

# The Soccer Divide

By ANDREA  
DI ROBILANT

JOE MCGINNIS. *The Miracle of Castel di Sangro*. LITTLE, BROWN & COMPANY. 416 PAGES. \$25.00

SOCCER MANIA is spreading fast across the land — the national frenzy surrounding the success of the U.S. team at the women's World Cup was a powerful reminder. And despite all the hype, despite the hysteria of frazzled soccer moms and dads screaming their heads off every Saturday morning, the kids who actually play on those fields are getting better each year. They love the game, talent is blossoming, and with the help of shifting demographics in favor of the Latino population, a little brio is also finding its way into American soccer. Given the rapidly increasing pool of players, the resources, and the sheer doggedness with which Americans are mastering the game, there is no reason to think the U.S. team cannot compete with the very best, even perhaps winning the World Cup in 2006 or 2010. But at the same time, soccer in America will always be an acquired skill, a contrived love nurtured by necessity (the ultimate

test of globalization?) rather than instinct. It will never run in the blood, even as the blood changes.

Joe McGinniss's *The Miracle of Castel di Sangro* serves as a useful cautionary tale. Five years ago the author awoke in the throes of an inexplicable and overwhelming passion for the game of Pelé. His doctor told him, jokingly, he had probably suffered a small stroke — one that had impaired the part of the brain which prevents Americans from fathoming the subtle beauty of an art form the rest of the world venerates. An increasingly common "ailment," one is tempted to say. But McGinniss's fixation was in a category all its own. And soon he was mumbling abstruse statistics on the Italian premier league as if speaking in tongues.

In fall 1996 he tore up a million dollar contract for a book on O.J. Simpson, set forth from his family in Massachusetts ("leaves the comforts of home," is the way the publicists at Little, Brown quaintly put it), and moved to Castel di Sangro, a little town (pop. 5,000) in a remote part of the Abruzzi, nestled between the Bitter Mountains and the Valley of the Dead Woman. Nathaniel Hawthorne once described the region as "without enough of life and juiciness to be any longer susceptible of decay. An earthquake would afford it the only chance of ruin, beyond its present ruin." A recent Frommer's guide described it more succinctly as "arid and sun-scorched, impoverished and visually stark."

Not the most alluring of places, by any stretch. McGinniss, however, was on a mission and he did not amble into the town of Castel di Sangro per

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chance. He was looking for a good story on which to let his new obsession loose. And back then the Italian papers were filled with news on the team from Castel di Sangro. Against all odds, it had advanced from the doldrums of semiprofessional soccer to the Serie B, a league that was way above its station and just one step removed from the

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mighty Serie A, the major league of Italian soccer — by most reckonings the pantheon of world soccer.

There was no rational explanation for Castel di Sangro's extraordinary feat. Italians saw it, quite simply, as a *miracolo*. And McGinniss arrived just as this plucky little town would have to compete with big and famous cities like Turin, Venice, and Genoa in the upcoming season. Would it manage to survive in Serie B? Would *salvezza* — salvation — follow the *miracolo*?

Castel di Sangro's predicament in 1996-97 was familiar to Italians, who often use soccer terms such as *promozione* and *retrocessione* — the upgrading and downgrading within the various leagues — to chart the political

and economic course of the nation as a whole. Ever since the country was unified over a century ago, Italians have aspired to the Serie A of European nations (Great Britain, Germany, France) while fearing relegation to the dreaded Serie B. The hysteria which followed the entry of the Italian lira into the euro-zone last year, for example, sprung from the joy of *promozione* into the league of Europe's economic champions. (This year, the sluggish pace of the economy had many Italians worried about a possible *retrocessione* and hoping for another *miracolo* that would ensure *salvezza*.)

The odds in favor of *salvezza* were not good. Castel di Sangro turned out to be a rather uninspiring team trained by a conservative coach who liked to play the safest possible game of soccer, with most players bunched up in front of the home goal and one lonely forward up front waiting patiently for the ball and, presumably, for a *piccolo miracolo*. No matter. A true Italian soccer fan seldom rejoices; the real pleasure is always in the pain. And by the time McGinniss settled into his routine he was already a true believer, a besotted *tifoso* (fan) in the throes of the weekly cycles of the soccer season. Every day he rushed out to get the sports dailies, joined the training sessions, ate his meals with the team, drank and smoked and gossiped with the players until late at night (the coach had strict rules for his players: no garlic, no hot peppers, and *molte sigarette!*). On Saturdays, he was on the road with the team — to a long string of embarrassing defeats, punctuated by the occasional *miracolo* that kept hope alive. There were moments of real drama along the way, as when

one of the mid-fielders was arrested on drug smuggling charges. And there was tragedy as well: Two of the better players were killed in a car crash.

McGinniss has a good eye for the quirky details of daily life in Castel di Sangro. The constant, obsessive chatter on the telephone, with its *ciaociaociao* leitmotiv; the sordid details of a neighbor's domestic life; the two-bit orgies organized by the team president in the neighboring village; the drama of the depressed, pill-popping soccer wives; the rituals around the dinner table at Marcella's trattoria; and the whiff of illegality wafting over everything. Especially around the silent, cigar-chomping, patron of the team, Signor Rezza, who views the American intruder with growing perplexity. There are times when McGinniss brings to mind the hackneyed old image of the bumbling American (or British) traveler who marvels at the oddities of his strange new surroundings; the effect can be slightly irritating. Still, his sketchy portrait of Castel di Sangro as a town of high-strung neurotics with a warm heart is a welcome antidote to the recent spate of best sellers peddling the phony image of modern Italy as a sun-drenched land of earthly delights.

**S**O THE RAW MATERIAL in the small town of Castel di Sangro is all there, one feels, for the making of a very good book. But soon enough McGinniss's obsession starts getting in the way, and his promising sketch remains just that, overshadowed by the excruciating chronicle of the author's own *dementia footballensis*. He badgers the coach about the players he should send in the field. He makes melodramatic scenes at

the stadium. At night he obsesses over his computer in his dingy one-room apartment (he has covered the walls with soccer flags and scarves) pitting the Castel di Sangro team against imaginary foes. He vents his rage against the team managers by nailing vitriolic manifestoes around town — he calls them polemics — like an eccentric Martin

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Luther of the Abruzzi. And he becomes increasingly foul-mouthed, blurting out Italian profanities as if suddenly infected with a local variety of Tourette's syndrome.

It turns out McGinniss is not a true *tifoso* after all but rather its American caricature. The author loses control in a way a real Italian soccer fan never would. He rants and raves and makes a spectacle of himself (one wonders, inevitably, if all the noise he makes is at least in part designed to attract the attention of Italian publishers to the book he is writing, for he is constantly giving interviews and promoting himself as well as the team he is covering). By the end of the book McGinniss is running up and down the stage and ready for the great coup de théâtre.

## Books

Castel di Sangro loses the last game of the season against Bari. It doesn't really matter in terms of the overall standings — the team has already attained *salvezza* and therefore runs no risk of being downgraded from Serie B. But McGinniss accuses the team of having thrown the game — a rather potent charge to level against Castel di Sangro without any proof beyond a few quotes from anonymous sources. It is possible that the game was indeed fixed. Corruption in sports is nothing new in Italy (nor, for that matter, in the

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United States) and it has plagued Italian soccer since the earliest days. But the evidence McGinniss brings forth is slim compared to the level of his outrage. Understandably, the team managers, most of the players, and the townfolk do not take kindly to his accusation. And the book ends on a rather ludicrous note with this self-appointed American Don Quixote brandishing his polemics until he is pretty much run out of the small town that had taken him in as one of its own. Hard to believe, but at the end of it all there it is: the well-meaning American fighting it off against the wily Italians. As one Castel di Sangro player

confides to the author in the closing moments of the drama, "Remember, we are the land of Dante, but also of Machiavelli."

In the end the book tends to reinforce the great soccer divide between America and the rest of the world. Supercilious European readers will be tempted to think of McGinniss as a typical specimen of the New American Soccer Enthusiast, all bluster and foolishness. And in doing so they will underestimate the degree to which soccer is indeed taking root in this country. Yet the author's saga points to the dangers of succumbing too recklessly to an unnatural love. McGinniss is being sued by the Castel di Sangro soccer club and will have his opportunity to lay down his case in court. Meanwhile he is upset, indeed furious, because the Italian media have not rallied to his cause. He has sent inflammatory e-mails to numerous Italian journalists and editors. He has made wild accusations and warned of the dawn of a new fascist era in Italy. Which in a way brings us back to the diagnosis of his friend the physician. Something may indeed have suddenly turned on the soccer light bulbs in McGinniss's brain. But his Yankee genes have prevented him from becoming a true soccer fan. Instead, they have turned him into a fanatic. Or as McGinniss, who likes to flavor his prose with Italian words, would say: *un fanatico*.

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