

FROM THE ARCHIVE

The game's up for drug cheat Maradona

July 3, 1994: the Argentine football genius makes a squalid exit from the World Cup, writes Hugh McIlvanney

IT was the grubby tumult of an unscheduled press conference in Dallas on Thursday that most effectively conveyed the sadness seeping through the squalor of Diego Maradona's expulsion from the World Cup.

As a mass of hands holding microphones closed around him like a carnivorous plant, the drawn, slightly hunted look on his face said more about the nature and origins of his predicament than the predictable words of denial and complaint that came from his mouth. The evidence that he had been using forbidden drugs to lose weight partly explained that look. But another form of loss, an imminent and perhaps permanent separation from the game that has been the steadiest theme of his disreputable life, showed there too.

His addiction to cocaine previously caused him to be banned from football for 15 months and put him at odds with the law in Italy and in his native Argentina. Such precedents ensured sceptical resistance to initial reports that this latest offence was simply a case of innocent medication that went wrong.

His battles with fluctuating weight and his insistence on surrounding himself with a sycophantic entourage are not the only respects in which Maradona, 33, behaves more like a wayward boxer than a footballer. That is not surprising. The suddenness of his elevation from the dirtiest parvenu in the Buenos Aires slum of Villa Fiorito, where he was the fifth of eight children raised in a two-roomed shanty in a mud street, to all the self-indulgence



Maradona and his wife, Claudia, are besieged by photographers at Logan airport in Texas after his suspension from the World Cup

tidal wave of money can buy is a phenomenon more common to the fight business than football. But the fawning, clamorously personal adulation that flooded in on Maradona wherever he went in the early days of his career is something to which no fighter, not even Muhammad Ali, has been subjected. Nor has any other footballer experienced it on the same scale. Pele was an obvious candidate, but he had a personality that enabled him to take the benefits of celebrity without allowing it to derail his own sense of himself.

Many are inclined to shrug and tell us that what we are seeing is merely the comeuppance of an incorrigible lowlife. In support of this condemnation, there is an

indictment that lists Maradona's drug troubles, together with his admitted appetite for prostitutes and a police investigation into alleged links with the Camorra, the Neapolitan mafia, not to mention the odd paternity suit and the occasion in February when he discouraged beseeching reporters with a barrage of argon pellets.

George Vecsey, a New York Times columnist whose credentials include a genuine fondness for football that is rare among his brethren, did not hold back when he put the case for the prosecution. "Diego Armando," wrote Vecsey, "with an unfortunate inclusion of Maradona's middle name, 'is a raging one-man conglomeration of menace, anger, suspicion, swagger, callousness and contempt.'"

For Maradona, and everyone who thrilled to the impossible reach of his virtuosity, the one memory that will never dim is Mexico in 1986. The prejudiced will maintain that even there he blemished his towering domination of the event unforgivably with the "hand of God" goal against England. But, while acknowledging he was wrong to let Argentina profit from a goal turned in by his hand and wrong again when he joked about the incident, I have always wondered whether the British papers that denounced Maradona as a cheat would have fumed as convincingly had England gone through to the semi-finals in similar circumstances.

In any case, we need look no further than the same quarter-final

to see the other side of the man's contribution to football. His second-goal climax to an incredibly sustained and dramatic surge, in which the deft touches of his left foot and innumerable shifts of balance and direction left a clutch of English defenders mesmerised and trailing, was as great as any scored in the World Cup since its inception in 1930.

As he braces himself to cope with the loss of the irreplaceable, maybe we should try to remember Maradona at his finest. We should also admit that, however nasty he has been, he is not quite Satan, though he could play like the devil.

Maradona, 49, was sacked as Argentina coach after the team was knocked out of this summer's World Cup in the quarter-finals

AA Gill pedals into censure with 'dyke on a bike' joke

Miss Clare Balding complained to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) that an article headlined "Thumping in tents: a great British tradition", published in The Sunday Times's Culture section on July 25, 2010, discriminated against her in breach of clause 12 (discrimination) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld. The article by AA Gill, reviewed the complainant's television programme, Britain by Bike. In it, he referred to the complainant as a "dyke on a bike". She considered this to be a pejorative reference to her sexuality and irrelevant to the programme. The hurt was compounded by a mock apology by the columnist for previously saying that she looked "like his lesbian".

The newspaper said that its columnist was well known for his acerbic and sometimes tasteless sense of humour: he was a "controversialist who pursues the English tradition of lampooning and ridiculing public figures". It pointed out that Mr Gill had been the subject of 62 PCC complaints in the past five years, which had not been upheld (on freedom of expression grounds). There was no reason why — in an age when homosexuality carried little social stigma — the reviewer could not discuss the sexuality of a TV presenter who had no problem with being openly gay.

In addition, the newspaper drew attention to two organisations called Dykes on Bikes (an American lesbian motorcycling movement and a UK-based cycling organisation), whose members had reclaimed the word "dyke" as an empowering, not offensive, term. It argued that an individual's sexuality should not

give them an "all-encompassing protected status".

The complainant indicated that she was not demanding special treatment, simply the same treatment as everybody else. She asked the newspaper to apologise.

Adjudication

The right to legitimate freedom of expression is a key part of an open and democratic society and something that the commission has sought to defend in the past. In this case, the columnist was clearly entitled to his opinion about both the programme and the complainant. As the paper had pointed out, the commission has previously upheld his right to offer such opinions in his columns.

Of course, freedom of expression — and should be — appropriately restricted by the Editors' Code of Practice. Clause 12 of the code is clear: newspapers must avoid prejudicial, pejorative or irrelevant reference to (among other things) an individual's sexual orientation. The commission itself has said that the use of "dyke" in the article — whether or not it was intended to be humorous — was a pejorative synonym relating to the complainant's sexuality. The context was not that the reviewer was seeking positively to "reclaim" the term, but rather to use it to refer to the complainant's sexuality in a demeaning and gratuitous way. This was an editorial lapse that represented a breach of the code, and the newspaper should have apologised at the first possible opportunity.

BIRTHDAYS

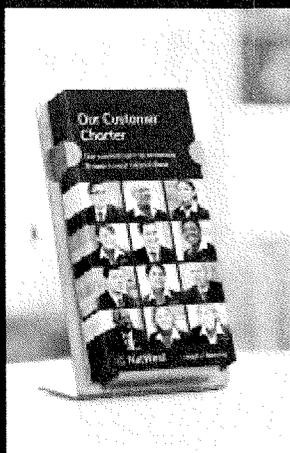
Kate Adie, broadcaster, 65; Jarvis Cocker, pop singer, 47; Jeremy Irons, actor, 62; Patrick Marber, writer and director, 46; David McCallum, actor, 79; Austin Mitchell, Labour MP, 76; Pete Murray, broadcaster, 85; Zandra Rhodes, fashion designer, 70; Twiggy, model, 61

ANNIVERSARIES

1285 English defeat the French at battle of Poitiers; 1911 birth of writer Sir William Golding; 1944 death of Dambuster Guy Gibson VC; 1959 Nikita Khrushchev banished from visiting Disneyland, California; 1970 first Glastonbury festival; 1985 earthquake kills an estimated 10,000 in Mexico

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