

## Maradona: Soccer's Bedeviled Deity

By Justin Kavanagh

*Hand of God* by Jimmy Burns

According to his biographer, Diego Armando Maradona's life is "the story of a natural-born football talent who grew up to believe he was God and suffered as a result."

While the religious glorification of any sports star is misplaced, Maradona's gifts of skill, balance, vision and courage could certainly appear supernatural at times. But it was his all-too-human weaknesses in the mortal realm that caused his downfall. After years of drugs, drink, and women, the wings of this great talent grew heavy with the dirt—and gravity dragged him back to earth. Tragically, he now seems close to going under.

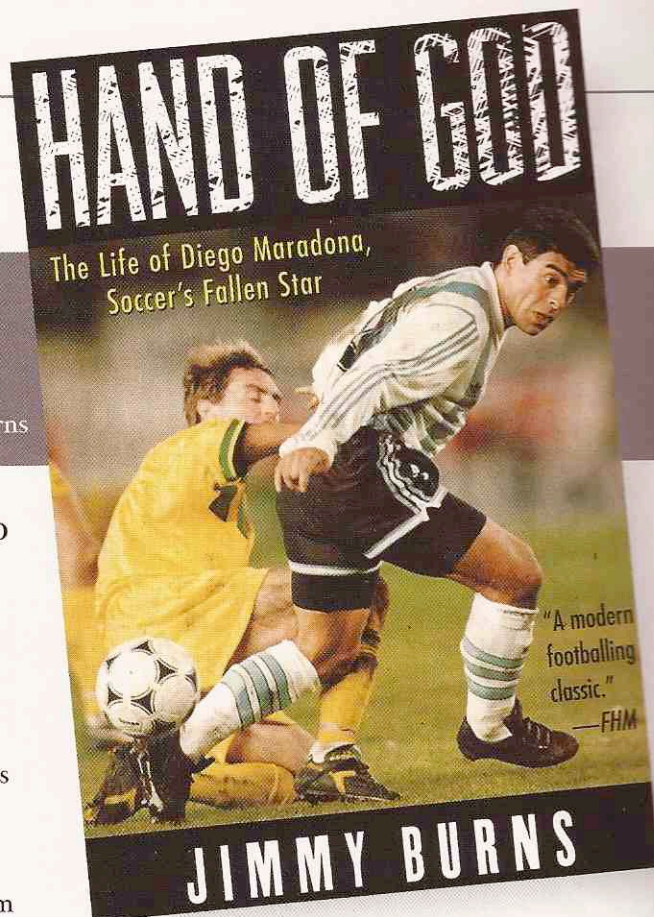
Maradona is currently responding well to "rigid" rehabilitation treatment in a Buenos Aires psychiatric hospital, shedding over 40 pounds. After what doctors described as "an uncontrollable attack of fury," he is reported to have screamed, "I don't want to be here."

Granted immortality on winning the World Cup at the age of 25, Maradona has never quite learned to become a man.

Unable to live life as a mere mortal, he continues to push his body ever closer to death. Following a recent spell in Intensive Care with pneumonia, Maradona released himself and was seen a day later playing golf shirtless in the cool evening air.

Burns' biography reveals that a leaked medical report suggests that Maradona's brain is now irreparably damaged. Is it possible that mental illness could now become his purgatory, after years of following his nose through blizzards of cocaine?

So how did it come to this? Jimmy Burns' intriguing book recounts a life which began in the crushing poverty of the barrio of Villa Fiorito. Born of poor Italian immigrant and Indian stock, the first son of Dona



Dalma Maradona was cast as an outsider in his native Buenos Aires. Later in cosmopolitan Barcelona, Maradona's pride would snap during a Kings Cup Final against Athletic Bilbao, when the crowd taunted him with chants of "Indian, Indian." But his working-class heritage would consecrate his standing with the poor of Naples and with Boca Juniors' fans on his return to Argentina.

Maradona's father worked in a bone-crushing factory. The son would spend his career in fear of bone-crunching tackles from defenders like Goikoetxea, the "Butcher of Bilbao," who left Maradona's ankle held together with a screw.

Diego Maradona grew up in a shantytown where the only abundance was that of time. He used the endless idle hours to practice with his one and only toy, a leather football. It was probably the cause of his fall into an open sewer late one night. As a favorite uncle saved him, Maradona heard the warning that would haunt his adult life: "Diegito, keep your head above the shit."

The rescued boy grew up a pícaro (a street urchin living by his wits). His soccer too was imbued with viveza, the cunning liveliness prized in Argentina and a vital part of his game given his diminutive size. In an



effort to build up his physique, the teenager was taken often to the medicine men who were an insidious part of his country's sport.

Argentina has long been considered (maybe unfairly), as the red-light district of soccer. The National Team were branded "animals" in 1966 by English manager Alf Ramsey. The country's 1978 World Cup triumph on home soil was won with the flowing attacking football preached and practiced by Cesar Luis Menotti, the left-wing coach chosen (ironically), to bring glory to a country ruled by military junta. But the dubious 6-0 triumph over Peru, and the winning burst of energy summoned during extra-time in the Final cast long shadows of suspicion.

In that era of state terror, when thousands of dissenters simply "disappeared," soccer in Argentina took on an overblown importance. Football became the opium of the masses and the stellar talent of Diego Maradona was quickly seized upon for political purposes. He began to enjoy the indulgences of those in power, and a blind eye was often turned to his increasingly errant behavior.

Cesar Menotti ignored the public and political clamor to pick the teenager for the '78 World Cup. He claimed that the prodigy lacked emotional maturity—a judgment vindicated by Maradona's petulance and prolonged sulks when not selected. The coach also wanted to avoid the risk of serious injury to the developing player. Menotti cared. Few others did, and the young genius was soon on an exhausting but lucrative treadmill of matches—often anesthetized against injury.

In the summer of 1982, Argentina went to war for the Malvinas (the Falkland Islands)—and Maradona, who had been signed by Barcelona for a world record \$6M, captained his country in the World Cup Finals in Spain. While the soldiers fought a losing battle, Maradona and company were accused of hedonism and indiscipline. The young genius left the tournament in shame, sent off for a petulant kick against arch-rival Brazil. Pelé praised Maradona's talent, but doubted "whether he has sufficient greatness as a person."

In his defense, Maradona was hacked out of the tournament just as Pelé had been in

1966. Yet following his move to Barcelona, doubts about his temperament persisted. One of the most poignant quotes in Burns' book comes from Barca teammate Lobo Carrasco: "He seemed to me to be still terribly innocent and hungry. His eyes were like two big plates. He wanted to eat the world, and that scared me. The more friendly I became with him, the more I worried about him, the more I feared it would all end in tears."

If wanting to eat the world sounded like a line from *Scarface*, then Maradona's villa in the Catalan capital also began to resemble Tony Montana's Miami compound. An entourage of family, friends and hangers-on took up residence, and wild parties would last into the early hours. And with the vampires came the devil's dandruff. In 1996, Maradona admitted that he had tried cocaine first in 1982 "because I wanted to feel alive," which hints at an athlete pushed to exhaustion and world-weariness at the tender age of 22.

His requests for a rest were ignored and in an act of defiance, Maradona took the entire Barcelona team out on a wild night in Paris (to the disgust of Jose Luis Nunez, the Barcelona President). Publicly dropped and chastised, the exile fell into a long depression. His apparent paranoia toward the increasingly intrusive press raged, though the part played by drug consumption is impossible to gauge. Maradona seems to have long believed that he lived beyond good and evil, as if chosen by God for a life of greatness.

His sense of persecution was further fueled by Goikoetxea's famous hatchet job, which left him crippled for three months. The player sent for his trusted medicine man in Buenos Aires, whose advice vexed club doctors. Maradona would often play through pain with a shot of cortisone—or other painkillers.

*Hand of God* gets behind the myth and details the political and financial forces that drove Maradona's career. By 1984, a \$10M move to Naples had been carefully choreographed. It was a smart career move, but the Maradona entourage was also in need of a serious cash injection.

Burns describes Naples as "Babylon-by-the-Bay," a pagan place seeking a soccer savior. ▶



And true to his self-image, Diego Maradona descended from the sky in a helicopter as the tifosi (the Neapolitan faithful), looked heavenward. He stepped onto the sacred ground of the San Pablo and the old stadium shook with fervor. The man was deified; but he was headed for a private hell. He would lead Naples to two Serie A titles, but his eventual fall from grace would be equally spectacular.

Allegedly closely tied to the local Mafia, the Camorra, Naples was a club in thrall to dark forces. Maradona, raised in the law of the street, had found an alluring sanctuary. Offered a cocoon of protection by the shady Neapolitan underworld, his descent into darkness was rapid. Maradona became King of Naples. He enjoyed the privilege of a clan leader. The press observed the unspoken law of omerta.

Maradona began referring to himself in the third person. He would mix events in his life with religious metaphors. It is likely that the brain-rot of cocaine had started—paranoia and self-delusion are two of the more obvious side effects.

Given the addictive qualities of the drug, and the chaos of his personal life, it is astonishing to reflect now on the will and desire that Maradona must have possessed to push himself into shape for the World Cups of 1986, 1990 and 1994.

He arrived at the Mexico World Cup in 1986 pursued by personal demons, including a very public paternity suit. Despite dreadful playing conditions, he raised his performance and displayed (in Burns' words), "more than any other player a total dedication to the game." In 1986, Maradona fulfilled his boyhood dream of becoming a World Champion. Never has one player so dominated the tournament. He described this, his finest hour, as "like touching the sky with your hands."

But for all the magic of that summer, the enduring image is of the pícaro (the street urchin), rising above England's Peter Shilton to pick the English pockets with his infamous "Hand of God" goal. Only minutes later, he would paint his masterpiece, weaving through the English defense to score the competition's finest goal ever. In that beguiling cameo, we had witnessed the two sides of Diego Maradona. Genius and thief. Conjuror and


con man. Deity and devil.

Four years later, in Rome, it ended in tears. In a script straight out of an Italian opera, Argentina met Italy in the World Cup semifinal—in Maradona's adapted home of Naples. The Argentine captain called on the locals to turn their backs on the land that made them outcasts and support his country. Maradona scored as Italy were beaten on penalties. But the Final was a game too far for the most cynical team to ever disgrace it. Two Argentinians were sent off. Maradona played as if in a trance. Germany won an awful game, and Maradona cried because he knew it was all downhill from there.

One year later, for reasons unknown (choose your own conspiracy theory!), he fell spectacularly from grace with the Naples Camorra and left himself open to a very Italian vendetta. His protection gone, the whole sorry mess of his life spilled out onto the front pages: the cocaine consumed; the allegations of trafficking; the prostitutes; the decadence; the corruption. He was banned from football and fled the country in shame.

Maradona's world imploded. He battled addiction, and his weight ballooned. Yet in 1994, he resolved to lead his country to one final tilt at the World Cup in the U.S.A. Once more, he tortured his body into fitness. Once more, he stepped onto the world stage, in Boston. Once more, he scored. He ran towards the camera, his eyes wild with vindication. It was to be his final goodbye. The desire was real, but the fuel was false. He failed the drug test, and proceeded to blame FIFA and just about everyone in the world except, of course, Diego Maradona.

Since then, Maradona has been living out a death wish: the failed comebacks; the shooting at journalists; the years of rehabilitation in Cuba; the divorce. And now... hospitalization. "I don't want to be here."

At times of great stress in his career, Maradona would return to his parents' rural home in Esquina, where he would fish and hunt. Wherever he seeks his next refuge, let's hope that he finds his happiness here among the millions of mere mortals who have thrilled to his gifts. The gods can wait a while longer. 

*Hand of God* by Jimmy Burns is available by order at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) or at [www.sportspages.co.uk](http://www.sportspages.co.uk)