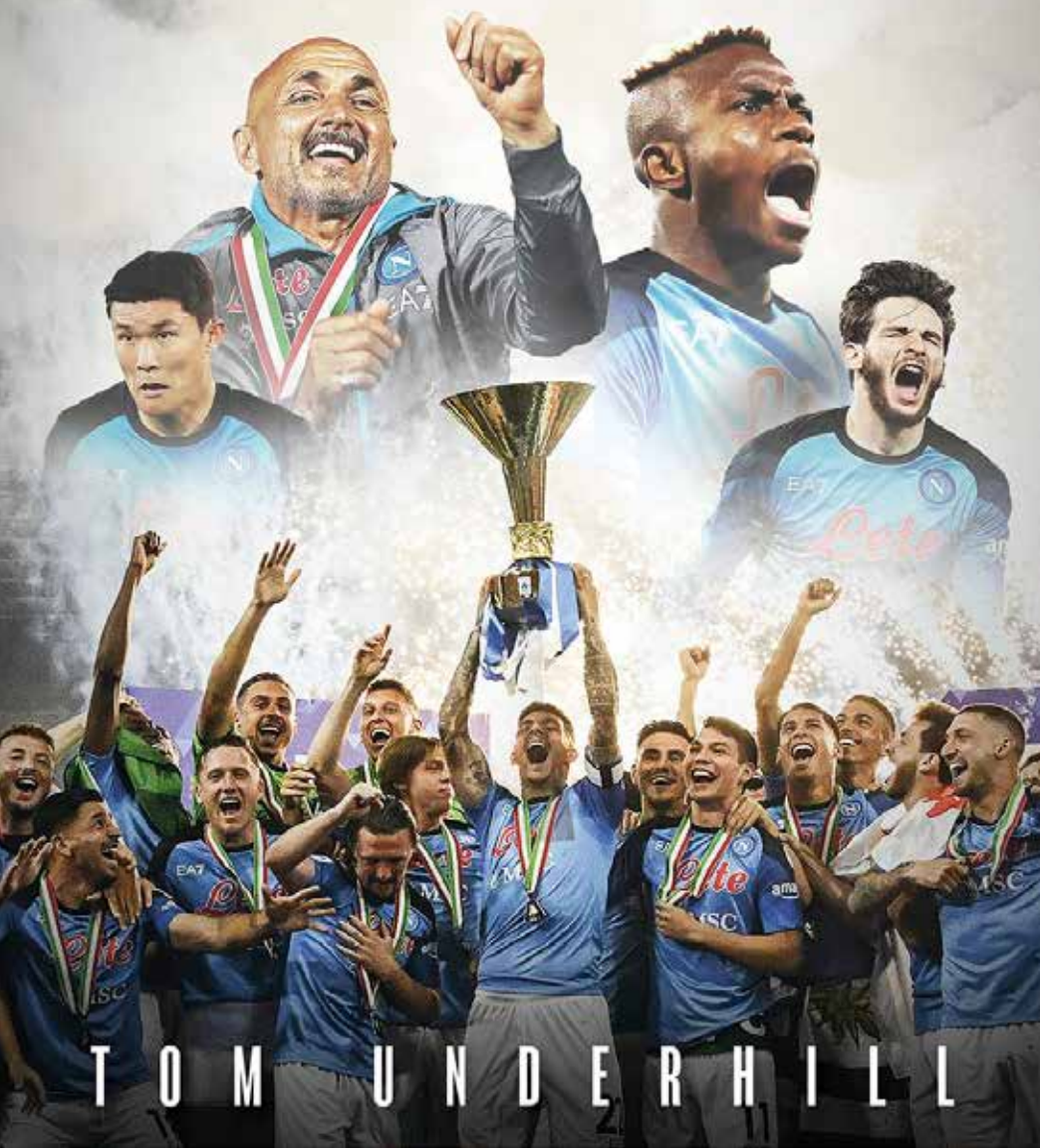


# RINASCIMENTO

The Story of SSC Napoli's Historic 2022/23  
Serie A Victory Under Luciano Spalletti



T O M U N D E R H I L L

# RINASCIMENTO

The Story of SSC Napoli's Historic 2022/23  
Serie A Victory Under Luciano Spalletti

T O M   U N D E R H I L L



# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Introduction . . . . .	11
From Naples Foot-Ball Club to Napoli Soccer: A brief history of SSC Napoli . . . . .	18
The Luciano Spalletti Story: Part One. . . . .	47
The Luciano Spalletti Story: Part Two. . . . .	73
The Modern Napoli under Aurelio De Laurentiis . . . . .	99
Exploding Into Life . . . . .	120
The Winter Charge. . . . .	149
Goduria. . . . .	177
Who were Luciano Spalletti's Napoli? . . . . .	208
The Farm . . . . .	232
Naples will always have 2022/23 . . . . .	252
Bibliography . . . . .	255

## From Naples Foot-Ball Club to Napoli Soccer: A brief history of SSC Napoli

NAPOLI'S HISTORY can be divided into three very distinct eras: the formative years, the Maradona years, and the bankruptcy and post-bankruptcy era.

Beginning with the formative years, the club formed in its original guise in 1905 with the amalgamation of two Neapolitan football sides: Football Club Partenopeo and Naples Foot-Ball and Cricket Club. This was at a time of significant British involvement in Italian football as workers migrated to Italy and spread the rules of association football. Two famous examples are Genoa who claim to be the oldest club in Italy thanks to their formation under James Richardson Spensley in 1897 (the club had already existed as part of a wider football, athletics and cricket club formed in 1893), and Herbert Kilpin's founding of AC Milan (to be referred to as Milan from hereon) in 1899. Naples' significance as a port and dockyard encouraged English maritime workers to relocate there, and this is how William Poths and Italian engineer Amedeo Salsi came to create Naples Foot-Ball and Cricket Club.

Naples hosted a number of football and athletic clubs at the time, but it was Naples Foot-Ball Club that quickly rose to the fore as the most powerful and prolific in the city. One year after formation, Naples became the first side from central-southern Italy to join the *Federazione Italiana del Football* (known as the FIF, Italian football's original governing body) but were hamstrung by the distances required to travel in order to compete with the northern teams. This forced Naples to withdraw from the competition before they had competed, and wait until other sides from Campania would also play. Eventually the issue was forced by two Neapolitan clubs (including Naples) asking the FIF to create another tier of the competition that would be specific to Campanian teams, and so the Terza Categoria Campania was formed. Back-to-back titles took Naples up to the second tier of Italian football, and the club would win that title two years running too.

A problem emerged in 1911 when the international players broke away to form a new Naples-based club called Unione Sportiva Internazionale Napoli. This was not uncommon, with a better-known example being in Milan in 1908 when a disagreement in the AC Milan board over signing international players caused Swiss and certain Italian members to split and form Foot-Ball Club Internazionale (Inter Milan, or Inter). The two Neapolitan clubs competed ferociously over the coming years and a power struggle developed between them. Both survived World War I and would eventually merge in 1922 to ease the post-war financial pressure that had mounted upon them. Naples was united with one main football team under the name Foot-Ball Club Internazionale-Naples.

This mashing together of names was shortened to FBC Internaples colloquially, then AC Napoli, and then Napoli.

A short number of years later, with the kit already a combination of Naples' light blue shirt with Internazionale's white shorts, the bold 'N' of the Internazionale badge appeared on the club shirt. The white 'N' on the light blue circle became one of Europe's football's most iconic club badges. Its simplicity and boldness make it instantly recognisable to the eye. 'N' means Napoli, and nothing else. The two original clubs had competed in the southern division of the Prima Divisione (top flight), and a run to the Lega Sud Final in 1925/26 secured Internaples a spot in the Divisione Nazionale for the start of the next season. The FIF had become the FIGC (*Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio*) and the fascist government under Benito Mussolini had desires for Italy's top football competition to be fully national, and not split into regional groups as it had been. Competing in a new competition also saw another name change as Internaples became 'Associazione Calcio Napoli', and the turn of the 1930s also saw the reintroduction of English influence on the club for the first time since William Poths' involvement.

William Garbutt is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Italian football, having moved to Genoa after a playing career in England and coaching the club for 15 years. Garbutt was an early tactician who sought to raise the game in Italy to the levels of those in England and left Genoa in 1927 having won three domestic titles to become Italy's national coach and then the first-ever manager of AS Roma. Napoli were next on his tour of influence, and under Garbutt they finished third twice between 1932 and 1934.

Garbutt left Naples and Italy in 1935 for Spain, where he would win the league with Athletic Bilbao before returning to coach Milan and then two further stints with Genoa. The first of his latter two stints with Genoa was marred by the influence of Mussolini's regime, which imprisoned and then exiled Garbutt for being a non-national. Like Genoa and Roma, Napoli's early years saw their brightest moments come under the coaching of William Garbutt. Those two third-place finishes were the highest they would finish in Serie A for 30 years as he influenced the Italian game wherever he went. The common title of 'Mister' that Italian players and fans use to address their manager can be traced back to Garbutt; the first 'Mister' of Italian football.

Garbutt was arguably the second-most important figure in Napoli's recent history at that point. The honour of first place could be awarded to Attila Sallustro, a Paraguay-born forward who had moved to Naples as a child and rose through the ranks of both Internazionale Napoli and Internaples. Sallustro played for the club at senior level for 12 years (as well as a year before the merger and five years as a youth player). He became known as *Il Divino* ('The Divine') and was beloved for not only being a superb striker, but also not asking for a wage from the club. They did reward him with gifts such as a Fiat motor car, but Sallustro had come from a wealthy family and chose not to take financial payment. In Garbutt and Sallustro, Napoli had two superstars to transform their side, along with Croatia-born Italian attacker Antonio Vojak.

The second third-place finish, in 1933/34, qualified Napoli for the European Cup and their first taste of European competition. That would turn out to be

Garbutt's last season in Naples and the start of a decline at the club. Many of the supporting cast behind Sallustro were sold and the great man's form suffered as a result. Many even correlated his deteriorating performances with his marriage to Russian actress Lucy D'Albert. After over 250 appearances and 107 goals for Napoli, Sallustro was sold to Salernitana in 1937 to close Napoli's greatest early chapter. He remained the club's record goalscorer for five decades until the arrival of another supremely talented South American in Naples in the 1980s. Sallustro would return to the city to live until his death in 1983, becoming Napoli coach in 1961 and working as the director of the club's stadium between 1960 and 1981.

This decline had coincided with the new ownership of Achille Lauro, a local businessman and politician who had been born into the wealth of a ship-owning family and had risen to political prominence as a member of the fascist party under Mussolini. Napoli's finances were dwindling, so Lauro sold many of their best players (including Sallustro) and as a result recorded lower Serie A finishes of tenth, seventh and 14th before the turn of the 1940s. In 1939/40, Napoli finished one place above relegated Liguria and were spared relegation by their superior goal difference. The nightmare of relegation that had seemed inevitable came to pass in 1942 and Napoli would remain in Serie B until after World War II when a restructuring of the league system allowed the club to return to Serie A, despite finishing third and one place outside of the promotion places in the most recently played season (1942/43).

The decades that followed the war saw Napoli bounce between Serie A and B without troubling the very pinnacle



of the top flight. Relegations marked this era as the club failed to truly establish itself as a Serie A mainstay, although they did feature in the first ever live match broadcast on Italian television in 1956. Another notable moment within this period was Napoli's move to Stadio San Paolo in Fuorigrotta in 1959 following an 11-year construction period. It was known initially as Stadio del Sole before being renamed in 1963 to honour Saint Paul the Apostle, and at the time held up to 100,000 spectators. Its first match as Napoli's official home venue saw Juventus beaten 2-1 in front of an enormous crowd.

As a stadium, the brutalist Stadio San Paolo is as intimidating and sprawling as one could ever find. Rather than building vertically and stacking spectators upon each other, it staggers outwards to hold those in attendance at a milder angle. A running track wraps itself around the playing surface to keep fans even further from the pitch, and whilst many Italian stadia of the time had this feature, it remains in place at Napoli. Then there's the structure itself. A mass of planted concrete struts burst from the ground to hold the weight of this giant, hollowed disc. Between the fans and the running track lies a deep concrete moat, sunk beneath the level of the pitch and so low that those within it crane their necks upwards to look at the bouncing fans above. Smoke billows out and flags fly over the moat in an atmosphere as close to a gladiator's entrance as one can picture.

A first Coppa Italia came in 1962, just one year after relegation, and their first piece of top level silverware in the same season that they were promoted back to Serie A. This made Napoli the first side to win the competition whilst competing in the second tier. Napoli also changed

their name to Società Sportiva Calcio Napoli, becoming the SSC Napoli that they are today. This would not be the final time their name would change, however.

Unfortunately, this bright moment was followed by another relegation: their second in three years and fourth since the formation of Serie A after the end of World War II. Napoli's return to Serie A came in 1965/66 and started a prolonged period of stability without dropping down a division. More than just stabilising, Napoli rose to become one of Italy's prominent sides under manager Bruno Pesaola. The Argentine coach had made over 240 appearances for Napoli as a player and had moved seamlessly into a coaching career at just 37. Napoli was Pesaola's first job in management and he delivered the club that precious Coppa Italia trophy in his first season. From there, the Argentine oversaw Napoli's rise and development, with the pinnacle coming in 1967/68 with an impressive second-place finish in Serie A. That team featured the attacking talent of José Altafini, a Brazilian-born striker who had appeared at international level for both Brazil and Italy and had been a star at Milan between 1958 and 1965.

Another notable name was that of Dino Zoff, a 25-year-old goalkeeper who had joined from Mantova at the start of that season. Zoff's career would take him to the heights of European Championship winner in 1968 and then, 14 years later, World Cup champion at 42. Zoff and Altafini were the stars of Napoli's greatest side since the days of Sallustro and Vojak under William Garbutt, a side that could compete in cup competitions and maintain a high level throughout the rigours of the league

campaign. Pesaola departed in 1968 and his credentials as a coach were proven by winning Serie A in his first season with Fiorentina. He would return to Napoli twice more, firstly in 1976 for one solitary season and then again in 1982 for one more. Not only had Pesaola created a competitive Napoli side, he also continued a rich heritage of Argentinian association with Napoli that would flow right through to the present day.

Unlike when Garbutt's departure sparked a decline, Napoli continued their progress post-Pesaola. Two spells under manager Giuseppe Chiappella returned positive results including a third-place finish in 1970/71. However, it was under the coaching of Brazilian Luís Vinício that Napoli made their greatest strides. Between 1973 and 1976, Napoli came third, second and fifth in Serie A as well as winning the Coppa Italia in 1975/76. This success and development can be attributed to stability in the boardroom. Napoli had had seven different presidents since 1960, with no one figure remaining in position for longer than three years in that time. Corrado Ferlaino had already had a go at running the club between 1969 and 1971, and returned in 1972 to embark on a prolonged period as president.

The star of that Napoli team was Sergio Clerici, who, despite arriving as a 32-year-old in 1973 and plying his trade at five different Italian clubs prior, caught fire in Naples. He scored 14 goals in their second-place finish in 1974/75 having scored 17 the season before. That period, which could claim to be the greatest in Napoli's history up to that point, featured a return to European competition via the 1974/75 UEFA Cup, an Anglo-Italian League Cup

success in 1976 and an impressive run in the European Cup Winners' Cup to reach the semi-finals in 1976/77.

Napoli rolled on as Ferlaino's presidential spell ended briefly in 1983 only to resume that same year until 1993. Ferlaino had gradually increased his involvement in the club from his initial minority share bought in 1967. His financial stake had risen in the late 1960s to a point where he became majority shareholder as well as being elected president in 1969. His control of the club was total, and the results on the pitch proved his value. Under Ferlaino's stewardship, Napoli were not relegated once between 1969 and 1993, having had three relegations in the decade before he became involved at the club.

His greatest success was still to come as the 1980s turned Napoli into a household name across the globe.

Throughout his life, Diego Maradona rarely found himself at peace with his surroundings. The social pressures of being treated like a god amongst men whilst also displaying the same frailties and flaws that mankind does engulfed him. Even when he was at his brilliant best as a footballer, speculation and interrogation followed his every move off the pitch. However, Maradona did not always help himself in this regard, and gave the baying hordes plenty of ammunition to play with. The contrast between his genius with a ball and troubled personal life made Naples the perfect home for him: unconventional, raw, emotional, beautiful and not to everyone's taste. But how did the greatest player in the world come to Napoli?

Maradona had not yet blossomed into the world's greatest. He had endured a wretched two-year spell in

Barcelona where injury curtailed his potential and he struggled to show the best of himself. Perhaps the image most associated with Maradona's time at Camp Nou was his ridiculous flying kick that caused him to be sent off against Athletic Bilbao in the 1984 Copa del Rey Final having spent months out with a bad injury. It perfectly summarised the frustrations of a troubled mind. He never played for Barcelona again, and was sold to Napoli for the equivalent of €12 million. With Italy's premier sides already containing top talents in Maradona's position, Napoli acted on the opportunity by offering a financially struggling star significant wages and the opportunity to be the patron saint of an aspiring side; one that had finished 12th the season before.

The deal would prove to have consequences further down the line, but as Maradona rose from the depths of Stadio San Paolo to an hysterical reception, that felt unimportant. A star had arrived, and Napoli could dream. Neapolitans were so desperate for Maradona to join that there were instances of fans chaining themselves to Stadio San Paolo and others going on hunger strike in an effort to pressure the transfer into being confirmed.

There was another layer to the connection. Maradona's origins in the rough barrios of Buenos Aires bore similarities to the city he was moving to: a rough and hardy edge that many would not wish to experience, yet beneath it was a community and spirit that connected its people despite their circumstances. On his unveiling as a Napoli player, Maradona said: 'I want to become the idol of the poor children of Naples because they are like I was when I lived in Buenos Aires.'

The Maradona effect was not felt immediately, although the Argentine's talents were evident quickly as he top-scored for the club with 17 goals. An eighth-place finish did not scream of a team reborn, but Napoli lost just one of their last 17 matches as Maradona gelled with his new team-mates and transformed their domestic form. Crucially, Maradona was fit and available: no Napoli player made more appearances than his 30 that season. Concerns over whether Napoli had invested in a physically declining superstar eased and demonstrated the benefits of a happy and healthy mental state on the body itself.

1985/86 saw further improvement as Napoli climbed to third place, albeit losing eight times and not reaching the heights of winners Juventus, who themselves were propelled by the creative attacking talents of a genius playmaker: Michel Platini. Napoli inflicted one of Juventus' three defeats that season, a 1-0 win in Naples with Maradona scoring a stunning chipped free kick for the match's only goal. Napoli also beat Inter and Milan with *I Rossoneri* defeated on their own turf at San Siro as Napoli began to punch up in the manner they had always wanted. The established giants of the north would always hold the heritage and prestige of Italian football, but Napoli were the aggressors, bloodying noses of the elite. That season had also seen the arrival of Ottavio Bianchi as head coach, having secured newly promoted Como's Serie A status the season before. Napoli were looking up, dragged towards the glass ceiling by Maradona's magic and supported by a hard-working and committed supporting cast.

Maradona's own glass ceiling was smashed that very summer in Mexico when he lifted the World Cup trophy

with Argentina. His performances were of a mind-blowing standard, tearing whole teams apart by himself and leaving them in his wake. One of football's iconic images is Maradona hoisted on the shoulders of his teammates at the Azteca Stadium. It confirmed him as the greatest talent in world football; one that Napoli were proud to call their own. The World Cup was still not enough for Maradona. Rather than feel quenched by the glory of winning the game's greatest prize, he set about using his wizardry to propel Napoli forwards.

Finishing third entered Napoli into the UEFA Cup for 1986/87; however, that novelty was quickly forgotten after losing to Toulouse in the first round. The real magic occurred in the league where Napoli lost just one of their first 19 in the 30-match Serie A season. The highlight of this run was a 3-1 away win over Juventus that cemented their place at the top of the table for a third week. It was a symbolic victory in coming from behind to beat the defending champions with three late goals, and from that point Napoli never looked back. They remained top until the season ended even when momentum began to slow as they won just three of their last 11 matches. Juventus could not catch them however, and a first Scudetto was Napoli's. Over 80 years since the first building blocks were laid, Napoli were champions of Italy for the first time. Fans flooded the field as other results confirmed the championship on the penultimate weekend of the season and a scrum formed around Maradona as he embraced his team-mates. The outpouring of emotion matched that in the stands, where blue smoke billowed and men wept.

The first Serie A title for Napoli was also the first ever by a team from the south, and it was celebrated as such: a triumph over the judging and condescending north who had lorded over the south both in a football sense and in a wider social context. Neapolitans were regarded as un-Italian by many in the north and sneered at for being economically impoverished and even derided for their darker skin colour. Napoli played through cacophonies of whistles and monkey noises every time they travelled north, with many screaming at them to 'Wash!' or be 'cleaned by Vesuvius' fire'. This was Naples' time to hit back at those cruel taunts. Coffins with Juventus flags draped over them were carried through the streets of Naples and effigies and paintings of Maradona appeared on every corner. One year on from winning the World Cup, Maradona was experiencing a sense of adoration and celebration that even Argentina hadn't given him.

'For me, this title means a lot more than winning the World Cup,' he said. 'I won a youth World Cup in Tokyo and I won a World Cup in Mexico last year but on both occasions I was alone. Here, all my family, the city of Naples are with me because I consider myself a son of Naples.'

The 'Son of Naples' wasn't done there. A 4-0 aggregate win over Atalanta in the Coppa Italia Final gave Napoli a domestic double and elevated their success into something even grander. Napoli were domestic dominators, sitting alone at the pinnacle of Italian football with two belts across their torso. For a club and city that had felt so oppressed and undermined for all their existence, this was a surreal feeling. It would be unfair to say that Maradona was merely enabled by the other ten players in that side.



There were many talented and skilled individuals in Napoli's first Scudetto-winning squad, but Maradona was the alien life force that had made dreams come true. Only he could have done that, binding the city to the team by channelling his ability and an acceptance of who he was. An imperfect master.

They nearly followed it up with an almost unthinkable second title in as many years, leading the league for 27 of the 30 matchweeks before crumbling spectacularly to lose four of the final five matches and gift the title to Milan. It was at this time that suggestions of foul play began to grow over Maradona's involvement with the Camorra, a powerful criminal organisation that ran parts of Naples. Maradona's darker side was starting to appear and become more visible as Napoli finished second again in 1988/89 and his not-so-secret cocaine habits and lavish partying tendencies could no longer be covered up. That said, Maradona's performances on the field continued to inspire Napoli to new heights. They won the UEFA Cup in 1988/89, their first major piece of European silverware, featuring a remarkable run to the final in which they beat Juventus and Bayern Munich. The latter of those ties is best known not for the match itself, but Maradona's warm-up. With 'Live is Life' by Opus blaring around the stadium, Maradona spent the duration of the song juggling the ball with ridiculous ease. It went high and then dropped right on to the cushion of his foot before being sent up again, all while having his shoelaces untied and shifting in time with the music. It was poetic in its simplicity.

The scoring burden had been alleviated by the arrival of Brazilian forward Careca in 1987, and the UEFA Cup-

winning campaign saw Careca become Napoli's main goal threat by scoring 27 times across all competitions. He and Maradona were as lethal and effective as any attacking connection in Italy, but they were nearly broken apart by a substantial bid from Marseille to try and tempt Maradona away from Naples. The details of the proposed deal were leaked and it fell through, but Napoli punished Maradona for his involvement in the saga and forced him to sit out the first half of the 1989/90 season. His weight fluctuated and the distractions that had previously made him who he was were beginning to frustrate and alienate those around him. The scandals were mounting: cocaine possession, alleged drug trafficking, affairs with multiple women and potentially fathering a son outside of his marriage, refusing to train. All the while, Napoli stormed back to reclaim their Serie A title three years on from last winning it.

This time it felt different. Perhaps it was the novelty and staggering scale of achievement that they had felt three years before, but this success was the beginning of the end for Maradona. That summer, as Italy hosted the 1990 World Cup, Maradona's Argentina met Italy in the semi-finals in Naples. Maradona had publicly implored Neapolitans to reject their nationality and support his Argentina side instead, citing the repression and cruel treatment they had felt by their fellow countrymen. Argentina won, but Maradona reacted furiously as his national anthem was booed at Stadio San Paolo. National newspapers and media outlets that had once protected his image began to turn on him, highlighting every misdemeanour and circling his movements.

It all came to an end in 1991. Maradona was handed a 15-month ban for testing positive for cocaine in a Serie

A match, and he fled Naples under the cover of night. Having arrived to a Beatles-esque reception of screaming hysteria and worship and elevating Naples and Napoli to nirvana, Maradona left in disgrace. He would play for another six years without ever re-finding the magic that he had touched Naples with. His years at Napoli had both blessed and cursed him, the city's darker characteristics equally supporting and destroying him. Maradona and Naples were made for each other, and they did just that. Forever more, Napoli was Maradona.

If the 1980s had been a stunning vista of excellence and silverware for Napoli, the 1990s plunged them to the darkest depths. Attempting to find optimism and purpose in the midst of losing an icon such as Diego Maradona would be testing for any club, let alone one so emotional and devoted to the great man as Napoli.

Understandably, Napoli continued to spend lavishly on player recruitment to try and remain relevant in the post-Maradona age. Bright talents appeared, including Gianfranco Zola, Fabio Cannavaro and Benito Carbone, but the financial maintenance required to keep Maradona healthy and happy had burned a deep hole in Napoli's pockets. *These Football Times* wrote that the deal to bring Maradona to Naples in 1984 had only been possible as a result of a local politician exercising his connections with the banks to obtain a sizeable loan.

Maradona's successes on the pitch had been vast and varied, but the picture off the pitch was far from healthy. President Ferlaino's tenure ended in 1993 when he was charged with paying bribes for significant state contracts within his construction business away from the football

club. Like Maradona, Ferlaino's unconventional and near-the-knuckle approach to life in Naples had caused issues further down the line. Zola was sold in 1993 and Cannavaro followed two years later as Napoli attempted to balance the books, and their performances suffered. A sixth-place finish in 1993/94 was the club's highest of the decade and Napoli cycled through 16 different head coaches in ten years. Ottavio Bianchi returned midway through a season in 1992 to replace Claudio Ranieri, but even the mastermind behind Napoli's greatest moments of the previous decade could lift them no higher than 11th. Eight years on from their second title under Maradona's captaincy, Napoli were relegated to Serie B for the first time since 1965.

The worst was yet to come. Napoli could not return to Serie A at the first try, finishing ninth and then eventually returning for the 2000/01 season with the top four sides all promoted. It was a short-lived return as they were relegated once again the following season. There would be no sight of Serie A football until 2007 as the dark storm clouds turned even blacker above Naples. Napoli were no longer even competing for promotion. They had sunk so low that they finished 16th in 2002/03 and then 13th in 2003/04, testing the bottom of Serie B rather than the top.

The summer of 2004 witnessed Napoli's darkest day as they were refused a licence to compete in Serie B, having accumulated estimated debts of €70 million. The National Associated Press Agency (ANSA, standing for Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata) declared Napoli bankrupt in August 2004. The club was put up for auction, and a bid of €37 million was accepted to buy the club's remains after they were put into administration.

That bid had been submitted by Italian film mogul Aurelio De Laurentiis. The then-55-year-old producer had established himself as one of Italian film's most important figures in connecting the non-Italian world to its movies. He had been introduced to the industry by his uncle Dino, who had also been a trailblazer for Italian film, and Aurelio's father had founded the Filmauro media company in 1975. Aurelio assumed control of the company, and also became a member of the National Italian American Foundation and had been president of the International Federation of Film Producers Associations between 1993 and 2003. Crucially, De Laurentiis' father had been born in the Neapolitan commune of Torre Annunziata, and whilst Aurelio was born in Rome and had no affiliation to football, he claimed to have been taken as a child by his father to watch Napoli in the 1950s. By his own admission, De Laurentiis did not know the rules of football upon buying the club in 2004. The man behind the company that produced the *Hannibal Lecter* film series would soon take on the starring role of his own story as chairman and president of the newly formed Napoli Soccer. He had even tried to buy the club in 1999 for €102 million only to see his bid rejected. 'I put €37 million on the table just to buy a piece of paper, and we started a new adventure.'

The bankruptcy had forced the club to change their name, although the iconic 'N' was retained on the crest of the light blue shirts. The terms of the bankruptcy also required Napoli to restart as a Serie C1 side, meaning they would compete in the third division for the first time since the restructuring of the Italian football system post-World War II.

Naturally, the first objective for Napoli Soccer was to scale the leagues. Any hopes of re-establishing themselves as a functioning and successful club would only be tenable if they were back in Serie A, and whilst they failed to gain promotion to Serie B in their first season, they gathered impressive home support with attendances regularly hitting 50,000 despite being in the third tier. De Laurentiis' model was to acquire highly talented young players and develop them into saleable assets to improve the club's financial position.

There was a ruthlessness to De Laurentiis' operation, one that would remain evident right through to the current day as his first coach, Gian Piero Ventura, was fired in January 2005 and replaced by Edoardo Reja. 'Edy' Reja was a seasoned head coach, having worked across all tiers of Italian football for over two decades. Reja made Napoli immediately competitive even if they missed out on promotion by three points. The team's main issue was a lack of goals, scoring just 45 times in 34 league matches with their top scorer (Roberto Sosa) hitting the back of the net eight times.

This all changed in 2005/06, when Napoli put their disappointment of the previous season behind them to romp to the Serie C1 title by 13 points. They remained relatively goal shy and added just three goals to their tally of a year prior, but their rock-solid defence conceded a mere 20 goals across the campaign. This was and remains a staple of Reja's teams; a resolute and strong defence that first and foremost prevents his sides losing. It is why he became such a trusted pair of hands for Serie A sides facing relegation and needing a coach to pull them back from the brink.

Perhaps more importantly, even than promotion, was Napoli Soccer were renamed. After two years without their original name, the club was officially renamed as Società Sportiva Calcio Napoli. SSC Napoli were back.

Reja's work was not done. Napoli went up again in 2006/07, making it back-to-back promotions under his management. This season coincided with Juventus' relegation into Serie B as a result of the *Calciopoli* scandal; a traumatising event in Italian football history that uncovered a systemic approach to pressuring referees into influencing matches. Juve were at the heart of the story and were stripped of two Serie A titles as well as being demoted. This all meant that the division was as tough as Napoli could have imagined for their re-entry.

Naturally, Juventus' squad was far superior to any in the league and they won the title and promotion at the very first time of asking. Napoli finished second, with their defence the tightest of any side (29 goals conceded), and their attack functional if not inspiring (52 goals scored was lower than five of the top seven). Of those 52 goals, Emanuele Calaiò scored 14, having also scored 18 in Serie C1 in 2005/06. Calaiò had played at youth level for Italy's national team from under-15 right through to under-21 and had impressed at Pescara in his early 20s. Napoli signed him as a 23-year-old, and Calaiò had repaid them by leading their attack for both of their successive promotion seasons. Calaiò was a case study for how De Laurentiis wanted his recruitment to work; sign young and sell high. 'We bought Calaiò while he was at Pescara, you will see what he will be worth in a season,' warned De Laurentiis in November 2006. He was right, although Calaiò's hot

streak was interrupted as Napoli returned to Serie A and De Laurentiis' purse strings loosened to attract non-Italian talents to ensure Napoli would not be seen in Serie B again.

The summer of 2007 saw the arrivals of four overseas talents that would begin to shape Napoli's new era. They were Ezequiel Lavezzi, an energetic Argentine winger; Marcelo Zalayeta, a seasoned Uruguayan striker who had been on Juventus' books for a decade; fellow Uruguayan Walter Gargano; and eye-catching midfielder Marek Hamšik. All four of these arrivals would feature in Napoli's most-used starting 11 in their return to Serie A and collectively the squad's level was raised. Lavezzi quickly established himself as a star in the making. Diminutive, quick-footed and Argentinian, the comparisons to Maradona arrived quickly. His and Hamšik's exploits in front of goal helped Napoli to finish eighth, seven points behind seventh-place Udinese but high enough for a UEFA Cup spot as a result of both that season's Coppa Italia finalists finishing higher than sixth.

In that same 2006 interview, De Laurentiis had spoken boldly of Napoli's ambitions. 'If I say that Napoli must compete with the noblest clubs in the world, I am not exaggerating. We have five or six million fans across the globe, we are a force. We have a duty to compete with Manchester United, Real Madrid, and not just with Juventus, Inter and Milan.' Napoli were still in Serie B at the time, so few could take this seriously. However, as Napoli scaled the tiers of Italian football quickly, and already qualifying for European competition at the first time of asking, De Laurentiis' objective no longer looked so fanciful.



Napoli continued where they left off and lost only two of their opening ten Serie A matches. The curse of the second season, where a team impresses in their first season in a higher division before being found out and brought back to earth the following year, took hold in the autumn and winter of 2008. Seven defeats in nine matches culminated with a 2-0 home loss to Lazio that cost Reja his job as coach. His replacement was Roberto Donadoni, and he too failed to kick Napoli on to the next level in the manner they had hoped. A 12th-place finish was secured but Donadoni won two of the remaining 11 matches of the season with very little improvement shown.

Donadoni continued flatterring to deceive in his first full season. He too was fired by De Laurentiis, having won just four of the 18 matches he had presided over in both seasons. Napoli were loitering above the relegation places, and the owner simply could not risk the reputational and financial implications of relegation; he had invested heavily in the summer, including an €18.75 million outlay on striker Fabio Quagliarella. De Laurentiis turned to Walter Mazzarri for his next appointment, a coach who had enjoyed success in guiding Sampdoria to the UEFA Cup a few seasons before. Following the disappointment of Reja's final season and Donadoni's subsequent poor tenure, Mazzarri's hire would prove to be one of the more inspired decisions of De Laurentiis' career. From his appointment in October 2009, Napoli would not lose again in Serie A until February 2010. The football was scintillating as Mazzarri deployed a three-man defence with aggressive wing-backs and allowed creative freedom to his three main weapons, Lavezzi, Quagliarella and

Hamšik. The trio scored a combined 31 goals that season as Mazzarri unlocked their potential, and Napoli soared accordingly. They sat as high as fourth for a long period in the middle of the season only to falter and drop down to sixth by the campaign's end. Mazzarri had turned their fortunes around, having arrived with the side in danger of relegation and ending the season having qualified for the Europa League play-off round.

Walter Mazzarri's first stint (we will return to his second spell much later in the book) was arguably best remembered for the attacking exploits of his front three. They became known as *I Tre Tenori*, meaning 'The Three Tenors', who were an operatic supergroup that included Luciano Pavarotti. Despite his contribution in Mazzarri's first season, Quagliarella was not a member of this famed trio.

He was loaned and eventually sold to Juventus after the season's first match, a Europa League win over two legs against Elfsborg of Sweden. The reason for his sale was the expensive arrival of another South American forward: Edinson Cavani from Palermo for a club-record €17 million. Cavani also bore a nickname; *El Matador* meaning 'The Bullfighter'. The Uruguayan played with a furious intensity and a lethal finish to match, and quickly settled into the front three alongside Lavezzi and Hamšik. In his first season at Napoli, Cavani scored an astonishing 26 Serie A goals, just two behind the league's leading scorer Antonio Di Natale. Cavani scored three hat-tricks, including two in January alone, and made the kind of impact his nickname suggested he might. A special attribute of Cavani's was that he did not require time and

space to be impactful, and could make short movements to pull away from a marker and create openings. In a league like Serie A where defenders were physical and sat deep, it was Cavani's intelligence and anticipation that made him so unstoppable.

Mazzari and Cavani propelled Napoli to a third-place finish and Champions League football was secured for the first time since 1990/91. It didn't stop there. Cavani had scored 33 times across all competitions in 2010/11 and matched it the following season. Napoli were poorer in the league than they were a season before, mostly as a result of drawing more matches, but a run to the Champions League quarter-finals made their return to Europe's premier competition worthwhile. The crowning glory of that season, however, was winning the Coppa Italia by beating Juventus 2-0 in the final with Cavani and Hamšik both on the scoresheet with second-half goals. This fourth Coppa Italia in the club's history also marked the first major silverware since De Laurentiis' takeover eight years before. In the grand scheme of his vision, a domestic trophy such as this was small change; however, the level at which Napoli were operating proved that the vision was on track. De Laurentiis wanted Napoli to be competing with the very best. They certainly were now.

One third of *I Tre Tenori* was lost ahead of the 2012/13 season as Ezequiel Lavezzi bid farewell to Naples for the riches of Paris-Saint Germain. Lavezzi had been there since Napoli's first promotion back to Serie A and had become an adored beacon of Napoli's growth. Pizzas and coffees were named after him and the people of Naples felt connected to his impish and maverick style. His

replacement would have the unenviable task of not only filling his role in the team but also connecting to the fans. That task fell to Lorenzo Insigne; an even shorter winger who had spent the last two seasons on loan but was a local and lifetime Napoli fan. That season would not see the best of Insigne, but soon even Lavezzi's standing in Naples would be challenged by that of his successor.

Napoli underwhelmed in the Europa League that season having participated in the Champions League a year before, making it through the group stages before crashing out in the first knockout round. On the other hand, their league form hit new heights with a record second-place finish and losing only once at home all season. Just eight matches were spent outside second place throughout the campaign as Napoli began to assert herself as a mainstay at the top of Serie A. Finishing behind the Juventus machine was no shameful feat, and Napoli had now climbed above the Milan clubs to make a claim to be the main contender. They were the top-scoring side in Serie A with 73 goals, and Cavani was crowned *Capocannoniere* (top scorer) for the first time, having scored 29 times in the league.

Cavani had now scored 104 times for the club in just three seasons. To put this in context, the Uruguayan was scoring 0.75 times per match, and only the greats, Maradona and Sallustro, sat ahead of him in the all-time Napoli scoring charts. Cavani was a wanted man, with talk of lucrative transfers away from Italy following his every goal. It turned out to be his last season at Napoli as he followed Lavezzi to the bright lights of Paris for a hefty €64.5 million fee. His star had shone for a short while in Naples, but it would be hard to argue that any player

shone brighter than Cavani in the modern era. A long and successful career took him from France to England to Spain and then Argentina, and forever underrated for his role not only as a goalscorer but as a facilitator and tireless worker for his team.

Cavani was not the only departee in 2013. Having extended his contract by just one year the summer before, Walter Mazzarri announced he would be leaving at the end of the 2012/13 season. Speculation had begun to swirl in the build-up to the season's end, and De Laurentiis was vocal in his pressure to reach a conclusion. 'He has four days to decide. When you go you know what you are leaving behind, but you do not know what you will find. The decision is up to him.' De Laurentiis even went on to say: 'The fans shouldn't worry if Cavani or Mazzarri leave, they should only be concerned if De Laurentiis goes!'

Mazzarri did indeed leave and joined Inter. De Laurentiis' response to his most successful coach departing for a rival? 'The Walter Mazzarri years at Napoli are happy ones, but you need two people to make a marriage. But if your wife wants to sleep with someone else, she'll sleep with someone else.' An emphatic way of saying that Mazzarri's head was turned, and De Laurentiis had come to terms with the fact that nothing would make him stay. Even his reasons for appointing Rafael Benítez to replace him continued the metaphor, claiming he liked how 'monogamous' the Spaniard was.

Aside from the managerial position, the money recouped from the Cavani sale had to be used wisely. Rather than trying to spend it all on one like-for-like replacement, which would have been impossible for a striker of Cavani's

quality, the squad was bolstered with many new additions. The headline arrival was that of Gonzalo Higuaín from Real Madrid for €37 million. The Argentine came with a burgeoning reputation, having scored over 100 times for Real, and at 25 years old had potential to grow even if he was from a very different mould to Cavani. Higuaín was less mobile than his predecessor and a more classic poaching style of centre-forward. He was one of three signings from Real Madrid in the summer of 2013 as he was joined by José Callejón and Raúl Albiol, and other signings included those of Belgian forward Dries Mertens from PSV Eindhoven and goalkeeper Pepe Reina from Liverpool as De Laurentiis flexed his financial muscle. With both Milan clubs in turmoil, there was a realistic opportunity for Napoli to become the second-best side in Italy behind Juventus with the view of pushing their bitter rival all the way across all competitions.

The new-look attacking trio of Higuaín, Callejón and Mertens, with Lorenzo Insigne rotating in and out, was not yet at the level of ‘The Three Tenors’, but between them they posted 46 goals in the 2013/14 Serie A season. Benítez threw out Mazzarri’s 3-4-3 formation and adopted a robust and stable 4-2-3-1 that was defensively sound but also allowed one more attacking player to feature. They scored more goals in Benítez’s debut season (79) than they had in any campaign under Mazzarri as the goals were distributed across the forwards. Napoli never once dropped out of the top three during the entire campaign and qualified for the Champions League for a second year running. Their foray into the Champions League that season was also promising as they won four of their

six matches, only to be knocked out by Arsenal's superior goal difference. A round of 16 elimination in the Europa League was a disappointment, but Benítez's superb debut campaign in Naples was rewarded with the Coppa Italia trophy, a second title in three years for the club. The initial two-year contract awarded to the coach was beginning to seem overly cautious, and an extension was seen as a foregone conclusion.

De Laurentiis wanted more. Two Coppa Italias in three years was an impressive feat for a club that had been in Serie B less than a decade before. His financial outlay had allowed Napoli to maintain their level towards the top end of the table even when selling their best players. It was undeniable that the president would grow tired of winning cups at the expense of securing that first league title since the days of Maradona. So whilst Napoli added another trophy to their cabinet the following season, the Supercoppa Italiana, finishing fifth and 14 points behind their 2013/14 tally represented a step back. In the spring of 2015, De Laurentiis began to vent to the press. 'I have spent €386 million on the purchase of players and I demand commitment. I dislike the idea of a training camp as part of the club's philosophy but Naples is a city full of distractions.'

This would not be the last time that De Laurentiis would threaten his squad with the proverbial stick of a training camp. Napoli undeniably regressed in that second season under Benítez, and squandered the opportunity of making the Europa League Final by losing to Dnipro 2-1 on aggregate. Having already adopted a strong Real Madrid influence in their own squad, the path connecting

the two clubs was trodden in the other direction as Benítez departed Naples at the end of his contract for the Spanish giants. After the team had been developed and honed under Mazzarri, and then stagnated in Benítez's second season, it was reasonable to predict that De Laurentiis' next move would be for a high-calibre, household name to elevate Napoli into league title-winners. However, his next appointment would go completely against this grain.