

Hand of God or God Knows?

By Ezequiel Fernández Moores

In 1980, Edgardo Esteban's dream was to play with Diego Maradona. Then 16, he played for Argentinos Juniors club's under 17 team, while his hero, four years older, already shone in their first team.

In 1981, Esteban went to the first Queen concert in Buenos Aires, where Freddy Mercury sang wearing the Argentine football team shirt. Maradona appeared on stage and later posed with the British flag stamped on his t-shirt.

In 1982, Argentina summoned both players to fight for their country. Maradona on the pitch. Esteban in the war. A war declared by my country, then under the bloodiest dictatorship we ever had, against the United Kingdom, in order to recapture the Malvinas Islands, occupied by the Empire back in 1833. The Falklands, you know.

On June 13, one day before the Argentine surrender, Esteban had survived the harshest night in the conflict. Starving and shivering inside his trench, he followed on the radio Maradona's and Argentina's opening match of the World Cup in Spain. With the match in full swing, shelling from the British navy sent him 5 feet in the air.

While the bombs were falling, Esteban learnt that Belgium had scored against Argentina. Surprising, because Argentina had arrived in Spain to defend their title. They had Maradona and several of the 1978 World Cup champions, such as Osvaldo "Ossie" Ardiles, star of Tottenham Hotspur when the war broke out. Ossie's cousin, army pilot José Leonidas Ardiles, had died on 1st May of hypothermia in South Atlantic waters, after the British Navy shot down his Dagger.

Argentina lost 1-0 against Belgium, a disappointing debut in Spain. Retribution came on June 18, with a 4-1 win against Hungary. Maradona scored twice. Private Esteban was already a prisoner of war. Argentina had surrendered on June 14, after a war that killed 746 Argentines and 255 Britons. The victory against Hungary got the Argentine soldiers captive on board the Canberra so excited their guards thought it was a revolt. They were celebrating Maradona's deeds and, perhaps also that they had survived the war, "that formalized homicide", in the words of Jorge Luis Borges.

There are those who say nations do not go to war anymore, but play football instead. Argentina and the United Kingdom, however, did both. Had the English and Argentine teams not been eliminated in the 1982 World Cup second round, they might have clashed in the final. In the Malvinas, conversely, Great Britain won. The Malvinas defeat triggered the end of the military dictatorship. You got four more years of Thatcher, if you will permit me the irony.

Our countries played against each other in 1986, in Mexico. What fan doesn't remember that match? The press revelled in belligerent headlines. British hooligans and Argentine "barras bravas" clashed outside the stadium. The players asked to talk only about football. Years after the victory, Maradona acknowledged in his memoirs that this caution was no more than a politically correct stance. For the Argentine team, he said, the match amounted to reparation for the loss of the Malvinas.

In that match, Diego was schemer and genius in just five minutes. In the 51st he scored with his hand -- the famous Hand of God goal. In the 54th, it took him 14 seconds to run 60 metres with the ball, dribbling past half the English team to score the goal declared by FIFA "Goal of the Century". "Sometimes I feel -- Maradona says in his autobiography -- I enjoyed the handball goal more. It was like robbing the English of their wallet". In an essay on Maradona, British writer Martin Amis writes that for many Argentines "foul means are incomparably more satisfying than fair".

According to Dutch journalist Simon Kuper, views on the Hand of God “summed up the mental divide” between Argentina and England. The Argentine pupil’s “criollo” quick wit and craftiness against the British teacher’s “fair play” and “sportsmanship”. Maradona became a national idol. Because with those goals, according to writer Juan Sasturain, Argentine football “killed” its father. To kill your father is no trivial expression in the country of psychoanalysis. Once the father dies, Argentina becomes, at last, a legitimate world champion.

I say “at last” because Argentina had won a World Cup in 1978, under a military dictatorship which used football to cover up the 30,000 people that disappeared and the many more thousands exiled and tortured. Argentina won under suspicion and the protection granted to those who play at home.

But in the South American collective football memory, England won the World Cup in 1966 in basically the same manner. There is no valid explanation to justify why FIFA, whose president at the time was Briton Stanley Rous, appointed the quarter-final referees at the Kensington Palace Hotel without waiting for the arrival of the region’s delegates. A British referee officiated in the Germany-Uruguay match and a German in England-Argentina.

In the opening eight minutes of the Germany-Uruguay match, Briton James Finney disallowed a goal by Uruguay and denied them a penalty. Early in the second half, he sent off two Uruguayans. In the final 20 minutes Germany scored two goals and won 4-0.

Argentina arrived en garde for their duel with the hosts. There was only one incident in the Argentina-England match. But it made history. After 36 minutes, German referee Rudolf Kreitlein got tired of Argentine captain Antonio Rattin’s complaints. He cautioned the captain, who continued to complain. He sent Rattin off. It was the first dismissal of a foreign footballer at Wembley.

Kreitlein acknowledged he never knew what Rattin was saying. He spoke no Spanish. He said he did not like the way Rattin looked at him. Rattin maintained that, as captain, he had the right to a translator,

refused to leave the pitch and the match was stalled for 8 minutes. On his way off, Rattin fiddled with a Union Jack corner flag and sat down on the Queen's red carpet.

England won 1-0. England manager Alf Ramsey hated the Argentines' artful style. He went on to the pitch to forbid his players swapping shirts. The Argentines, incensed with Kreitlein, wrecked their changing room.

In the press conference after the match, Ramsey called the Argentines "animals". Statistics show England committed more fouls: 33 to Argentina's 19. The English argue that Argentina provoked many of their fouls far from the ball, out of the referee's sight. Kicking and spitting followed.

Hugh McIlvanney wrote in *The Observer* that what took place at Wembley was, more than a football match, an "international incident". An Argentine paper claimed: "First they robbed us of the Malvinas and now they rob us of the World Cup".

Brazil felt robbed too. They had won the two previous World Cups, in Sweden in 58 and Chile in 62. But Pelé was violently beaten up by Portugal. And against Hungary they had two goals disallowed. Out of the nine referees and assistants assigned to them, seven were English.

Four Europeans monopolized the World Cup semi-finals. England celebrated their first title. For South America it was "robbery". Proof of this are reports sent by British embassies in South America to London, quoted in Martin Atherton's book, "*The Theft of the Jules Rimet Trophy*". "They don't believe any more in our concept of fair play and sportsmanship", reads one of the texts. It might not have been robbery but it looked like that. And Ramsey's "animals" utterance echoed for decades as a reminder of imperial times.

As you might know, Argentina was a Spanish colony but operated like a British one. Buenos Aires fought off two British invasions, in 1806 and 1807, but nevertheless became all but entirely dependent on

British capital. The United Kingdom called the shots in trade and business. And brought us football.

In 1867, the first official football match in Buenos Aires was played by two British teams on a cricket field. Until 1916, spoken and written English was the language of the Argentine FA. Also British were Alumni, the first champions in Argentine football, virtually dominant from 1901 to 1913. They were founded by Scotsman Alexander Watson Hutton, regarded as “the father” of football in my country.

In 1948, president Perón nationalized the railways. In 1953, Argentina won for the first time against the England team, with Perón in the stadium. “First we nationalized the railways, now football”, one government official said. “We left you trains and football and we kept the rest”, replied a Briton.

At this point, in fact, British trade had lost interest in Argentina. The British élites had long left football to the criollos and new waves of European immigrants. Football helped the Argentines shape their identity.

“While in England you had to go to school to learn football, in Argentina you had to play truant instead”, wrote the legendary El Gráfico magazine in those pre-TV days. Football was learnt on the city’s vacant lots, in the fenced plots. What mattered were not rules but craftiness, ball control, skill and dribbling. El Gráfico labelled the style “our way”.

It was not the more physical, more vertical, more pragmatic and collective but also more violent game of the British teacher. “Our way” was playful and individualist, slower and more crafty. “Football --remarked the writer Jose Marial- is an Argentine sport practised for the first time in England”. Reports of the early contests between Argentine and British teams highlight this clash of cultures. And Rattin’s sending off in 66 and the Hand of God in 86 made it worse.

Were I to delve deeper into history, I should remind you that right here in Coventry, Rattin had a predecessor. José Sanfilippo, one of the most inspired strikers in our history, faced Coventry in 1955 during a tour with his team, San Lorenzo de Almagro. Referee Arthur Ellis gave Coventry a penalty. Sanfilippo kicked it. Ellis sent him off and Sanfilippo refused to leave the pitch, 11 years before Rattin.

My country gave Rattin a national hero's welcome. He had left for England under a democratic government but returned from the World Cup to find a military dictatorship in power which welcomed his act of defiance in the home of the Empire.

In 2001, Rattin became the first footballer MP in Argentina, associated with Luis Patti, a former superintendent accused of torture and murder during the military dictatorship which organized the 1978 World Cup, the one that fell in 1983, after the Malvinas defeat.

Media built myths are misleading. Rattin told Chris Taylor, as quoted in the British journalist's book *The Beautiful Game*, he was not exactly an Argentine George Wallace, that Argentina should not have repelled the British invasions of the early 1800s and that he would live happily in London.

Our hated Alf Ramsey died in 1999 at 79, virtually alone in a hospital in Ipswich, his home town, refusing Westminster honours and estranged from that England that Rattin admires so much.

Is Maradona the only footballer ever to cheat? Perhaps the cheating, almost expected, is not the issue, because deceit is an integral part of any game such as football. In Argentina, as Amis states, we boast about it. In other countries, out of shame or hypocrisy, it is not even mentioned.

I have read debates published in recent years in the British press. And it is the fans, rather than the journalists, who remember how Gary Lineker, that paragon of sportsmanship, also scored a handball goal against Holland in the 1990 World Cup in Italy. Only that, unlike Maradona, the referee saw him and disallowed the goal. Others say

Lineker dived for the penalty that allowed England to eliminate Cameroon in Italy.

Michael Owen may also have dived in the 98 World Cup in France, during a match Argentina won on penalties, with David Beckham as the villain in a silly sending off, after Diego Simeone's "Latino" staging.

FIFA seems to bask in Argentina vs England duels. The 2002 clash meant redemption for Beckham, who scored a penalty courtesy of another, and perhaps exaggerated, tumble by Michael Owen. A British friend and colleague said about that 2002 penalty: "What I liked most was the fact that at last we beat the Argentines with their own medicine".

Odd...nobody called Owen "a cheat" in Argentina. The press nicknamed him "the Golden Boy". Perhaps it will take him 35 years -- as long as Martin Peters -- to admit whether he dived or not in 98 or in 2002. In his autobiography, published in 2006, Peters revealed he "cheated" to fake a foul and get a penalty during a match against Poland that England needed to win to qualify for the 74 World Cup. And wasn't it against Poland that Paul Scholes scored a goal with his hand in 1999? "I don't care, it's a goal for England", remarked Ray Wilkins on TV. And how about Denis Wise scoring a handball goal on his debut against Turkey? When asked if he had used his hand, he did not say "Hand of God" but "God knows!"

Wembley 66 was a landmark. The Argentines settled the score in two Intercontinental Cup finals. Racing Club-Celtic in 1967 and Estudiantes-Manchester United in 1968. But the English clubs preferred the more dynamic, attacking game of Menotti's winning team of 1978.

Four Argentine players came to England after the World Cup. The former "animals" were pioneering foreign outsourcing in English football. Ardiles and Ricardo "Ricky" Villa gave Tottenham Hotspur, a moment of glory when they helped them win the 1981 FA Cup, with Villa scoring one of the most beautiful goals in competition's history.

They say Sheffield United were offered a 17-year-old called Diego Maradona, and they rejected him because he cost £600,000. Another story has it that there were too many bribes to pay before the military would allow Maradona out of the country. They settled for Alex Sabella at £160,000. Birmingham City signed up Alberto Tarantini. Those were other times.

The Premier League embodies today a different kind of football, a globalized affair worth millions. Their most polemical signing these last years was Carlos Tevez -- the first Argentine double champion in the English League. English fans love him.

In *Play the Game 2007*, I told the story of Carlito's Way. I sensed his journey from Fuerte Apache, his disadvantaged birthplace in Buenos Aires, to "Gold" Trafford, would spell trouble. I just never anticipated how much. Not that his arrival in the Premier League failing to disclose his registration was owned by four investment funds would trigger rulings, compensations and lawsuits never seen before in the history of English football. Perhaps, if nations prefer today to play football rather than go to war, then the war lords, instead of buying weapons, buy football players.

There is, however, a name in Argentine football that matters a lot more to the United Kingdom. Not precisely a player, although Julio Humberto Grondona has been "playing" for 30 years as the master of Argentine football. He is FIFA's Senior Vice-President and controls some of the votes which may decide the bidding for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups in December 2010. England, we know, wants to be the 2018 host.

I am going to tell you a secret: Dave Richards, the Premier League chairman, met with Grondona last April 20, on the first floor of the Emperador hotel in the Recoleta neighbourhood, one of the most stylish in Buenos Aires.

The talks lasted half an hour, because Grondona arrived late and Richards had to catch a 12.15 flight. And Grondona, Argentine FA sources told me, intends to vote for the joint Spain-Portugal bid. He is good friends with Angel Villar, president of the Spanish Federation. The company which holds the marketing rights for the Argentine national team, Santa Mónica, is Spanish-Argentine.

Spain wins on friendship, business and language. But England has an advantage. Did you know that more than 50 years ago Grondona founded a club that climbed through all the divisions and now plays in the top tier? They use the Julio Humberto Grondona stadium and their president is Julio Ricardo Grondona, Julio Humberto's son. The team is called Arsenal because in 1957, when it was founded, the English Arsenal was regarded as the best team in the world.

Perhaps it is part of the ongoing love-hate saga between Argentine football and that from England. "How can we hate the English when they've given us the gift of football!", a friend tells me. A gift that, as time went by, has made up for the past Empire-colony relationship in our books. They say football brought Argentina and England together more than cinema, literature, Fangio or Stirling Moss.

True, in March, at Maradona's official debut as Argentina coach against Venezuela, Argentine fans performed their usual ritual. They sang, while jumping, "those who don't jump are English". Malvinas is an open wound for Argentines. For the British, it was a minor war, one of many. Football can sometimes be a metaphor for war. But it is not war.

They say around 600 soldiers committed suicide on their return from the Malvinas. Esteban, now a journalist, tells me there are already 350 cases in Argentina. Neither Wembley 66 nor the Hand of God brought about suicides. The horrific goal in the horror of war is to wipe out the enemy. That is not the case in football. Because in football, without a rival, we are left to play alone.