

Contesting global hierarchies through football. Diego Armando Maradona and the Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels

EDOARDO MOLINELLI¹

Abstract. Diego Armando Maradona is unanimously considered the best player of all time, alongside Pelé. However, while the Brazilian has always represented the establishment, Maradona positioned himself as the critical consciousness of world football, fiercely criticising the most important football institutions. Many aspects of Maradona's life have been extensively explored, both journalistically and academically. There is, however, a lesser-known event that serves as a perfect metaphor for his relationship with power: the establishment of the Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels (AIFP), which he founded in 1995. Despite having generated significant media attention, AIFP ultimately failed to challenge the role of players within the global football system. This chapter aims to investigate the development of AIFP, as well as the factors that contributed to its dissolution. Moreover, it attempts to show how the agency of top-level athletes can expose structural injustices within sports organisations and contribute to institutional change.

Keywords: Diego Armando Maradona, Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels, footballers' union, FIFA, contestation.

¹ Edoardo Molinelli, University for Foreigners of Perugia (Italy). E-mail address: edoardo.molinelli@studenti.unistrapg.it

Introduction

In early September 2024, several Italian newspapers reported that the mural dedicated to Diego Armando Maradona in the Quartieri Spagnoli of Naples was the second most visited site of interest in Italy, following the Colosseum in Rome (Corriere del Mezzogiorno, 2024). Despite the lack of official sources and accurate data on attendance, being the mural an open work of art, the news confirms the huge impact that Maradona continues to have, 27 years after his retirement from football and four years after his death.

This is primarily due to the exceptional sporting status of the Argentinian, who is unanimously considered the best player of all time, alongside Pelé. However, there are also other elements that have made Maradona a key figure in contemporary pop culture. From his political ideas to his off-field controversies, from his complex relationship with the media to his role as “voice of the voiceless”, the *Pibe de Oro*’s impact on global culture and society is undeniable. While Pelé has always represented the establishment, both in his country and internationally, Maradona positioned himself as the critical consciousness of world football. On many occasions, in fact, he fiercely criticised the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol (CONMEBOL), the Asociación del Fútbol Argentino (AFA) and their top executives.

Many aspects of Maradona’s life and career have been extensively explored, both journalistically and academically. His political beliefs, his relationship with the media system, his role as redeemer of Argentina, Naples and the many “Souths” of the world, his closeness to Central and South American socialist leaders (Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales), and his 40-

years battle against FIFA and other football governing bodies have been subjects of books, newspapers articles and academic essays².

There is, however, a lesser-known event that serves as a perfect metaphor for Maradona's relationship with power, made up of fierce criticism, controversy, great advances and sudden retreats: the establishment of the Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels (AIFP), a footballers' union which he founded in 1995 and chaired until 1998. The Argentinian always advocated for greater player involvement in decision-making within football organizations, which he believed were too distant from the needs of football's true protagonists. However, his attempt to establish a strong international footballers' union capable of negotiating with the top executives of FIFA, UEFA, and other major federations quickly faded from memory, despite having generated significant media attention and involving many top players at the time.

This chapter aims to investigate the genesis, formation, and development of AIFP, as well as the factors that contributed to its eventual dissolution. Moreover, it attempts to show how the agency of top-level athletes, such as Maradona, can expose structural injustices within sports organizations, thereby contributing to institutional change, albeit to a limited extent.

1. The establishment of AIFP

The inspiration to create a footballers' union probably came to Maradona during the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, which made him a true sports legend. During the tournament, Maradona and teammate Jorge Valdano repeatedly protested FIFA's

² A complete bibliography on Maradona can be found in Brescia and Paz (2023, pp. 254-261).

decision to have some matches played at unsuitable times (for example, noon) to satisfy the requests of European television stations. The day before the beginning of the World Cup, Maradona stated that “it is a mistake to play at midday and Havelange [FIFA’s president at the time, ed.] should know it [author’s translation]” (El Mundo Deportivo, 1986). Scott (in Brescia and Paz, 2023, p. 238) reports another controversial declaration of the *Pibe de Oro* during the tournament: “If they make me play at noon in a searing heat that gives me a splitting headache, then I have the right to say it. I’m the one who puts himself on the line in the field. No one pays to see Havelange”.

In his autobiography, Maradona (2005, p. 122) recalled the beginning of his clashes against FIFA: “To make matters worse matches were being played in the morning, at noon, at any old time just to please European TV schedulers. [...] I always went to bed late before a match, and woke up at eleven, but when we played at midday I had to get up at eight in the morning. [...] But it was a more serious matter than just a personal habit. That’s why we kicked up such a fuss, Valdano and me”.

Although Alabarces (2021, p. 176) refers to these minor protests as a form of proto-politicization, it is evident that Maradona was beginning to structure his thinking on the power of FIFA and the marginal role assigned to players in the decision-making process. However, nearly a decade passed before his vague intentions expressed in Mexico materialised into a concrete proposal. The first time he publicly discussed the idea of a footballers’ union was during his acceptance of the Ballon d’Or for Services to Football, at a ceremony held in Paris on 3 January 1995. At that time, he was serving his second ban for doping, having tested positive for ephedrine at the 1994 World Cup in the US. During the ceremony, he said to the press: “I have the word of Bebeto, Romario, Stoichkov, Francescoli, Negrete, who is the president of the Mexican players. I will speak

with Gullit and with the Italian players who I am good friends with. From there, we will begin to organise what will be known as the Football Players' Defense Union [author's translation]"³.

A couple of months later, on 18 September 1995, Maradona announced a press conference at the Hotel Le Meridién Etoile in Paris to present the international players' union, officially named Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels. This is how he recalled the event in his autobiography (Maradona, 2005, p. 232):

In Paris, on Monday 18 September, an old dream became reality: I founded the World Union of Footballers. I was supported by a gang, a serious gang, with Eric Cantona at the head of it. He was suspended at the time, like me, and was the first to add his voice to mine. Also there were George Weah, Abedi Pelé, Gianluca Vialli, Gianfranco Zola, Laurent Blanc, Rai, Thomas Brodin, Ciro Ferrara, and Michel Preud'homme... a first-class team. Our aim was simple but impossible because of the attitude of the directors: we wanted to be heard. Footballers have a voice and a vote and we wanted them to listen once and for all.

Burns (2010, pp. 235-238), who wrote one of the most complex and thorough biography of Maradona, gave an accurate description of the event:

Maradona arrives at Paris's five-star Hotel Le Méridien [...]. While Maradona receives a massage in his room, Didier Roustan, a journalist with the French TV Station 2, a friend of Eric Cantona, huddles in a corner with two of Maradona's lawyers, Bolotnicof from Buenos Aires and Sinischalsci (sic) from

³ The declaration is in the video "Un dia 3 de enero pero de 1995 Diego Maradona era premiado con el balon de oro en Francia". Available at: https://youtu.be/i9_D5jga1mU?si=p3P8rZ5JvoKPsTv (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Naples. [...] The debate, never fully resolved, is whether the founding stars, some of them millionaires, should each put up \$7,000 as a sign of good faith in the brotherhood of soccer. While Roustan seems to take the idea of the union seriously⁴, Bolotnicof and Sinischalsci see it as a simple marketing exercise for their client. [...] Later, in a crowded press conference, Maradona and Cantona [...] claim to want to set the seal on a new charter for footballers' rights. Cantona explains that football is a sport that brings joy to millions and that therefore footballers deserve to be treated with respect. Maradona extends the meaning of respect to cover sympathy for those players 'unfairly' subjected to drug tests whose consequences are out of all proportion to the act itself. [...] Maradona conveys a sense of being genuinely enthused with his project. He declares his hope that his 'union' will act as the channel for the frustrations and grievances of rich and not-so-rich footballers worldwide who feel that club owners and FIFA officials need to have their power checked.

Vincenzo Siniscalchi, Maradona's Italian lawyer cited by Burns, gave his version to an Italian radio on 29 May 2015. In the interview, Siniscalchi referred to the union's statute, which he claimed to have created together with a French colleague, and listed some of its points:

In the statute [...] there were evaluations of the protection of the footballer, not of corporate protection, in fact there was a reference to the existence of local unions which was in no way intended to be overridden by this world union of footballers. [...] Point 3: safeguarding the rights of the players' personalities, supporting the values of football in the complete development, and therefore not only sporting, of the player's personality. Point 5: aid to players from developing countries, [...] development of the ethical and social principles of football, with

⁴ Roustan was appointed general secretary of the union.

reference to the principle of solidarity between players throughout the world. [...] Point 7: the player is central to the world of football, and this centrality must be matched by rights and duties that must always be upheld. This was a politely but firmly polemical proposition towards Blatter's absolute patronage [author's translation]⁵.

Somewhat surprisingly, neither Maradona nor Burns referred again to AIFP in their books. Burns (2010, p. 238) merely noted that “the announcement of the union has in fact thrown the world of football's governing body into a slight panic. The men of Zurich do not like revolutions. Only when word comes back to them from Paris do they relax, satisfied that there is more mouth than muscle in Maradona's revolutionary army”. Also, Siniscalchi in his interview did not add any details about the fate of the union.

2. The rise and fall of AIFP

It seems that, at least in the memories of its founder and the people around him, AIFP came to an immediate end after the press conference in Paris. It is true that there were many doubts about its real effectiveness. Valente (1995) underlined the lack of clarity regarding the financing of the association, while Ceaux (1995) criticised the difficulty to know more about the union's aims.

The history of AIFP, however, continued for at least three years. This is stated by the Union of International Associations

⁵ Transcript of the interview given by Siniscalchi to Radio Radicale. Available at: <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/443650> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

(UIA), which affirms not only that the last news about AIFP dates to 1998, but also that it ceased to exist in 2004⁶.

In fact, the association gained a certain importance following the Bosman ruling, which had a shocking effect on football. Jean-Marc Bosman was a Belgian footballer whose contract with RFC Liege expired in 1990; he then moved to French club USL Dunkerque, which refused to pay the transfer fee requested by Liege. Claiming that this system prevented him to exercise his right to freedom of movement guaranteed by article 48 of the Treaty of Rome, Bosman took his case to the European Court of Justice. On 15 December 1995, the Court ruled in favour of Bosman, giving to all EU footballers the right to a free transfer at the end of their contracts (Antonioni and Cubbin, 2000, pp. 158-159). The Belgian player paid dearly for his victory. When his transfer to Dunkerque was off, he was suspended by Liege. From 1990 to 1995, when he officially retired, he only played a couple of games for the French club St. Quentin, the Réunion Island club Saint-Denis FC, and the Belgian team Olympic Charleroi. He then faced financial, personal and mental issues, which led him to depression and alcoholism, and left him bankrupt.

AIFP, however, tried to help him and was at his side since the approbation of the Bosman ruling. Moreover, the footballer's union chaired by Maradona saw the opportunity to gain more prominence in a context revolutionised by the Bosman ruling: "The association argues that the current structure of the European unions is not adapted to the new reality of football. [...] Its idea is that world football figures represent the group in negotiations with FIFA and UEFA [author's translation]" (Valente, 1996a).

⁶ Available at: <https://uia.org/s/or/en/1100021930> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

On 7 October 1996, the first general assembly of AIFP was held in Paris. Maradona did not attend for personal reasons, even if he sent a letter which was read by one of his lawyers, Daniel Bolotnicoff. The assembly decided to organise a friendly match for Bosman on 1 April 1997⁷. Italian player Gianluca Vialli was the spokesperson at the press conference: “We have learned from the mistakes we made this year, and we will be more active from now on [author’s translation]”, he said (Valente, 1996b).

Maradona was still the president of AIFP and was deeply involved in its activities, as showed by the press conference given after the union’s meeting in Barcelona on 24 February 1997. Facing the Real Federación Española de Fútbol (RFEF) refusal to authorise the match and provide a referee, Maradona officially confirmed his participation in the match on 27 April at the Estadi Olímpic in Montjuïc, Barcelona, and harshly criticised Blatter and Havelange for their handling of the Bosman ruling (Román and Segura, 1997). However, due to the protests of the Spanish players, who were convinced that the Bosman ruling would prejudice them by opening their local ‘football market’ to all EU players, AIFP decided to withdraw support for Bosman and turned the friendly game into a match in support of the union itself (Aguilar, 1997).

Despite being a nearly retired footballer (he had only 7 official matches in his last 2 seasons at Boca Juniors, 1996-97 and 1997-98), Maradona played in the game, being substituted in the second half. The Rest of the World won 4-3 against Europe, but the match was a clear failure: as underlined by Cordovilla (1997a), “Maradona, Cantona, Stoichkov, Vialli, Karembeu and a long list of world-class players were not enough to attract

⁷ The match was postponed various times, until it was definitively scheduled on 27 April 1997.

the Barcelonans to the Olympic mountain. The organisation generously spoke of 5,200 spectators [author's translation]". Just over 5,000 spectators in a stadium capable of holding more than 50,000 people was certainly not a good result. Organisational problems, opposition from FIFA, UEFA and RFEF, and the lack of adequate promotion were certainly the main reasons for the failure of the initiative, although Maradona was still able to draw media attention to himself and the match. The president of AIFP spoke the day after the game, stating that "the media have echoed this event because I did not attend the press conference to present the match, and they did not want to understand that I was very tired after fourteen hours of flight. [...] There is a certain journalistic sector that prefers to be on the side of the executives [author's translation]" (Artús and Roca, 1997).

Some months after the match at the Montjuïc, AIFP took part in an event of the European Year Against Racism. As stated in an official European Commission press release (1997), "on Sunday evening next October 12, three of history's greatest footballers, Diego Maradona, Georges Weah and Eric Cantona will lead three teams of top international football players onto the pitch for a game with a difference. The all star 'Football Against Racism' kicks off in the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid as one of the biggest events of the European Year Against Racism. [...] Three games of forty minutes will be played in front of a crowd of over 100,000 and a televised audience of millions worldwide".

Despite being listed as one of the captains of the three teams, Maradona did not attend the game. The media had anticipated that the Argentinian did not agree with the organizers (that is, the same union of which he was the president) about some undefined aspects (Cordovilla, 1997b), but the day after the matches he said that he was not in Madrid "because we have

a problem with a Frenchman who we put in charge of the union to manage the income and he is making a very big mistake: he charges each player 6,000 dollars as a contribution and that is outrageous [author's translation]" (Durrels, 1997). The Frenchman was Didier Roustan, the general secretary of AIFP, who answered that "Maradona is unpredictable; talking about him in terms of logic is impossible [author's translation]" (Durrels, 1997).

Although 'Football Against Racism' was a big success, with more than 90,000 people attending the game (Cordovilla, 1997c), it was the last significant event promoted by AIFP. On 12 May 1998, the match held in honor of Jean-Marc Bosman was finally played at the Villeneuve-d'Ascq stadium near Lille, but it went almost unnoticed. Maradona and Cantona did not attend. While there were some famous players, such as Michel Preud'homme, Vincenzo Scifo and Gheorghe Hagi, only around 5,000 people watched as a selection of veterans won 3-1 against a younger team (Cherruau, 1998).

From this moment on, AIFP's activities ceased permanently. Maradona had already shown that he no longer agreed with the union's board; apart from his testimonial role as president and his show press conferences, in fact, the real leader had always been Roustan. As Essindi (2003) claims, "Didier toured European clubs at his own expense, shook the hands of Vialli, Weah, Pelé, Waddle, Maldini and rallied them to his brown panache. Quickly, this king of the opposite left his position on France 2 to take care of the union full time. Due to lack of resources, the experiment ended in 1998". Villepreux (2006) adds: "The union leader leads a double life. At France 2 during the day, resistant at night. He exhausts himself defending the rights of billionaires who disappear as soon as his back is turned. 'Three years of suffering.' But the artificial existence of this union that he will have embodied alone will have an

indirect effect, the reactivation of FIFPro, a place where player representatives will be consulted”.

Several causes contributed to the disappearance of AIFP. First, the footballers gradually began to disengage and move away from the project. The lack of concrete results certainly had an influence, as did the strong opposition of FIFA, which became even more threatening the closer the 1998 World Cup in France got. There were also huge economic problems. Right from the presentation press conference, the promoters failed to clarify the union's financing system; Maradona himself protested against the self-financing required of members, which he claimed would prevent footballers from South America, Asia and Africa from joining AIFP. Moreover, the footballers' union did not have a well-defined structure. This led to a series of organisational problems that were evident in the match on 27 April 1997, when a lack of promotion and clarity about the objectives of the association resulted in a very low attendance.

Finally, it was probably the rebirth of FIFPro that put an end to the AIFP. FIFPro was founded on 15 December 1965 in Paris by representatives of the French, Scottish, English, Italian and Dutch footballers' associations. Its first congress was held in London in June 1966, leading to the approval of the statutes. After some decades of decline, FIFPro gained again its role as main representative of the footballers thanks to the Bosman ruling: in fact, it was accepted by UEFA and FIFA as the official players' union and grew from a European organization into a global network (Dabscheck, 2003, pp. 97-98). This recognition reduced AIFP's claims to be the main international players' union and undoubtedly quickened its disappearance from the global football scene.

3. *Conclusions*

Although born with the best of intentions, the union envisioned and promoted by Maradona ultimately failed to significantly challenge the role of players within the global football system. However, it played a crucial role in drawing attention to several critical issues, particularly the lack of democracy and the complete exclusion of the players not only from the decision-making process but from any form of negotiation or dialogue. While it may be an overstatement to claim that the battles fought over three years by the AIFP, especially in relation to the effects of the Bosman ruling, brought about a radical shift in the relationship between governing bodies and athletes, it is not coincidental that FIFPro was officially recognised shortly after the creation of this alternative union. It is likely that FIFA and other federations preferred to negotiate with FIFPro rather than with a group of 'rebel' footballers.

As regards Maradona, the fact that he only briefly mentioned the union in his autobiography probably reflects the disappointment resulting from the unsatisfactory outcome of this initiative, which left minimal impact on both the Argentinian's biography and the broader history of football.

There is no doubt that AIFP's limited success was partly due to Maradona's own limitations. As president, he could certainly have done more for the union, at least in terms of promotion. However, it is also true that at the time of the union's founding, the *Pibe de Oro* was facing an exceptionally challenging period in his life: banned from football and labeled a doper by public opinion, he was uncertain about the future of his career and was physically and mentally weakened. Moreover, Maradona was never known for the consistency of his behavior. Nevertheless, he remained a figure far removed from the image of the neutral sportsman, one who was unafraid to take a stand on

contentious issues. As noticed by Agafonova (2021, p. 81), “amidst all the eccentricities and controversies in his biography there is a firm position aimed at altering the governing landscape of sport towards a more democratic model and at providing a level playing field for all the parties”.

The same concept was expressed in a more literary manner by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano (1998, pp. 198-199), which gave probably the most incisive portrait of Maradona as a non-aligned sportsman:

Maradona said things that stirred up the hornets’ nest. He wasn’t the only disobedient player, but his was the voice that made the most offensive questions ring out loud and clear. Why aren’t the international standards for labour rights applied to football? If it’s usual for performers to know how much money their shows bring in, why can’t the players have access to the books of the opulent multinational of football? Havelange, busy with other duties, kept his mouth shut, while Joseph Blatter, a FIFA bureaucrat who never once kicked a ball but goes about in a twenty-five-foot limousine driven by a black chauffeur, had but one comment: “The last star from Argentina was Di Stéfano”.

Maradona, however, was not just a generic challenger to the hierarchies of world football and politics. He was also a visionary and a forerunner, as shown by the recent controversy over the indiscriminate increase of matches and the near-exploitation of players. In mid-September 2024, Manchester City midfielder Rodri openly discussed the possibility of going on strike in protest against the unsustainable number of matches, after two of his colleagues (Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker and teammate Manuel Akanji), as well as Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti, complained about the problem. In July, FIFPro (2024a) announced that European Leagues and FIFPro Europe will file a formal complaint to the European Commission

against FIFA: “The international match calendar is now beyond saturation and has become unsustainable for national leagues and a risk for the health of players. FIFA’s decisions over the last years have repeatedly favoured its own competitions and commercial interests, neglected its responsibilities as a governing body, and harmed the economic interests of national leagues and the welfare of players”.

Furthermore, the recent European ruling regarding the Diarra case has the potential to disrupt the football world as the Bosman did in 1995 (MacInnes, 2024). In 2014, French player Lassana Diarra unilaterally terminated his contract with Lokomotiv Moscow after being excluded from the team and placed on a reduced salary following an argument with the coach. The Russian club accused him of terminating the contract without ‘just cause’ and filed a complaint with FIFA’s Dispute Resolution Chamber, which ruled in favor of Lokomotiv and ordered the player to pay €10.5 million in compensation. Diarra subsequently appealed to the European Court of Justice, which, on 4 October 2024, overturned FIFA’s decision and ruled in his favor (James, 2024). The decision of the European Court of Justice, according to FIFPro (2024b), “states central parts of FIFA’s player transfer rules are incompatible with European Union law”. It could deeply transform the system of player transfers and the validity of contracts, at least within Europe. At present, the consequences and implications of this ruling remain uncertain, and no comments have been made by players regarding the Diarra case.

The potential players’ strike and the Diarra case show how Maradona’s legacy is still very strong today, even indirectly as in these cases. Sports history is full of examples of athletes who advocated for social progress or contested the status quo – sometimes directly opposing sports governance bodies – because of their individual influence. As Kaufmann and Wolff

(2010, p. 158) note, there is “a long, albeit small, tradition of individuals who have used the playing field to advocate for political and social justice”. Maradona’s legacy fits into this tradition, although his role as the main contestant of major international football institutions has not always been consistent. As Agafonova (2021, p. 89) underlines: “On different occasions, the Argentinian acted as SGBs’ ambassador, counterweight to their powers and the loudest critic of their decisions and policies”. However, he was able to revolutionise relations between players and football institutions, forcing FIFA and other international bodies to stop viewing players as mere accessories and to treat them as stakeholders: “Maradona set the trend to deal with big organisations standing on equal footing with them, as partners. Maradona’s style can serve as an inspiration for many athletes in order to build truly ‘horizontal relations’ with SGBs” (Agafonova, 2021, p. 91).

It is undeniable that Maradona was one of the first global sports icons to take inconvenient stances against the establishment, anticipating a trend which, according to O’Neill et al (2023, p. 1), has been steadily growing: “Athlete activism, advocacy, and protests are an increasingly visible and influential feature of contemporary sport, as more elite athletes use their platform to speak out on social and political issues”. During his career, the Argentinian criticised the excessive commercialization of contemporary football, the subservience of international federations to television networks, and the limited influence of players in decision-making process. Thanks to his status as the best footballer of the world, he did not experience significant repercussions for these outspoken stances. However, many still believe that he was punished by FIFA with his ban for doping during World Cup 1994, a claim he denied in his autobiography: “The truth, the only truth about the World Cup ’94 is that my personal trainer, Daniel Cerrini, made a mistake and

I took the brunt of the fallout. [...]. Some people went around saying that FIFA had left the road clear for me to do whatever I wanted and then they betrayed me with the drug test. That's a lie" (Maradona, 2005, p. 201).

While it is true that he was regarded as a global football icon and a valuable 'asset' for FIFA, he had anyway the courage to speak out loud and clear and to put his career at risk. Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, despite being exceptional talents and far more successful than the *Pibe de Oro*, have sometimes been criticised for their passivity in matters unrelated to football. Maradona, on the contrary, has always been considered as a popular hero who fought against the powerful to right the wrongs of past injustices. Most notably, it was his famous brace against England during World Cup 1986 that turned him into a living legend. In that match, which Argentina won 2-1, he first used his hand to pass Shilton – a goal famously remembered as *la Mano de Dios*, the Hand of God – and then scored what is widely regarded as the greatest goal in World Cup history, dribbling past five English players, including the goalkeeper, before placing the ball into the net. This performance occurred exactly four years after the Falkland/Malvinas war and was seen by many as a symbolic act of vengeance by the Argentine people against the English. More broadly, it has been interpreted as a triumph of the colonized over the imperialist colonizers (Ferrari, Vandenberg and Diana, 2021, pp. 62-63).

In conclusion, the history of AIFP shows the importance of individual agency in contesting sports governing bodies, especially when it comes to top-level athletes. Although acting instinctively and with limited organizational capacity, Maradona deeply felt the need to oppose the structural injustices perpetuated by major football institutions. He knew that his status could enable him to take a stand, and he acted accordingly. For this reason, there is a clear distinction between the pre- and

post-Maradona era, both on and off the pitch. His ability to take uncomfortable stances and to consistently assert his freedom of thought set a standard that no footballer after him can escape. Whether or not to take a stand is a choice, and Maradona showed that even the most famous player in the world can do so.

References

- Agafonova, R. (2021) '«Proud, rebel, political»: How Maradona influenced football governance' In Bifulco, L., Bory, S. and Pecchinenda G. (eds), 'Global Maradona: man, athlete, celebrity, idol, hero, myth', *Eracle. Journal of Sport and Social Sciences* 4(2), pp. 80-95.
- Aguilar, F. (1997) 'Habr  partido en Montju c el 27-A', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 8 April.
- Alabarces, P. (2021) *F tbol y patria: el f tbol y las narrativas de la Naci n en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros.
- Antonioni, P. and Cubbin, J. (2000) 'The Bosman Ruling and the Emergence of a Single Market in Soccer Talent', *European Journal of Law and Economics* 9(2), pp. 157-173.
- Art s, J.L. and Roca, S. (1997) 'Por fin, aparece Diego Maradona', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 28 April.
- Brescia, P. and Paz, M. (eds) (2023) *Diego Maradona. A Socio-Cultural Study*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York City: Routledge.
- Burns, J. (2010) *Maradona. The Hand of God*. 2nd edn. London: Bloomsbury.
- Ceaux, P. (1995) 'Maradona prend la pr sidence d'un syndicat de footballeurs', *Le Monde*, 20 September [online]. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1995/09/20/maradona-prend-la-presidence-d-un-syndicat-de-footballeurs_3861693_1819218.html (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Cherruau, P. (1998) 'L'Association internationale des joueurs professionnels fait la fête à Jean-Marc Bosman', *Le Monde*, 14 May [online]. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1998/05/14/l-association-internationale-des-joueurs-professionnels-fait-la-fete-a-jean-marc-bosman_3649412_1819218.html (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Cordovilla, A. (1997a) 'Noche de goles', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 28 April.

Cordovilla, A. (1997b) 'Las estrellas unen su fútbol por la tolerancia', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 12 October.

Cordovilla, A. (1997c) 'Goleada contra el racismo en el Bernabeu', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 13 October.

Corriere del Mezzogiorno (2024) 'Maradona batte Pompei: il murale ai Quartieri Spagnoli è più visitato degli Scavi', 3 September [online]. Available at: https://napoli.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/24_settembre_03/maradona-batte-pompei-il-murale-ai-quartieri-spagnoli-e-piu-visitato-degli-scavi-e153a71c-213b-4769-9bce-87d6f4df8x1k.shtml (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Dabscheck, B. (2003) 'International Unionism's Competitive Edge: FIFPro and the European Treaty', *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations* 58(1), pp. 85-108.

Durrels, P. (1997) 'Maradona protesta por las cuotas del sindicato', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 14 October.

El Mundo Deportivo (1986) 'Maradona: los puntos sobre las ies', 31 May.

Essindi, I. (2003) 'Machin chose', *Technikart* 70, March [online]. Available at: <https://t.ly/FFWJl> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

European Commission Press Release (1997) 'Maradona, Weah and Cantona sign up for European Year Against Racism', 10 October [online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_97_863 (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Ferrari, G., Vandenberg, L. and Diana, P. (2021) 'Maradona and China: Perceptions and representations of a sports myth' In Bifulco, L., Bory, S. and Pecchinenda G. (eds), 'Global Maradona: man, athlete, celebrity, idol, hero, myth', *Eraclio. Journal of Sport and Social Sciences* 4(2), pp. 51-79.

FIFPro (2024a) 'FIFPro Europe to file joint complaint to European Commission against FIFA regarding international match calendar', 23 July [online]. Available at: <https://www.FIFPro.org/en/who-we-are/what-we-do/foundations-of-work/european-leagues-and-FIFPro-europe-to-file-joint-complaint-to-european-commission-against-fifa-regarding-international-match-calendar> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

FIFPro (2024b) 'FIFPro Statement: Decision of European Court of Justice', 4 October [online]. Available at: <https://FIFPro.org/en/supporting-players/obtaining-justice/governance-and-representation/FIFPro-statement-decision-of-european-court-of-justice> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Galeano, E. (1998) *Football in Sun and Shadow*. 2nd edn. London: Fourth Estate.

James, M. (2024) 'The Diarra case', *The International Sports Law Journal* 24, pp. 205-207. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-024-00286-5> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Kaufman, P. and Wolff, E.A. (2010) 'Playing and Protesting: Sport as a Vehicle for Social Change', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 34(2), pp. 154-175.

MacInnes, P. (2024) 'Diarra verdict a landmark day which could alter balance of football power', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2024 [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2024/oct/04/-lassana-diarra-fifa-verdict-landmark-day-alter-balance-of-power-analysis> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Maradona, D.A. (2005) *El Diego*. 2nd edn. London: Yellow Jersey Press.

- O'Neill, F., Dickson, G., Ströbel, T. and Thompson, A.J. (2023). 'Elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest: a scoping review', *European Sport Management Quarterly*, pp. 1-29. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2023.2287471> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).
- Román, R. and Segura, M. (1997) 'Sindicalista', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 25 February.
- Salazar-Sutil, N. (2008) 'Maradona Inc. Performance politics off the pitch', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11 (4), pp. 441-458.
- Stanisci, J. (2023) 'Ni esclavos ni marionetas. La historia de la Asociación Internacional de Futbolistas Profesionales', *META – Sentidos en juego*, May [online]. Available at: <https://revistametasantidos.com.ar/sentidos/ni-esclavos-ni-marionetas/> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).
- Tolsi, N. (2020) 'The political life of Diego Maradona', *Mail & Guardian*, 3 December [online]. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/sport/-2020-12-03-the-political-life-of-diego-maradona/> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).
- Valente, A. (1995) 'Maradona presenta el Sindicato', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 19 September.
- Valente, A. (1996a) 'Los futbolistas quieren fusionarse en un sindicato', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 13 February.
- Valente, A. (1996b) 'Bosman tendrá su partido el 1 de abril', *El Mundo Deportivo*, 8 October.
- Villepreux, O. (2006) 'Coups de tête', *Libération*, 7 June [online]. Available at: https://www.liberation.fr/portrait/2006/06/07/coups-de-tete_43902/ (Accessed: 10 May 2025).