**Diego Maradona The Magician**

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My childhood hero and superstar, the heartthrob of millions across the globe is no more. Diego Armando Maradona will be loved, discussed and remembered in many ways, for many things.

He was not only a sublime superstar; ferociously talented but also relentlessly driven sports complex. He was not just a gifted footballer but a force of nature whose presence was most profoundly felt for good or evil, no matter where he was or what he did. Undoubtedly, the most crowning moment of his career came when he opted to transcend the sport entirely. Argentina’s quarter-final against England in the 1986 World Cup was absolutely dripping with political malice. The two countries had been at loggerheads four years earlier over the ownership of the Falkland Islands. Although the conflict never got to declared-war status, the lack of declaration somehow failed to prevent hundreds of deaths on both sides. Almost four years after the contentious Argentinian surrender, diplomatic relations between the countries had yet to be restored. Ill-will between the two countries remained high. Nostalgia for empire and the ugliest kind of nationalism left England treating Argentina as The Natural Enemy; Borges described it as “a fight between two bald men over a comb.” It fell upon Maradona, then 25 and at the peak of his considerable powers, to restore the nation’s honor, dignity and pride against the perfidious fiends of Albion. He scored both goals in a 2-1 win. The second was a feat of genius, a dazzling run through four English tackles and a photo finish.

This signature goal took Maradona at his absolute best. Everything about it carried his signature. His escape from a tight spot in midfield; his loping gait which somehow conveys ownership of the football while everyone else on the pitch was, at best, a renter. It’s glorious and beautiful, and deserves its nickname. Upon replay, however, it became obvious that the 5′5″ Maradona hadn’t somehow headed the ball past his far taller opponent. He had jammed the ball in with an upraised fist. England protested furiously (and rightly) for handball. The referee ignored them and the goal was allowed to stand. Sure, it was cheating. And sure, it was pretty brazen. Nobody else would have gotten away with it but Maradona. Nobody else would have tried it except Maradona. For him, special rules applied. He often looked like he was playing a different game than his sluggish beef-witted opponents. Here, the cliché became reality. Maradona was equally brazen when talking about the goal. Basking in the glory of the win, which took Argentina to a semi-final against Belgium, he brushed off a post-match suggestion that the goal was not quite legal, claiming that it was scored “a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the Hand of God.” Years later, he’d admit that the Hand of God was, indeed, the hand of Diego.

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He was a man who lived life in reckless disregard for the rules. He appeared to consider that they did not necessarily apply to him, and the world then obliged him by turning a blind eye.

Maradona got away with the Hand of God because he was Diego Maradona, and this was part of the Diego Maradona experience. Years later, he remarked, “I never apologized to anyone.

Besides, I don’t have to apologize by making a statement to England. For what? To please who? What pisses me off the most is that they repeat this in Argentina and talk to people who know me. They talk about contradictions. At forty-seven I think that apologizing to the English is stupid”. The Goal of the Century sums up Diego Maradona the player. It shows him fiendishly cunning, frighteningly strong, the ball held at his feet through bounds of pure, mutual love, the Maradona with the instinctive knowledge of the critical movement at the critical time, the Maradona capable of scything through teams at will. As Arthur C. Clarke might say, any sufficiently talented athlete is indistinguishable from magic; the Goal of the Century is Maradona  
at his most magical.

The persistent debate about who is the greatest footballer of all time has often pitted Maradona against Pele, joint winners of the FIFA Player of the Century award in 2000. The legendary former Brazil forward was among the first to pay a heartfelt tribute to the Argentine. “What sad news,” Pele said. “I lost a great friend and the world lost a legend. There is still much to be said, but for now, may God give strength to family members. One day, I hope we can play ball together in the sky.” Argentina declared three days of national mourning for one of its most beloved sons. Alberto Fernandez, the Argentina President, captured the mood of the nation when he said: “You took us to the top of the world. You made us immensely happy. You were the greatest of them all. Thank you for having existed, Diego. We are going to miss you all our lives.” Cristiano Ronaldo, the Juventus and Portugal forward, said: “Today I say goodbye to a friend and the world says goodbye to an eternal genius. One of the best ever. An unparalleled magician. He leaves too soon, but leaves a legacy without limits and a void that will never be filled. Rest in peace, ace. You will never be forgotten.” Brazil and Paris Saint-Germain forward Neymar tweeted: “Don Diego Maradona…Rest in peace! Legend of football.” Ossie Ardiles, Maradona’s former Argentina team-mate who won the World Cup in 1978, was left deeply saddened by the news. “Thank dear Dieguito for your friendship, for your football, sublime, without comparison,” the former Tottenham player tweeted.

According to Argentine legend, Diego Maradona emerged from the womb on Oct. 30, 1960, kicking. If so, it was surely with his left foot, the one seemingly touched by God; the one that scored the bulk of his 258 career goals and helped deliver the 1986 World Cup to Argentina with a performance as brilliant and controversial as his life. That life came to an end on Nov. 25, when he died at age 60 at his home in Buenos Aires province. With Maradona’s death, the world lost one of its most gifted athletes and tormented souls. And in a scene envisioned by soccer historian Jimmy Burns in a 1996 biography, life in Argentina came to a halt as well, as fans mourned the loss of a champion alternately invincible and incorrigible, and ultimately inscrutable. “The only certainty about Maradona,” Burns wrote in “Hand of God: The Life of Diego Maradona, Soccer’s Fallen Star,” “is that when he dies, no matter how he dies, his funeral in Buenos Aires will be as big as Evita’s, and even then people won’t believe that he is dead.” The Hand of God, meanwhile, discards that level of footballing genius for something more profound. It gives us Diego Maradona the force of nature, an impossible talent bulldozing his way through the helpless defense. While Maradona will certainly go down as one of the sport’s greatest-ever players, his defiance of convention is both what got him there and enabled him to transcend even that celestial role.

In the final analysis it can be safely said that Diego Maradona was extremely gifted genius in football history. He defined the game in his own diction and framed his own rules. He raised the bar and set new standards of excellence. He was one-man army who could single handedly ravage any side at will and thus change the complexion of the game in moments by his rare feats with the ball. Only Maradona could do it. The little champion has left behind his glorious legacy for many in coming generations to follow and lift the game. We will not have the like of him again. May his soul rest in eternal peace!