

'It never stops hurting knowing

ANDREAS WERZ

DIEGO MARADONA was without doubt one of the world's greatest footballers. The 1986 World Cup winner with Argentina was last year voted "FIFA Footballer of the Century" in an internet survey conducted by the world body itself. The *FIFA Magazine* Editor, Andreas Werz, recently caught up with the 40-year-old Argentine in Buenos Aires.

Question: Personally, how do you rate the standard of today's football?

Answer: Technically, I would say that football is no better today than it was a few years ago. That was fairly evident from the level of play at the last two FIFA World Cups. I think this stems primarily from the fact that in many countries football is no longer played on the streets, in the backyards or on playing fields – the places where football skills are best learnt – often because these spaces don't exist anymore. What strikes me most about many of today's players is that they lack respect for the ball. It seems to me that much more importance is now attached to physical conditioning, tactics and defensive play than to technique and attacking football. There is a great deal that FIFA can do to encourage people to buck this trend.

● **What do you mean exactly?**

Well, FIFA can use its influence and standing to ensure that a passion for ball skills and attacking play is reawakened in young players. Sometimes, I watch a game and wonder whether the players have been replaced by robots. I think FIFA needs to keep a very close eye on what is going on in football academies. In recent years, numerous academies have been set up all over the world – a trend I welcome wholeheartedly as these institutes not only nurture the next generation of footballers, but they also create good people. However,

no one should be allowed to set up and run an academy purely on the back of a handful of appearances in the Argentine championship, for example. Football academies have a major responsibility to society, therefore they must be managed by specialists. I have noticed in Argentina that most academies are more concerned with tactics and skill. It's probably the same elsewhere, but it shouldn't be the case, and it's hav-



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that my playing career is over'

ing a very negative effect on the appeal of our sport. That's why FIFA should step in.

● What kind of thing do you have in mind?

I spoke to Michel Platini about it in Buenos Aires some time ago. He also believes that FIFA ought to launch projects to promote the technical side of football. The onus is also on coaches to ensure that tactics do not stifle technical flair. Tactics are important, for sure, but they must not be allowed to dominate football. Sadly, that is exactly what is starting to happen and as a result a lot of enjoyment is being taken out of the game. Football is not as attractive as it used to be – for players or spectators.

● Should retired world stars like Michel Platini, Johan Cruyff and yourself make an effort to revive this enthusiasm for skilful play?

I think so and I'm sure that we could make a difference. If Platini, Cruyff and I were involved in a global campaign to promote the technical element, it would have a much greater impact than if we simply tried to foster this style of play in traditional coaching roles. I would like to talk over my ideas with Platini and other retired top players sometime and hear their thoughts on the matter. I would love to get involved in promoting and improving football worldwide, it is something I feel very strongly about.

● Can football be improved by making further changes to the Laws of the Game?

There should definitely not be any major changes to the Laws of the Game. Football has always been a spectacle and it is the most popular and compelling sport that is. However, FIFA and the International Board made a very shrewd decision when they outlawed goalkeepers from handling backpasses, and I'm also a strong advocate of the six-second rule for goalkeepers. Both of these amendments have had a positive effect on the game. But we must never forget that football should stay a simple game.

● Next year the FIFA World Cup is to be played in South Korea and Japan. What do you expect from the competition?

I'm sure it will be a very enter-

taining tournament as long as we don't lose sight of the fact that the tournament is being staged in Asia. The Koreans and Japanese have a unique history, distinctive traditions, and a very different football culture. We must respect and accept these differences. The whole mood and atmosphere in and around the World Cup stadia will be very unlike what fans are used to in Europe and South America.

● Today, more and more club and National team competitions are being organised around the world. Critics claim that there are too many games and football is reaching saturation point. Do you believe that this build-up of fixtures will harm the players and ultimately have a detrimental effect on the quality of the game?

We must certainly take care that the amount of football being played does not reach saturation level. These days, some players are forced to play in a huge number of games. Often, they go on to the field looking tired and jaded, and inevitably, it is the sport that suffers. Fans pay a lot of money to see the top teams and players, and what they end up getting for their money is often a disappointment. The supporters then become disillusioned and ask themselves why they

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Diego Maradona receives the FIFA Player of the Century web-based award from FIFA President Joseph Blatter.

should bother going to a game again. Nevertheless, the mass popularity of football will never die.

● **What is your view on clubs paying fees in excess of \$60 million for players like Luis Figo and Zinedine Zidane?**

First of all, let me say that I don't believe the players receive their rightful share of transfer fees. Figo and Zidane may get ten per cent of this \$60 million. In my opinion, that is not enough. The clubs receive the lion's share of all fees, not the players, and that is simply not right. I still don't think that top players earn enough money. After all, they are the ones who draw the crowds to matches, and they are the ones, who enable clubs to seal the lucrative television and marketing contracts that generate so much money. It is not the high transfer fees paid for top players that concern me, but the disproportionate sums that are now being demanded for very average footballers. Zidane warrants \$60 million because he is an exceptional player. There are very few active footballers with this talent, but we still often see incredible amounts of money being paid for run-of-the-mill players. That's something I can't even begin to understand.

● **Is too much attention now being paid to money rather than the game itself?**

That's definitely the case in the media and business. But the players themselves still have only one aim when they set foot on the pitch. That's to win the game and entertain the public. In this respect, things are the same as they have always been. If players take pleasure out of football, so will the fans. Unfortunately, very few showmen exist in today's game.

● **Which of today's players do you enjoy watching the most?**

Rivaldo. I love watching him play. In my opinion, he is the only player who really is a joy to watch and he never ceases to amaze me. I rate Luis Figo very highly as well, but he is not yet a complete footballer.

● **Is there a player, who you would consider to be your successor?**

Each footballer should try to get the best out of his or her own particular talents, play their own game and not model themselves on others. Pele was Pele, Platini was Platini and Maradona was Maradona. Each one was unique, and always will be. I don't think anyone should attempt to be like I was as a player. It's not possible, as each player has his or her own individual qualities. I never wanted to be a new Pele, I just wanted to be Maradona.

● **Are you glad that you played**

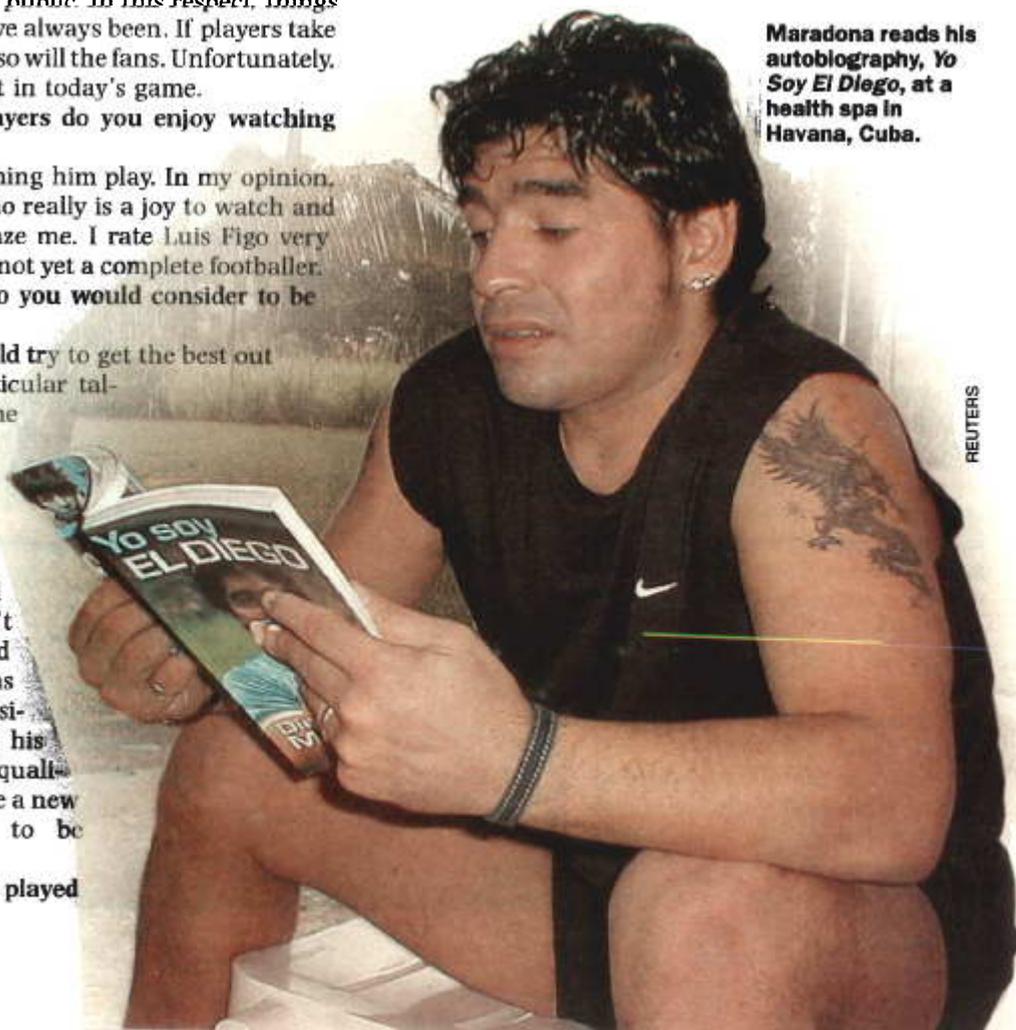
Diego Maradona Factfile

Born: October 30, 1960 in Lanus (Buenos Aires Province, Argentina); **Playing career:** 1976-1980: Argentinos Juniors (166 appearances, 116 goals). 1981-1982: Boca Juniors (40 appearances, 28 goals). 1982-1984: FC Barcelona (58 appearances, 38 goals). 1984-1991: SSC Napoli (259 appearances, 115 goals). 1992-1993: FC Sevilla (29 appearances, 8 goals). 1993: Newell's Old Boys (5 appearances). 1995-1997: Boca Juniors (29 appearances, 7 goals).

in the 1980s and 90s, or would you rather have been a professional today?

I would be happiest if I was still able to play. It never stops hurting knowing that my playing career is over. Football still flows through my whole body – my head, my heart, my stomach, my legs and my feet. My passion for the sport is as strong as ever. I was so happy when I was playing. I had fun for the whole of my career, whether I was playing in youth teams, at the FIFA World Cup, with FC Barcelona or with Napoli.

Maradona reads his autobiography, *Yo Soy El Diego*, at a health spa in Havana, Cuba.



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Professional debut: Argentinos Juniors – Talleres de Cordoba 0-1, (October 20, 1976). **Final professional appearance:** River Plate – Boca Juniors 1-2 (October 25, 1997).

Honours: FIFA World Cup winner (1986), FIFA World Cup runner-up (1990), four World Cup finals appearances (1982, 1986, 1990, 1994), World Youth championship (1979), Copa America (1983, 1987, 1989), UEFA Cup (1989), Argentine championship (1981), Spanish Cup (1983), Italian championship (1987, 1990), Italian Cup (1987), Italian League's top goalscorer (1988), Argentine Footballer of the Year (1979, 1980, 1981, 1986, 1990), Argentine League's top goalscorer (1978, 1979, 1980), South American Footballer of the Year (1979, 1980, 1986,

1989, 1990, 1992), World Sportsman of the Year (1986), FIFA Footballer of the Century in Internet-survey (2000), 91 international A-matches, 34 goals, 15 appearances for Argentina U-20, 8 goals. **Full international debut:** Argentina – Hungary 5-1, February 25, 1997.

Coaching career: 1994: Deportivo Mandiyu. 1995 – Racing Club.

Suspensions: 1991 – tests positive in a drug test and is banned from playing football worldwide for 15 months. 1994 – fails doping control during the FIFA World Cup and is suspended for 15 months. 1997 – third positive drug test. On October 29, 1997 Maradona finally announces his retirement as a player. ■

I have always loved the game, no matter whether in front of 10 or 100,000 spectators. Football was and still is nothing but a pleasure for me, I am at my happiest when I'm on the pitch.

● **In your autobiography, "Yo soy el Diego," you say that the happiest time of your career was during the FIFA World Youth Championship in 1979. Why was that?**

Argentina had an unbelievably strong team in Japan and we won the world title in style. It was my first major success. At the time, I was very young and I was full of dreams and ambitions, as were all my team-mates. We all had so much fun playing football and it showed the way we played. We would repeatedly put the ball through the legs of our opponents, delicately chip defenders, and score fantastic goals. We played absolutely wonderful football. It's true that I never had as much fun at any other time while I was playing. Japan is my happiest memory.

● **And what is your least favourite recollection?**

The humiliating end to my time in Italy. The circumstances that led to my leaving Naples still cause me a great deal of pain. It is something I will never forget. When I was forced to leave Naples, my team-mates were the only ones to get in touch and thank me for what I had done. I heard nothing from the management of the club. I did not deserve such a farewell. I did so much for the people of Naples, brought them so much happiness, won the Italian Scudetto, and helped turn Napoli into a competitive team. But, despite all the bad things that happened, I still have good memories of Naples and Napoli. And I will never forget the people of the city and the support they gave me.

● **You are still a very avid follower of football and you regularly attend matches. You're an especially vociferous supporter at the home games of your old club Boca Juniors. Why do you do it?**

There is no place in the world where the passion and love for a football club is so apparent as at Boca Juniors. The club and its fans are unique. I'll never

have my fill of the feeling I get there and that's why I go to the Bombonera Stadium so often. At home, I watch football on TV every day. I have 18 satellite dishes at my house, so I can watch live coverage of matches from all over the world. I even get games from the Iraqi championship.

● **You had a brief spell as a coach. What made you decide to give up the job?**

I don't know. Maybe it was because many club presidents have no confidence in coaches and don't give them the time they need to build a team. A few defeats and the coach is given his marching orders. I have recently received more offers for coaching positions, but they didn't really interest me. If I ever decided to coach again, it could only be with a club that had ambition and set itself high targets, somewhere I can build a team and make a mark. I don't want to be in a position where I constantly have to stave off relegation. I want to be battling the title. In my two coaching jobs, I had to organise absolutely everything, even down to buying match kits and making sure that they were washed for the next game. I don't want to be in that situation again.

● **Are you working at the moment?**

I have a weekly programme on Argentine TV and I spend a lot of time travelling around the world. I must admit I don't have a great deal of work, mainly because I turn down a lot of offers I receive, as I don't do things I'm not entirely sure about. I've set up the "Foundation Diego Armando Maradona" in my hometown, Buenos Aires. It's a foundation that looks after the interests of children and youngsters, bringing them up to be good people and preparing them for a career. They play football of course, but we also provide them with medical care and a balanced diet. The project is very important to me. From my own experiences, I know what it is like to grow up in difficult conditions.

● **Although you retired from playing a few years ago, the interest surrounding you continues unabated. You still draw crowds of people wherever you go in**



Mardona poses with former Argentine tennis star Gabriela Sabatini during the opening of his official web page in Buenos Aires.



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the world, particularly in Argentina. Do you ever get tired of permanently being under the scrutiny of fans and journalists?

Never. It has been part of my life for so long that I don't know anything else. That people still come to see me and take an interest in what I am doing makes me realise that I have left a lasting imprint on football, my clubs, the Argentinian national team and millions of fans worldwide and I have brought them happiness. This recognition and love have been earned. Only when I am with my two daughters do I want privacy.

● **If you could rectify one mistake from your past what would it be?**

I have made many mistakes and suffered from their consequences. The biggest mistake of all was taking drugs. This one action saddened and hurt many people especially my wife and my daughters. It is something that I will never stop regretting. But it doesn't make me a monster. I have come to accept myself for what I am and I'm happy with myself. I now hope to help keep youngsters off drugs through the "Foundation Diego Armando Maradona." They should not do the same as I did. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to work for the welfare of children and young people. And it's not a case of doing these things now just because I myself had a drug problem.

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● **In July, you met FIFA President Joseph S. Blatter in Buenos Aires. What did you discuss with him?**

We had a very friendly, informal chat. As I have already mentioned, I am keen to actively help FIFA to make the game better, though I'm not yet sure in what capacity. Perhaps, I could work more closely with other retired stars like Franz Beckenbauer, Michel Platini and Bobby Charlton to take football to the world. They already do a great deal of work for football, but they could achieve even more with more practical work, which I would be happy to help with. I feel that stars who have retired from the game should work more intensively for football. They are heroes and what they say and do has a real effect on people. It is essential that we take full advantage of that.

● **Many football fans around the world will want to know about Diego Maradona's health these days?**

I know that millions of people are concerned about my well being. I can reassure them that I am very well. I keep a regular fitness programme and the results of medical tests have been fine. God doesn't want to call me yet. I'll be on this earth a good while longer and I plan to use my time to give something back to football, after it gave so much to me. ■

Courtesy: FIFA Magazine

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