

*De
Bajwa*



The Conquerors

*How Carlo Ancelotti Made
AC Milan World Champions*

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Contents

Introduction	7
1. Remembering ‘The Immortals’	19
2. Remembering ‘ <i>The Invincibles</i> ’.	53
3. ‘I don’t want to remember this’.	76
4. ‘The Early Life of Carlo’.	93
5. ‘Laying the Foundations’.	121
6. ‘Drawing the Blueprint’	142
7. ‘Getting the Decorators in’.	162
8. ‘The Finishing Touches’	188
9. ‘The Journey to Hell’.	195
10. ‘Istanbul’	210
11. ‘Calciopoli’	237
12. ‘Damage Control’	254
13. ‘The Road to Redemption’.	278
14. ‘Revenge is Sweet’	303
15. ‘The Best Team in the World’	335

CHAPTER ONE

Remembering ‘The Immortals’

TO BEGIN our journey towards a period of unprecedented success for AC Milan, we need to focus on a period belonging to the opposite category.

Almost hidden among a depressingly high number of others, the club were embroiled in a scandal that would later be titled the *Totonero* affair of 1980. It was a scandal that would shine a light on an inherent problem with the way gambling in Italian sport was governed, an issue which Hamil and Morrow describe in *The governance and regulation of Italian football* (2010). It’s as much a reflection on the state of Italian football at the time (one which seems to stand to this day), as it is about Italian society. They profess that there has

developed a ‘culture of malpractice’ from a system which fails to properly dish out the appropriate punishment when necessary, thus undermining the wider public’s view of the integrity of high-profile football in the country. The paradoxical allowance of and reaction to *Totonero* serves as a damning illustration of all that’s broken.

For a long time, sports betting was a state-run exercise operating on a type of accumulator – allowing customers to bet on the outcome of numerous fixtures at one time from a ready-made list, and potentially seeing larger returns should all of them go their way. The process known as *Totocalcio* (soccer totaliser) was introduced in 1946 and had been immensely popular for the decades leading up to the 80s. Personally, I’m not big on betting, but I imagine it can be worth your while if you were to accurately guess the results of two or three games. Ramp that up to between ten and 12 (as per the regulations at the time) and the odds of guessing them all correctly are very slim. But so would be the stake.

From a regulatory point of view, this format’s agreeable. As the aforementioned scholars (and

countless others) will attest, the Italian sporting scene has had its fair share of controversies over the years. They are usually perpetuated by organised groups seeking to use their influence to affect the outcome of major events for their own gain. So, *Totocalcio* was a nifty solution to banning any nonsense for *specific* games. It would quench the public's need to gamble, even if it meant that it diminished the likelihood of a steady return. And it did work for a while.

However, as football grew in stature and fans – but let's call them 'punters' for now – enjoyed an economy affording a more comfortable lifestyle than before, the idea of seeing how well their money could work for them proved too enticing a prospect to resist against better judgement. Though, the eventual overstep didn't come from some tricky mobster looking to sink his claws into an unsuspecting perp. Instead, that honour belonged to Alvaro Trinca and Massimo Cruciani, the owner and supplier of a popular restaurant in the centre of Rome, believed to be a favoured spot for many of the Lazio representatives. From the outside it

was an honest family enterprise. But within it was a sordid hunting ground with plenty of tables under which business could be done.

A couple of discounts here, maybe a vintage bottle of wine there meant the duo cultivated a position of real influence over the Lazio cohort, all before presenting their 'divide and conquer' strategy for getting around the match betting regulations. The solution was annoyingly simple: there were already a number of illegal bookmakers keen to stretch the letter of the law in their favour, and perhaps an even greater number of customers wanting to make a quick buck in such an easy way. So, if they could theoretically take control of how these fixtures would end (with the statistical method behind making the odds throwing itself from left to right with the amount of interested betters), it could be a potentially lucrative income for those now directly involved in moulding the outcome.

As a random example (not based on evidence), let's imagine that Trinca and Cruciani planned an intervention prior to Lazio playing Juventus. They look at the odds which show Juventus

are heavy favourites – assuming something like giving the Rome men a 20/1 chance of overcoming the Old Lady. Obviously it would be advantageous if they could ‘persuade’ Juventus to throw the match. A £1,000 bet for Lazio to win would bring a £20,000 return – so multiply that by either a higher initial placement or a greater volume of gambles – and numbers may not even go as high as the one the bookmakers will owe you. It’s a good plan. Very easy. Maybe a little too easy. And boundless. But completely reliant on everyone doing their part.

At the beginning, things went well for the pair as Lazio remained their focus. But the wheels fell off when they chose to expand their enterprise. Which is where AC Milan comes in. With a pretty strange outcome, it must be said.

Details of why or how are so far unannounced, but it doesn’t take a genius to connect the dots. The entire issue was brought to the authorities by the very brains behind it – Trinca and Cruciani themselves. Allegedly aggrieved at the audacity of clubs not holding up to their side of the bargain, they decided to *Reverse Uno* their way into a

lawsuit of their own. A kind of ‘we had a deal, you broke the agreement so I’m going to tell on you’ situation. I must stress that there is little evidence to better understand who were the drivers behind their decision to do this, but the punitive damages laid out by the authorities seek to paint a better picture. Cruciani held back fewer secrets than a Hayu reality show; naming a vast number of his co-conspirators in the police report. They included Giuseppe Wilson, Bruno Giordano, Massimo Cacciatori and Lionello Manfredonia of Lazio, Enrico Albertosi of AC Milan and even Paolo Rossi, of Vicenza, who was having a successful loan spell at Perugia.

Now, I’m no fraudster, but there were clear flaws in this strategy right from the beginning.

Football is a game of 11 players. Which is more than double any of the first-teamers Cruciani and Trinca were alleged to have influenced from any single club. So it’s no wonder things never worked out. Only a maximum of four players were in on the ruse at any given time and, of course, they could be subbed by their unsuspecting manager or let the match pass them by if they weren’t

absolutely on their game. Which might not even be relevant – with the greatest of respect to them – otherwise they probably wouldn't have given in to scamming their way through a football career. Then, let's assume that things go wrong anyway and the *poliziotti* come calling. When you have enough people on your side, and operate much more smoothly than this, you're likely to keep your stories straight and work your way through an interrogation or two.

Given that it was a federal offence at the time, the punishments were severe. Many of the mentioned players received at least a three-year suspension from football – with a permanent marker against their name should they return. A further 11 players and a few club presidents were also sentenced; some of whom had the indignity of being picked off by the police before a match at their home stadium. I doubt that this was a genuine power-play to 'make an example' of the offenders, but it's a fun thought.

Very few came away from this scandal unscathed, but Paolo Rossi could have done worse. He maintained his innocence throughout

the saga, but had enough information to give some evidence to the police to help clear his own name and indict others. Nevertheless, his eventual two-year suspension was an unwelcome addition to the overall 50 years' worth of sentencing that's believed to have resulted from *Totonero*. It was a suspension which was fraught with uncertainty because of his joint-ownership contract with Vicenza and Juventus. It had been arranged to give him some valuable game time at the smaller club, while remaining the asset of the bigger one.

Even with the ban, Juve saw fit to repurchase the rights to employ Rossi full-time towards the end of his banishment. It gave him just enough game time to get sharp for the upcoming 1982 FIFA World Cup in Spain. There he would become a focal point in Italy's campaign, scoring more than half their goals after an underwhelming group stage.

While Rossi was able to put the issue behind him, his more recent achievements almost completely overshadowing it, the other offenders weren't so lucky; particularly Lazio and Milan.

Both were relegated to Serie B for the new season and while Milan did get promoted back to the top division they had to do so twice before stabilising in 1983/84 when they finished sixth. They could only stand by as perennial table-toppers Juventus picked up four of a possible six post-*Totonero* titles, with prolific creator Michel Platini winning a triplet of top-scorer trophies during this time. Milan could only dream of reaching peaks like those again. All the while, the questions grew in pertinence and intensity.

When would they be able to win a *Scudetto*? Would their reputation be forever tarnished just because of a few rotten eggs? Whatever the court of public opinion would decide, one thing was for sure: to succeed they needed the right people in the right place. A solid owner – ideally with some financial muscle – a manager with good ideas on how they could get themselves back to the top, and even better players.

In 1986, one of those prayers was answered:

'Milan were in Serie B. Then I came along and promised that I would make the team

THE CONQUERORS

the strongest in the world, but nobody believed me, not even the players.'

Silvio Berlusconi

A look at the enigma which is Silvio Berlusconi is enough to leave the average football fan with mixed feelings. Paul Ginsborg's biography, *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony*, is one of the more accurate, yet deceptively diplomatic descriptions of the enigmatic businessman and politician. Insisting that Berlusconi's story can be read as 'one part of the Milanese bourgeoisie, dynamic, parvenu and without a sense of limit, as it gains ascendancy over the other (submissive side), and in the end transforms it'. Some may call it 'brazen', 'brash' or even 'over-indulgent'; and not in a good way.

The point is, when it comes to football, all that dissipates with every moment of success you're able to bring. It's the difference between arrogance and confidence, I suppose. As an example, a player who boasts the ability of Cristiano Ronaldo without the desire to realise it but maintains they are just as good is arrogant. Cristiano, himself, is confident.

So, while Berlusconi might have been a more than eccentric figure, as polarising as he was effective, there's no escaping his ingrained positive impact on the trajectory of AC Milan after he arrived in 1986, especially following the indignation which outgoing president Giuseppe Farina had attracted.

Berlusconi's arrival, by the way, was something else.

Even now it seems too outrageous to be true. One can only presume Berlusconi was aiming to combat the negative publicity the club had attracted with a headline-grabber of his own. I suppose he was aiming to usher in his era with a spectacle befitting his promises. And I reckon he pulled it off.

Berlusconi took charge on 20 February 1986, but waited until the end of the season to introduce himself to his expectant subjects. In July of the same year, he warned the fans to brace themselves for an address on the eighth in a stadium not too far away from the San Siro, which is also known as the Giuseppe Meazza stadium depending on whether your Milanese bread is buttered red and

black or blue and black. The stage Berlusconi had chosen for his arrival was the neighbouring Arena Civica, a rustic, charming, multi-purpose arena which housed Inter in the 40s. It housed a confused 10,000-strong audience waiting to see what their new owner had in store. Then, with the Sforzesco castle standing proudly in the distance, and a welcoming dance troupe warming up the crowd for the main event, Mr Silvio landed. Yes. Landed.

The man thundered through the open roof in a helicopter – propelling his way into the egos of every scorned fan who'd gone without success for so long. He even chose to have two other helicopters flown in for good measure either side of his.

It was one of those moments when you must think you're in a music video, as when there's a rainstorm outside and you watch the streams of water flow down your window. Berlusconi arrived with his own soundtrack, Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* blasting through the speakers.

While some may have seen it as a needlessly in-your-face stunt, about as crass as it was obvious, I (and many Milan fans of the time) disagree. From

a publicity perspective it was a statement that needed to be made.

Lest we forget, it came off the back of a deeply ill-timed and shameless affair for one of the biggest clubs in the world who, incidentally, were crowned domestic champions before a couple of restaurateurs got grilled by the *Guardia di Finanza*. Milan's reputation seemed terminally affected and their squad was a far cry from rivalling clubs such as Inter and Juventus. Actually, Sky's Tommaso Fiore takes one step further in claiming that a potential audit was looming (with a devastating outcome) had they not got their act together. They were in desperate need of salvation, such that in December 1985 there was even a banner unfurled during a home game welcoming the forthcoming president when he was flirting with the idea in the press. Now, there he was, packaged like some resourceful oligarch sent from heaven, determined to restore Milan to their former glories and beyond. And he even gave the fans a taste of what was in store.

Those adjacent helicopters either side of Berlusconi served a purpose other than vanity. For, no sooner had they docked than a number of

familiar faces emerged. Naturally, Franco Baresi was the first.

Now, we can argue here until we're blue in the face about who we think is the 'greatest' centre-back of all time. But we'll never come to an agreement because 'greatest' is a subjective term clouded with an objective veil, lulling us all into a false sense of security that our opinion is factual when it can't be. In reality, we each value different qualities in different ways. Most are valid, but we choose the weight, and that's a dangerous thing.

What I think we should do instead, and this is a common theme I'll choose when assessing the various players that we come across on our journey to the last page, is to make a case for things every football fan can appreciate. Baresi is a good example. He is 1.76m tall – about 5ft 9in. And he was a centre-back.

By comparison, Liverpool's Virgil van Dijk is an adonis. Tall. Strong. Fast. Handsome. Eight inches taller than Baresi. Van Dijk is the archetypal defender, and Baresi was the antithesis of pretty much all of that. Not as tall, nor as strong or quick. But Baresi was smart, *very* smart. The weird and

wonderful Brazilian playmaker Zico labels him the 'consummate libero'; thereby 'capable of doing whatever he wanted with the ball whether he was defending *or* attacking'. Further testimony to his ability only seeks to confirm Zico's assessment, and converges on his positional intelligence as the reason for his success. He didn't necessarily need recovery pace to make up for a mistake, because he did not make them in the first place. And you don't need to be taller or stronger than the other guy if you're the one who gets to the ball first. He was exceptional beyond his shortcomings and wise beyond his years. All things considered it was a very sensible decision for Berlusconi to have Baresi step out of that helicopter first. After years of uncertainty, Milan could now point to their off-pitch general and their on-pitch commander. One that was 'always a Milanista' and was there to serve.

It's easy to forget that Baresi was only 26 years old as he emerged alongside Milan's new owner, but their reception told those fans everything they really needed to know about what was coming. These guys are here now. They're here to stay and they've come to play.