

Spring 2014

The Soccer Diaries

Michael J. Agovino

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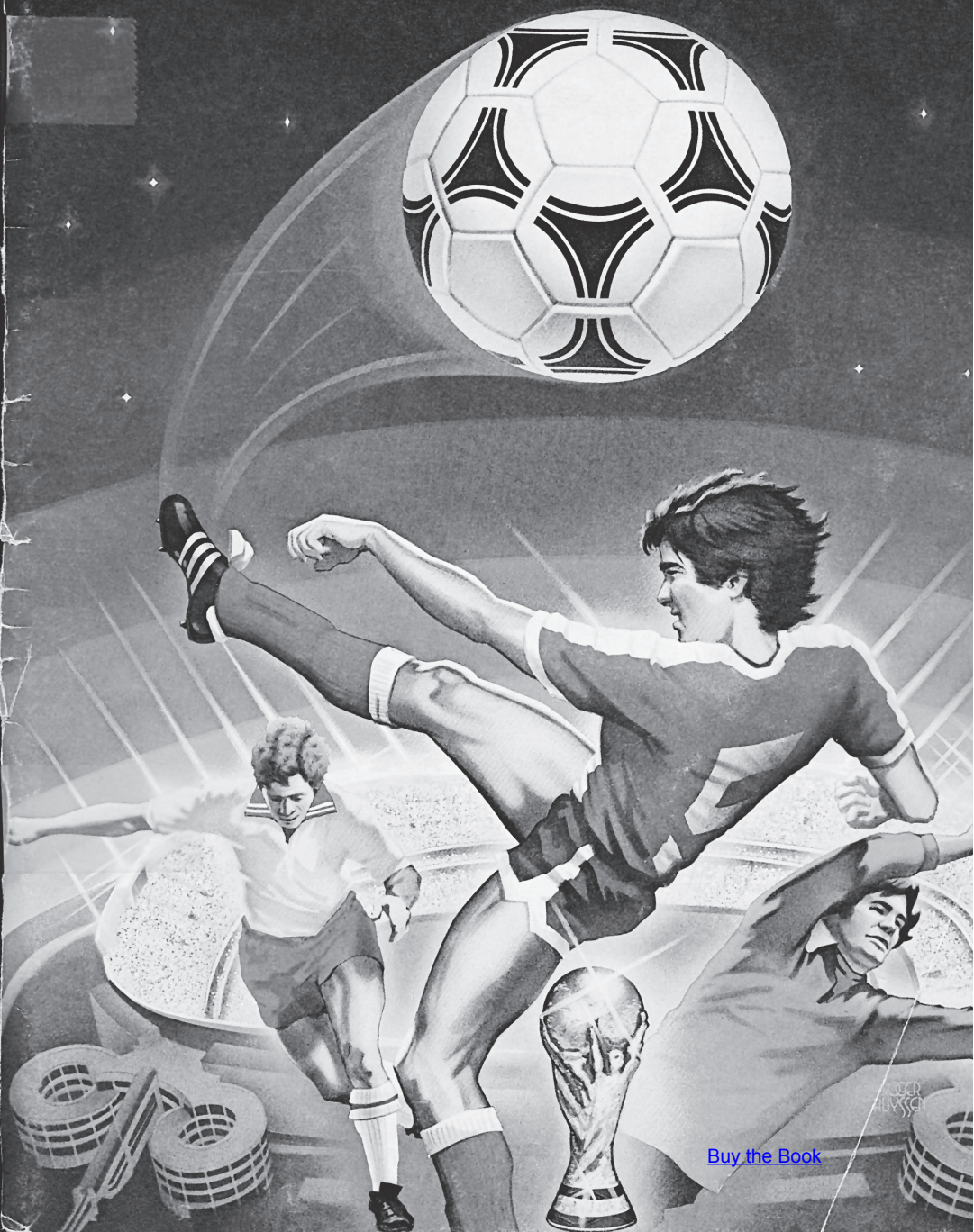
THE SOCCER DIARIES

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FIFA WORLD ALL-STAR GAME



FOR THE BENEFIT OF UNICEF
AUGUST 7, 1982/GIANTS STADIUM/EAST RUTHERFORD, NEW JERSEY



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THE SOCCER DIARIES

AN AMERICAN'S THIRTY-YEAR PURSUIT
OF THE INTERNATIONAL GAME

Michael J. Agovino

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Portions of this book originally appeared
in *Tin House* and *Howler*. Images courtesy
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Cosmos (Cosmos yearbook), FIFA and Roger
Huyssen (FIFA-UNICEF World All-Star Game
program), Transatlantic Challenge Cup,
ticket stubs, press passes (from author).

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Agovino, Michael J.
The soccer diaries: an American's
thirty-year pursuit of the international
game / Michael J. Agovino.
pages cm
ISBN 978-0-8032-4047-6 (hardback: alk. paper)—
ISBN 978-0-8032-5566-1 (epub)—
ISBN 978-0-8032-5567-8 (mobi)—
ISBN 978-0-8032-5565-4 (pdf)
1. Soccer—History. 2. Soccer—
United States—History. I. Title.
GV942.5.A43 2014
796.3340973—dc23
2013045092

Set in Minion by Lindsey Auten.
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For Adria, my sister and first
Soccer Made in Germany companion

Football, bloody hell.

SIR ALEX FERGUSON

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my agent, the wonderful Jennifer Gates. And thank you to my new friends in Nebraska: the great Rob Taylor, editor of many a fine baseball book and who I suspect will soon be searching for soccer on Saturday mornings in Lincoln; and his associate, Courtney Ochsner, who is so efficient and kind they named a sporting goods chain for her in Switzerland (where you can buy all of your soccer gear!). Thanks also to Karen H. Brown for a fine copy edit (her hometown of Boulder, Colorado, was flooding as she gamely completed her work). Thank you also to Joeth Zucco, who managed the project through to the end, to Nathan Putens for the beautiful book design, and Acacia Gentrup and the marketing team. Finally, I thank all of you who spent time playing soccer with me, talking soccer with me, and watching soccer with me. This is for you.

INTRODUCTION

To quote Ryszard Kapuscinski, who makes a cameo in these pages, “This is a very personal book, one about being alone and being lost.” Well, maybe not about being lost in my case—though my poor sense of direction has tripped me up a time or two—but certainly about being alone. Alone, that is, while pursuing a friend, the friend being the sport of soccer.

This friend has been full of contradictions: it’s been simple but nuanced; endearing but tedious; often inspiring though sometimes dark; intellectual but primal; sometimes stylish and poetic, other times ugly and crude; at one time it was elusive, but now it’s ubiquitous.

But it’s always been there for me—often after I had to look long and hard—and it’s always been generous. It takes but it gives—and shares and teaches, too.

We met in 1982, almost by accident, thanks to what was then known as SIN, the Spanish International Network. Befriending soccer back then almost felt sinful in this country. It was a punch line, made fun of as foreign, less than masculine, possibly communist.

For me, it didn't matter. I was hooked in the summer of 1982, and have doggedly pursued the sport, and the culture that surrounds it, ever since. This book is about that pursuit, from foreign games on snowy UHF channels and Toby Charles on PBS's *Soccer Made in Germany* to the 24/7 coverage of today.

It's also about the people I met—while playing, watching, discussing, and arguing about soccer—and the places I visited along the way. I've seen games in seven countries, which might seem like a lot to some, or not very many to others. What I saw delighted me, sometimes frustrated me, but always fascinated me. It ends, thirty years and one day later, where it began, in the Bronx.

In between, there are stops in Rome, London, Munich, and many in Zurich. There are World Cup matches, European Championships (just one game and the dullest of all time, but still), UEFA Cup, Champions League, international and club friendlies. There are the NASL, MLS, USMNT, EPL, and FIFA.

From great stadiums (Berlin's Olympiastadion, Rome's Stadio Olimpico, Dortmund's Westfalenstadion, and Yankee Stadium—well, almost) to brilliant national teams (Brazil, Germany, Argentina, Italy). From great clubs (the Cosmos, Bayern Munich, AC Milan, Benfica, Liverpool, Feyenoord, Roma) to clubs I'd never heard of (MyPa?).

From the Bundesliga to Serie A, from the Recreation Ground in Aldershot to FIFA's gleaming headquarters overlooking Zurich; the Great Lawn in Central Park to a training facility on Spain's Costa del Sol, ground zero of Europe's economic collapse.

But this book is also where I've discovered and grappled with soccer in the most unlikely of places: the Waldorf-Astoria, the Plaza Hotel, the Public Theater, Film Forum, the Tate Gallery, the Guggenheim Museum, Sonny Mehta's apartment, Lincoln Plaza

Cinema, the TriBeCa Film Festival, a conference room in the Hilton Hotel, the Dolder Grand Hotel, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Dia:Beacon. And to places that no longer exist: the Palladium, Foxboro Stadium, Giants Stadium—so much in Giants Stadium—and a social club in Queens.

This is not an official history of the sport but, rather, my own observations, opinions (many unpopular, that you're welcome to disagree with), musings, and wonderings as an American fan and occasional journalist.

Despite this being my own take, I'd like to think it shows the evolution of soccer—how it's been perceived, presented, and processed—in this country over the last thirty years. It's for the hardened fan, but also for the newcomer who's just discovered the sport, and for anyone who's curious about soccer, just the way I was in the summer of 1982. You might make a new friend. All are invited, and it's my hope that all will find places throughout to smile. May you enjoy the journey as much I as did.

February 1, 2013

Prologue

.....
It is not just a simple game; it is
a weapon of the revolution.

CHE GUEVARA

August 7, 1982
FIFA-UNICEF World All-Star Game
Giants Stadium
East Rutherford, New Jersey

The day of my first soccer game began in the Bronx, where I was from. We didn't have a car, my father didn't drive (nor did he make any apologies for that), so we took a city bus, the QBX1, to the No. 6 subway at Pelham Bay Station. This didn't take us to any game or stadium, but first to 125th Street, where we, the only white people, crossed the platform for the 4/5 express, to Grand Central, then to the shuttle, and finally to the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

The steps from the subway, menacing and dark in those years, to whatever was above—a street, a plaza, a square, light, safety in numbers—usually brought an exhale and relief, but at the Port Authority, it was the opposite. It was an ascension into still more, and diverse, rings of despair—and the pent-up energy of wants and needs. It was at once the most alive of spaces and the most

terrifying, besides, that is, the No. 6 train that we had just taken, a portable mural of affirmation and rage, the elevated tracks buttressed by tenement carcasses.

Weeks before, this ad had appeared in the *New York Times*: “For the first time in history, the world’s greatest soccer players—selected on the basis of their performance in the 1982 World Cup—will collide in an international all-star match. Above all else, they’ll be fighting for one goal: to help the world’s children.” The game was sponsored by UNICEF; tickets were pricey at fifteen, eleven, and seven dollars. If you couldn’t make it, the ad read, be sure to make a donation to UNICEF on East Thirty-Eighth Street. It was billed as “Europe vs. the Rest of the World.”

My father, who understood little about soccer but encouraged my newfound interest in it, bought us tickets high in the upper deck. It would be hard to get to, he said, but there would be buses from the Port Authority. We’d been to Shea and Yankee Stadiums together, and Madison Square Garden, but never to Giants Stadium and never on such a journey, across three rivers, to see a game.

The bus to Giants Stadium was crowded, unlawfully so I’m certain, not an inch of standing room to be wriggled. But the law likely didn’t care about us; we were “other.” If there were white people, and there were a few, none aside from us appeared to be speaking English. Mostly, though, there were nonwhite people, with every texture and curlicue of hair, every shade of skin, from caramel to onyx, but different, it was clear—through speech, gait, stance—from the black people I lived among in Co-op City, or on the No. 6 train, or at the 125th Street station.

It may have reeked of an admixture of perspiration and, with windows wide open, bus exhaust, but it was the most comfortable uncomfortable coach ever to depart from Forty-Second Street and Eighth Avenue, everyone giddy, full of smiles and harmonies. They couldn’t wait to see their countryman, or neighboring countryman, or someone at least from their part of the world, in performance: Thomas N’Kono of Cameroon, Faisal Al-Dakhil of Kuwait, Julio

César Arzú and Roberto Figueroa of Honduras, Lakhdar Belloumi of Algeria, Jaime Duarte of Peru, and Júnior and Sócrates of Brazil. Soccer was the game of Europe—Italy, young men with names and faces and noses like mine, had just won the World Cup, beating, to the delight of everyone it seemed, the West Germans—but this was also the game of the third world, of poor people. For that, I liked it more.

Outside the stadium, soccer balls ping-ponged up and down, to and fro, off feet, thighs, and foreheads all over the vast parking lot, which appeared interminable—concentric circles of sterility in middle-of-nowhere New Jersey, brought to life by people from every latitude. If there were “real Americans”—*whatever that means*—they were the minority and arrived in cars.

It was intimidating, the sheer size of the crowd and the steep incline of the upper deck. Yankee and Shea hadn’t been like this. They usually had no more than ten or twenty thousand, maybe forty if the Yankees had a key rival in town. I’d never sat so high up in those stadiums. On this night, it felt as though we’d all spill out of the upper tiers.

Just before kickoff, Danny Kaye, the entertainer and UNICEF ambassador, told us, on behalf of all the world’s children, to scream. He said to us, “Make the loudest noise ever heard!” And we did, the 76,891 of us, the second-largest crowd in the history of U.S. soccer, and Giants Stadium shook.

The game program, like everything from that night, was different in the best of ways. It was sophisticated, worldly, and informative, not merely photos of Mr. Met juxtaposed with Schaefer Beer ads. The first page had a letter from President Ronald Reagan. When my father saw his picture, he said, in his East Harlem Italian inflection, “Disgrazia.” It had a letter from João Havelange, as stately as any UN Secretary-General, who was the president of the world governing body known as Fédération Internationale de Football Association, FIFA for short, in Zurich, Switzerland. It had a profile of UNICEF, of its mission, and photos of handicapped kids—about

my age, at around fourteen—in Rwanda, at the Gatagara Mission Center, trying their best to kick the ball on a dusty patch. Another photo showed starving children in Somalia’s Sabaad Refugee Camp. Rwanda, Somalia—now I’d have to find them in the *Britannica Atlas*, my favorite book, just the way I’d had to find Cameroon, its capital Yaoundé, Kuwait, Honduras (and Tegucigalpa—*But Daddy, how do you pronounce Tegucigalpa?*), Vigo, Gijón, La Coruña, and Zaragoza in the previous weeks when I’d come across this game I knew little of that now obsessed me.

Someone named Brian Glanville, “a soccer correspondent for the *London Sunday Times*,” wrote about the different national styles of soccer. (What a thought. I never heard of this in baseball. There was no Brazilian way of playing baseball or an English way; they didn’t play baseball.) Glanville declared that the Scots had changed their style—to a fault—and that the Czechoslovaks were known for their “Danubian deliberation and pattern weaving.” There was a byline from someone named Juvenal, just Juvenal, who wrote for the Argentine magazine *El Gráfico*, and Rob Hughes, another “correspondent” for the *London Mail on Sunday*. I loved how they used that word, *correspondent*, and how these pieces read like serious, global concerns. It made sense that there were soccer correspondents. *Could I be a soccer correspondent?*

The program had profiles and a photo of each player: Rossi, the hero; Keegan; Rummenigge; Platini; Camacho; and Antognoni, who scored the winner past the great N’Kono in the final minutes. They played for wonderful-sounding teams; not the London Lions or Paris Panthers but Tottenham Hotspur, Juventus, Alianza Lima, Canon Yaoundé, Corinthians, Flamengo. There was a World Cup quiz and primers of all the great players from days past. It was all there, in this Baedeker of the game, its past, present, and future. Another headline read, and this delighted me, “U.S. Soccer: The Time Is Now.” There was a photo of an American player for the Portland Timbers of the NASL who represented U.S. soccer’s future. His name was Glenn Myernick.

My mother had pulled me out of religious instruction the year before; we weren't churchgoers anyway. This would be my bible, and I would memorize every word of it, every thought, every fact.

I read the game articles the next day in the *New York Times*. One claimed that Belloumi, the Algerian who'd helped shock West Germany a few weeks earlier, had left his honeymoon early to be there. Falcão, the lanky Brazilian, attended despite his father having just suffered a heart attack. I clipped these articles and attached them, with the ticket stubs, to the program. I'd keep them forever, even if it turned out to be worth something, no matter how much I might need the money.

We made the loudest sound ever—you should've heard us—just like Danny Kaye wanted. And then, over the public address system, they played John Lennon's "Imagine."

Part 1

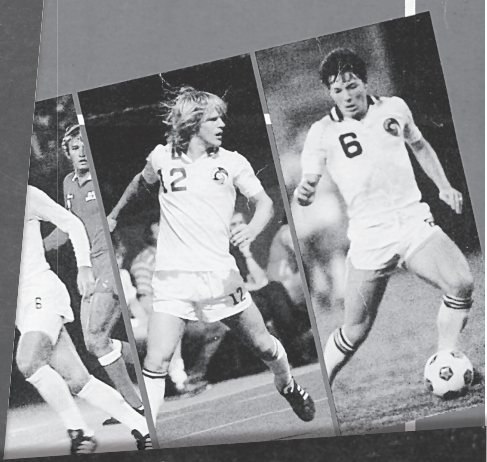
THE DARK AGES, 1982–1993

Five days shalt thou labor, as the Bible
says. The seventh day is the Lord thy
God's. The sixth day is for football.

ANTHONY BURGESS

COSMOS

Trans-Atlantic Challenge Cup



1983



UNITED STATES
SOCCER
FEDERATION

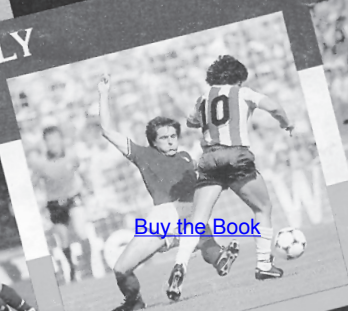
presents

Italy vs. Team America

SUPERSTARS OF SOCCER
MAY 30, 1984 • GIANTS STADIUM



ITALY



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Spring 1982

IS 181

Bronx, New York

This was eighth grade, gym class. I was a small kid, normally the kind who would get picked on, but because of luck, and a little pluck, was spared. Probably because I loved sports, knew a lot about it, and was good in gym class, except when they tried to teach us how to swim, but that's another story. None of us could swim. Our junior high school, IS 181, named after the great Catalonian cellist Pablo Casals, didn't have an actual gym, so phys ed was conducted in the field house of the adjacent, and notorious, New York City high school, this one named after Give 'em Hell Harry. Every six weeks or so we'd rotate sports. Touch football outside in the asphalt yard; running and sprinting on Truman's track; and volleyball and basketball, our favorite, in the field house with actual nets, which was something the outdoor courts never had. And then, in the spring, this new thing, soccer, which really wasn't that new at all. Just to kids like us, urban kids, who after school played more basketball or handball or two-hand touch football, always on asphalt to a soundtrack of Afrika Bambaataa and Kurtis Blow or the Black British R&B Invasion of Central Line, Junior, Imagination, and Jimmy Ross.

Soccer? We'd kind of heard about the Cosmos from the sports highlights on the news, but the games were far away, in New Jersey. There was a thing called indoor soccer, the New York Arrows, but that was even farther away, at the Nassau Coliseum, and looked more like hockey.

But every spring, our gym teacher, Mr. Chiarello, who was just like your gym teacher—hairy, bearish, loud—but a bit more streetwise, held up a black-and-white ball with hexagons and pentagons and said, “Yo, listen up, fellas. This right here is a soccer ball. Soccer is the most popular sport in the world.”

The tough kids, usually the best athletes, were allowed to refer to him simply as “Chee,” and would say, “So Chee, why ain’t no one here play it?”

“Yo, I’m tellin’ you, they will be soon. Now, listen up, get into two lines.”

So we did just that, one class stretched out across the length of a volleyball baseline, and another class, the opponent, on the opposite baseline. Then he told us to pick five players who were good with their feet to step out of the line to actually kick and maneuver with the ball. The rest would stay spread out every few feet and that would be the goal. In other words, there were about ten goalkeepers spanning about thirty feet and anything the opposing five field players could manage to get between them was a goal. All on comfy hardwood. This was more ridiculous than the indoor soccer on TV news highlights, where someone named Steve Zungul seemed to score five goals a game for the New York team. Ridiculous, but we played. We loved to play anything, we loved being in gym. There was never any locker-room anxiety of being naked in front of your classmates. The only anxiety was the possibility of the high school kids passing through and bullying us or, more likely, invading bands from our rival 180, also connected to the Truman field house, but in the other direction. *Yo, we got each other’s back, right?* And anyway, the fashion was to wear your gym shorts under your jeans, above the belt line, with your gym shirt tucked into the shorts. The shirt read “Northeast Bronx Education Park”—blue lettering on orange, the colors of our city, and of the Knicks and Mets.

We did this every spring; but this time something different happened. Someone passed the ball in my direction, and I kicked it between two of the ten goalies strung across that final line. A goal!

Hugs from teammates, my classmates, who liked me already, but now liked me a little more. Then it happened again. A second goal, the winning goal. We won, my homeroom class, 2–1. I was the hero. Then it happened the next week, I scored more goals, we made it to the championship game, and then I don't remember what happened. And then it was done. There was no team or league to join, no one to play with in the street, on the tower-in-the-park grass, or the asphalt, where we played most of our games. That was that. There were no possibilities, no opportunities to improve, not here in the Bronx.

June 13, 1982

Argentina vs. Belgium

Live on SIN

The *New York Times* was in our apartment everyday; we had home delivery. I would look at the sports section first, and I saw that today was the first game of this thing called the World Cup. There was a photo of the referees weighing the game ball, whose design looked wildly different from the black-and-white panels I was used to seeing. I was curious. There had been New York Cosmos games on Channel 9, but my father never watched; he had no money riding on it. On some weekends ABC would show an NASL game and I'd watch for a few minutes once in a while. I had rooted once or twice for the Minnesota Kicks, the only reason being that they played in the greatest stadium in all the world, Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington, Minnesota, home to my Vikings. My thinking was that it was necessary to support any team that shared this hallowed ground, whether it be the Twins (Rod Carew!), the Kicks, or the Golden Gophers. The Twins were a baseball team; baseball I understood. I was raised on baseball; my father taught me baseball. But the Kicks, in these few telecasts on *Wide World of Sports*, they never really sank in. I only remember an African player named Ace Ntsoelengoe. What a name. But this World Cup game I thought I'd

check out. It was on TV, on SIN, the Spanish International Network, and there was nothing else to do.

Holy shit! What is this? Marching out in single file, exchanging banners, each team posing for a team photo just before the game; those uniforms, like the very flags themselves. Everyone is overcome with emotion, the fans, the players; the Argentine coach can't stop smoking. And this beautiful moment as soon as the final whistle sounded: players took off their jerseys and exchanged them with an opponent. I wanted to be part of that. It was less than two hours, less than a baseball game or football, basketball, or hockey, but it was exhausting—and exhilarating.

I couldn't wait until tomorrow. And the day after and the day after that.

Tomorrow

June 14, 1982

Every game was on TV, live on SIN in our mornings and afternoons. PBS would show a shortened, seamlessly edited sixty-minute version at eleven o'clock at night, under the program title *Soccer Made in Germany*. "Shame," by Evelyn Champagne King—of the Bronx, by the way—was, for whatever reason, the theme music.

Italy played Poland the next day, the morning game, in a place called Vigo. I had been to Spain, on a family vacation, six years before, but I hadn't heard of Vigo. Since we were one of the few families in my corner of the Bronx to travel, I was always drawn to our massive *Britannica Atlas*. And no short cuts, either, no looking at the index in the back with the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates with the corresponding page number. Maybe that was efficient, less time consuming, but it was no fun. It was like peeking at the answer key in the back of the teacher's version of a textbook. The fun was in the journey of running my finger up the Portuguese-Spanish border or west to east, along the Pyrenees, to try to find this place. Where the hell was it?

So with the game underway, I searched for Vigo. Madrid is easy, we were in Madrid, and Barcelona, we were supposed to go to Barcelona; I find that, too. But where's this Vigo? I ran my finger over the two-page spread that shows Spain, Portugal, southern France, and northern Morocco. Granada, Valencia, Sevilla, Bilbao. Ah, here, in the left-hand corner, right above Portugal. It looks small; no wonder I missed it.

The game went on, sometimes in the background as my eyes combed the atlas, sometimes in the foreground, when the Spanish announcer grew in urgency, which on this morning was rare. This wasn't like yesterday's game, with the pageantry; that massive, majestic stadium; the emotion; the burst of intensity after the goal was scored; the Belgian, Erwin Vandenberg, dropping to his knees, not out of contrivance but because he was overcome. No, this was—quiet. The stadium looked small; it had the musical name of Estadio Balaídos. The tempo was much slower, even slower than baseball. *Is that possible?* There was the constant blare of air horns even if nothing of consequence was happening. When I finally found Vigo and put the atlas to the side, I remained glued to the TV, even as nothing continued to happen. The Poles were dressed exactly like their flag—white shirts, red shorts—but why were the Italians in blue shirts and white shorts? I may have been a self-hating Italian, but I knew the flag: red, white, and green. I'd have to find out.

The final score was 0–0. So how to explain this enthralled feeling? I shifted, and accepted, this new biorhythm, and quite easily. At the end of seventh grade, I found two FM stations, WBAI and WLIB, which played reggae music. It was different to what I normally listened to: soul, funk, R&B, and a new thing called rap. “Shame,” with its saxophone solo, was an anthem in these parts of the Bronx, before I'd ever heard of *Soccer Made in Germany*. Reggae was black music but its core felt different. You were drawn into it, or, I was told by other seventh-graders, black seventh-graders, you weren't. *Mike, man, how can you listen to that island-mon shit?* Soccer, lilting, more ebb than flow, with spells of soaring lyricism, felt something like this.

Then came the Brazilians. This was still another rhythm, another feel altogether. They played in the second game that day, against the USSR. I had a couple of friends over and we watched it in my room. They were older, my two best friends, my only two friends in Co-op City who hadn't moved away or gotten into the wrong crowd, one black, the other Indian. They were bored by it. *Yo, let's go out and play some ball.* Ball, in the Bronx in 1982, meant only one thing. Wait, it's almost over, let me just see the end of this game. Brazil was losing, but look at them. There were the same air horns blown from the crowd but this game had a constant drumbeat and brass harmony from the stands—and it wasn't coming from Soviet fans. They may have been winning, but everyone knew what was coming. Even my best friend, Calvin, who was black, said, "Brazil's gonna win. Ain't they the best at soccer?" Our other best friend, Ravi, who was Indian and knew nothing about soccer, agreed with him.

They were right. A player named Sócrates, so skinny, all arms and legs in those short shorts, delicately skipped past two Soviets and blasted a shot into the corner of the goal. It was said that Sócrates was criticized for not celebrating after goals. This was a soccer player my father could love. Not only did he have, for some reason, the name of the ancient philosopher—my father loved the ancient Greeks, the ancient Egyptians, Sumerians, Etruscans, Romans, all the ancients, and anything historical—but he was indeed a serious man. His club team in Brazil was Corinthians. Not the Jets or the Mets, the Giants or even the Yankees, but *Corinthians*. With his close-cropped beard, black curls, and unsmiling face, he *was* biblical. He could've been a bust in the antiquities wing of Metropolitan Museum. But he was prebiblical, too—he was Sócrates after all—and postmodern, as he was a doctor who chain-smoked. He was twenty-eight years old, but he had the demeanor of a sixty-year-old.

My father would rail against contemporary baseball players who would soak up congratulations after throwing to the right base or moving the runner over. *They're supposed to do these things! It's their job! Rizzuto did that in his sleep!* Sócrates he would embrace,

if he'd had the patience for this game. Sócrates had more urgent matters on his mind. A goal, and a spectacular one, like the one he just scored? It was his job and an important one, securing the midfield and aiding in the attack of what appeared to be the best team in the world. No dropping to his knees, like Erwin Vandenbergh. No jumping up and down. Not even a smile, just raising his arms to the gods.

That wasn't the case for his teammate Éder, just Éder—*where did they get these names?*—who scored the spectacular winner. He was so delighted he did a somersault in front of the frenzied crowd. Brazil would be my team. Then we played basketball, the three of us, Calvin, Ravi, and me, a game called “Twenty-One,” a game you could play with an odd number of people.

Later, at our dinner table, I said to my parents, “When we went to Spain, how come we didn't go to Vigo?”

“Where's that?” My mother said. “Barcelona, we were supposed to go to Barcelona or Valencia or Sevilla but we got sick.”

“Vigo would have been nice for the food,” my father said. “It's in the region of Galicia, and they're known to be the best cooks in Spain. Maybe next time. Why? Where did you see Vigo?”

“There was a soccer game there today. Italy played Poland.”

“How'd the Italians make out?” he asked.

“It was a tie, o-o,” I said.

“Oh, soccer can end in a tie?”

“I guess so. The regular team that plays in Vigo is called Celta Vigo, like the Boston Celtics—isn't that funny?”

His eyes lit up. “Do you know why that is?” He didn't wait for a response. “The Celts were an Indo-European people who settled in this part of Spain, Galicia, before they eventually found their way to Ireland and the British Isles. I don't pretend to know soccer, but I'd bet it's a historical reference.”

I didn't want a history lesson. I wanted to talk soccer. This game wouldn't be passed down to me. I'd have to learn the hard way—or the best way. On my own.