

Jorge Valdano

The pitch is a jungle

By Lothar Gorriss and Thomas Hüetlin

Jorge Valdano knows the sport inside out: As a Real Madrid player, he won both the Spanish championship and the UEFA Cup twice in the 1980s. As an international, he scored one of Argentina's three goals in the 1986 World Cup Final against Germany. As a coach, he led Real Madrid to the Spanish league title in 1995. As a manager, he turned the club into a global enterprise and invested 200 million euros in the likes of Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo and David Beckham. And because he describes his obsession with the sport in newspaper columns and books, happily quoting Shakespeare and Jorge Luis Borges, he is fondly referred to in South America and Spain as the Philosopher of Football. He has just published his latest volume on the subject, entitled "On Football." Valdano, 50, studied law and now works as a corporate consultant in Madrid. In October he will be taking up his post as director of Escuela de Estudios Universitarios, a soccer college established by Real Madrid and the European University of Madrid.

Señor Valdano, most employees at your company Make-A-Team are ex-sportsmen and -women, including Spain's former goalkeeper Andoni Zubizarreta. What can the world of commerce learn from football?

The idea behind my company is to apply the principles of football management to the business world. We show the executives of major Spanish corporations how to motivate and provide leadership, resolve conflicts and nurture talent. The analogies between the sport and business are fairly obvious. Companies need to earn money and achieve their targets. But the world we live in is full of frustration, anxiety and stress, all of which subverts these goals and strategies. In my view, football can offer solutions to all of these problems. Ultimately, it is just a metaphor for life.

That sounds suspiciously like a cliché.

Not remotely! A company's workforce is no different from a sports team. Both are microcosms of humankind. Football helps us understand who we are. It reflects what is happening in our cities: the commercialism and the competition, the ugly and the beautiful aspects. And why is it so compelling as a metaphor? Because it is a world of exaggeration, of excess. It produces powerful images, images we can all relate to.

Changing ends for a moment: What could football learn from business?

First and foremost, the ability to manage yourself well. For example, clubs might learn to spend less than they make.

As a manager of Real Madrid, you splashed out over 200 million euros for stars like Figo, Zidane, Ronaldo and Beckham.

That's right. But it worked. When we took over back in 2000, the club had 40 professionals in its squad. Their salaries accounted for 97 percent of its annual budget. Real was 300 million euros in debt. We sold club real estate to reduce our debts and introduced a new concept: the galácticos, the extraterrestrials. The plan was to buy a world-class player every year, thereby creating a global brand identity for the club, and simultaneously integrate budding stars from our youth academy. Today, salaries make up just 50 percent of the budget, and are almost covered by our merchandising income. Real Madrid accomplished something that ought to be the norm. Today the club has 100 million euros in the bank. Last year alone it earned 50 million. Not in spite of the stars, but because of them.

Yet Real Madrid hasn't won the league title since 2004 and has gone through four coaches in the process. How long can a club keep raking in 50 million euros profit without picking up any silverware?

Hold your horses. Through 2003, we won seven trophies. What's more, in my view, the final scores often cloud the reality. People think it's a disaster whenever a team loses – although the club might be in sound

financial health. I ask you: Isn't the other way around more absurd – when a team wins title after title but piles up debt in the millions?

You resigned 18 months ago. Why?

Restructuring the club was like running a revolution. It was draining. Back then I was the club's only spokesman. I was highly visible, only too visible. At the end of the day, I was worn out. And I probably wore out everyone around me as well. Throughout my career – as a professional, coach and manager – I always have made a point of taking a breather every three or four years.

Do you still believe in the concept of the galácticos? President Florentino Pérez, your fellow "revolutionary," stepped down in February. It seems like an era has come to an end.

Real will certainly need to realign its priorities now. Zidane, for example, is in the twilight of his career. Time takes its toll on everyone, whether you're an extraterrestrial or a mere mortal. Right now Real Madrid needs stability. It's a not-for-profit organization that needs to keep its fans happy and stay out of debt. 100 million euros now is being invested in new players for next season. Not in galácticos, but instead in solid international quality. Real will be focusing more heavily on young players, too. As in business, the renewal process never starts until it's too late. And it inevitably takes longer if the old guard includes stars like Zidane or Roberto Carlos.

In 1975, at the age of 19, you left Argentina to sign for a Spanish team. Can you remember how much money you were making back then?

Only that it was 10 times as much as in Argentina. To put it in perspective: I could have bought four mid-sized cars a year with my salary. That wasn't exactly a fortune, and my team – Deportivo Alavés – was languishing in the second division to boot. But I was desperate to get away, so I grabbed the first opportunity that came along.

What made you want to leave?

A need to escape from the chaos in Argentinean football and the chaos that consumed the whole country. Argentina was preparing to host the World Cup at the time and – needless to say – that was a big deal for the military junta. To move to a foreign team, I had to sign a waiver agreeing to my exclusion from the World Cup squad. I was on the fringes of the national team at the time, so it was a tough decision. I spoke to César Luis Menotti, the team's coach. He said, "Stay, and you can be sure of being in my squad for the Finals." Then he added, "But who knows what the future holds? Somebody else might be managing the team next week." Nothing was certain in Argentina at the time. The country was falling apart.

Did you leave the country for economic or political reasons?

For professional reasons, first and foremost. I was a good player, very adept and quite skillful, although I'd have to describe my playing style as dry.

Dry?

Basically, I was methodical – like a German. The Argentinean game features agility and mobility. We all know the stock image: ultra-imaginative, ultra-creative. In a nutshell, just like Maradona. In those days, everyone was telling me I would make it big in Europe. That was the kind of praise I really didn't want to hear. I'm from Argentina. I wanted to be successful in my home country, but I was no Maradona. The sad truth is that, as a fan, I too would have rather watched Maradona than Valdano.

Is there really a difference in mentality between Argentineans and Europeans?

In Argentinean society, deception is considered an art form. Anyone using stealth and cunning to get somewhere in life will garner more respect than somebody who has made it through honest hard work. At my first professional club in

Argentina, Newells Old Boys, cross-country runs were on the training schedule every Tuesday. There was a racecourse right next to our pitch. We had to do three full laps, a fair distance. A funny thing happened during my first training session at the club: I was young, fast and athletically built, so I sprinted out ahead. But much to my surprise the team's three stars overtook me a quarter of the way round. In a taxi! A friend of theirs had been waiting for them in his cab, and dropped them off shortly before the home stretch. The trainer had been oblivious. To be a star in Argentina, you don't need a fitness trainer. You need a taxi driver.

Were you involved in politics?

At that time I was studying law in Rosario. It was impossible to attend university and not become politically aware. Argentina was a police state – ruled by dictators. People lived in constant fear. Even today the sight of a uniform sends a shiver down my spine. But I was never really involved in politics, let alone as an activist.

In the 1970s your former national coach Menotti propagated the idea of leftist football. You, too, were seen as one of its proponents. Does that still apply today? After all, you transformed Real Madrid into a global enterprise.

In my view, categories like rightist and leftist are misleading. I would tend to think in terms of progressive and conservative approaches to the game.

And what defines a progressive approach?

It rejects the mainstream belief that organization takes precedence over freedom; that the collective counts for more than the individual; that rejects the notion that the coach's ideas outweigh those of the players, and fear neutralizes attacking instincts. It's a fact, though, that fear has been the driving force behind every footballing revolution in the past 30 years.

Were you also motivated by fear as coach of Real Madrid?

That's inevitable, because your job is always on the line. For coaches today, though, every match means another series of threats; in their sum, they encourage defensive thinking. Ultimately, football is a beautiful game that the mediocre turn ugly in the name of pragmatism.

Does Real Madrid play progressive football?

Absolutely. That's the essence of the galacticos vision. Ideally, imagination should always overcome predictability in this team. Real plays progressively. Chelsea doesn't. The London club has adopted a very intense, very physical game. I like a lot of the Chelsea players, but I don't like the team's style. If Chelsea played Juventus in the Champions League, I'd rather spend the time in the backyard.

You are a paradox: a romantic and a capitalist.

Maybe. You see, in my eyes, the pitch is a jungle. And what happens in that jungle has hardly changed over the past 100 years. The thoughts that flash through a striker's mind today as he bears down on goal are the same ones that Maradona, Pelé, and Di Stefano had in their day. What has changed is what surrounds the jungle. A revolution has taken place there, an industry has sprung up. In football, too, homo sapiens and wild beasts exist side by side. We humans need to play. It's primeval urge in each of us, and we need to take that seriously. But the industry is big and powerful. We need to protect the jungle, to defend it from civilization and all of its rules. Civilization should be kept out of the game: Keep off the grass!

In 2003 you signed David Beckham for 35 million euros, a player who seems to have crossed this line long ago.

That's not the way I see it. As a player he has incredible élan and outstanding potential. Off the field he behaves like a modern-day dandy, but on it he is a warrior. It would be very unfair not to differentiate here.

Does that make Beckham the ideal footballer because he combines both fields? The sport and its marketing?

He is the ultimate modern player. But that too can entail risks. Beckham is a Beatle, a Rolling Stone, a role model, an advertising icon, a hero of the globalized game, a symbol of commercialism. There are a lot of things going on around him, but he seems able to deal with them pretty well. The question is: Can his club and teammates cope too? All of a sudden, you have young players admiring his hairstyles and his clothes rather than his free kicks.

Is Beckham your ideal modern-day footballer?

I didn't say I approved. I grew up with a romantic notion of the sport, and it's something I'm happy to champion. But that works only if these ideas retain some connection to reality. Today the game has become a part of international com-

merce. I suspect we are at the very beginning of this process, and things that are new always prompt resistance. At Real Madrid we had to ask ourselves: What does a team need to do to remain a major global force? We live in the age of globalization, but we can conquer this market only from within our jungle, by exploiting the beauty and fascination of the game. Maybe Real Madrid faced up to these new realities earlier than others – and, in doing so, tried to find a compromise between romance and business, the jungle and civilization.

The kind of adulation enjoyed by Beckham in Asia has nothing to do with his playing skills. The fans in China and Japan just want a glimpse of their fair-haired knight in shining armor.

That's not true. People love good football around the world – in the mature markets of Europe as well as in the emerging Asian markets. Fifty years ago Real had a bond with the Spanish capital. Today it has relationships with the whole world. And that makes it a fairly complex business.

Which television has long since taken over.

Television finances football. It generates its image. It globalizes the sport. It metamorphoses players into superstars. And TV is killing the game? In my view, it's reviving the game – as a spectacle. This is obviously a marriage of convenience, but the game itself hasn't been forced to change.

So despite being a romantic at heart, you have come to accept television?

Yes. That's the way of the world. It's money – not ideas or beauty – that ultimately calls the plays. During my term as directing of sporting activities in Madrid, I always said I was a bit like the gatekeeper at Jurassic Park. The jungle may still exist but – in end effect – it has become little more than a theme park.

How did you get into sport?

For children in our village, football was all we had. We didn't have computers, we didn't have TV. I played every single day. I listened to games on the radio. In my generation, the action was relayed in words, not pictures. Let me tell you a story. After we had beaten the Germans in the 1986 World Cup Final in Mexico City, some of the players broke down and started sobbing in the dressing room. And I thought to myself: This has been the highlight of my entire life. The culmination of everything I've ever worked for. So I thought it really might be a good time to cry. But try as I might, I couldn't shed a single tear. Eight years later, after my career had ended, my brother sent me a cassette. He often made tapes for me. I slipped it into my WalkMan and went jogging. All of a sudden, between two songs, I heard the voice of a famous Argentinean commentator – a voice that had been my constant companion during childhood. And as I ran, I heard him describing my goal that day, Argentina 2, West Germany 0! I slumped down on a bench and cried like a baby.

Doesn't it seem strange that there's a fortune to be earned in the sport – by coaches, players, agents, the federations – but that the clubs, the actual entrepreneurs, rarely make a profit?

That depends on what you mean by profit. For example, as president of AC Milan, Silvio Berlusconi definitely profited. He used the sport to demonstrate his model for success to the Italians. He acquired a level of visibility and attention that was quite extraordinary, that would have been virtually impossible otherwise. Without this high profile, he could never have achieved his political goals. There are leaders like Berlusconi in almost every country. Spain has Jesus Gil y Gil, who owned Atlético Madrid and founded his own political party. Argentina has Mauricio Macri, the chairman of Boca Juniors. He has just been elected to parliament for the province of Buenos Aires. Someday he is even hoping to become president of the country. That kind of visibility is an asset in its own right.

And which rewards does the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich expect to reap from Chelsea?

The sums he is investing there may seem crazy, but to him it's like buying a bottle of water is to us. It may look as though his patronage of the club is just a billionaire's quirk, a hobby. Paradoxically, though, he may be looking for the visibility and attention that will let him blend in and hide.

So you think his compatriot and fellow billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky – who is currently doing time in a Siberian prison camp – should have bought a club, too?

Yes. A few weeks back the Zapatistas – a Mexican guerrilla force, freedom fighters or whatever you want to call them – approached several players. They contacted Maradona and me, too. They wanted to organize a big charity

match. In the end it didn't materialize. But what were they trying to achieve? They didn't want money. They wanted people's attention. They've dropped off the media radar since giving up kidnappings and assassinations. So what do they do? They simply slip on a new mask, hide behind it and organize sporting events. Berlusconi and the Zapatistas both want the same thing – power.

Would you have taken part?

Why not?

Why did the game fall through?

They couldn't get enough people together.

Could it be that the Zapatistas were too radical for most?

Possibly. Maybe they were satisfied with the publicity they got just by announcing their plan.

Maradona is a friend of yours. Why did he fail? Because he broke out of the theme park?

He didn't break out, he was dragged out. He became a global celebrity, and his life was being turned into a spectacle – with or without his consent. Being as famous as Maradona is an awful burden. The mantle of stardom the Argentineans have draped on Maradona's shoulders is so heavy that he has never been able to struggle free. The history of Argentina in the past 30 years charts a decline that continues to this day: a military putsch, a coup d'état, hyperinflation, the impoverishment of millions of middle-class families, state bankruptcy. And there was only one man who could save the day: Maradona. To this country he is a hero, a modern-day St. Martin. It is difficult for a single man to come to terms with the fact that he is expected to compensate for the harsh realities of an entire nation, even though he himself only ever came alive on the football pitch—as part of a game, a fictional world. That is the cause of a terrible misunderstanding. Maradona has come a long way. He has risen from abject poverty to the pinnacle of fame, and that several times over.

Do you have any contact with him?

Occasionally. We talk on the phone. There are two very distinct Maradonas: the public one and the private one, who can be absolutely delightful. We spoke just recently, as a matter of fact. He had tried to call me several times. When he finally got through he said, "Jorge, you sure are hard to get hold of. Who do you think you are? Maradona?"

How is he doing?

He's lost weight. His talk show is the country's most popular TV program. He is an eccentric personality in an eccentric football universe in a very eccentric age. Everything about Maradona is big. Even his enemies: Menem, the Pope, George W. Bush. That takes real guts. He never backs down, he never gives up, no matter how desperate things seem.

A romantic figure?

Well, you know, even during his playing days, television was already dictating the kick-off times. On the other hand, Maradona himself was art. He was a naive artist who couldn't explain what he was doing. When we were sitting in the dressing room before the 1986 World Cup Final, there was a deathly hush. No wonder: the biggest moment of our entire lives was waiting outside for us. All of a sudden Maradona started to cry out to his mother, "Tota," that's her name, "Tota, come and help me. I'm afraid; I need you to protect me." His message to us was clear: Don't worry if you're afraid, because Maradona's afraid, too. He was football's greatest genius, and the only place he was happy was on the pitch, in the jungle. Without a ball, he's just a man who can't live off memories alone.

Is Maradona's rags-to-riches story a leftist or a capitalist dream?

It was an exception, which is precisely the kind of trap that capitalism sets. Donald Trump is the same kind of role model for the 50 million poor Americans who will never make it good, whose faces you'll never see on TV. Football is a fiction that society needs to survive, just like literature or the movies. There's only one problem: In the fiction of football, real games still need to be won.

Who's going to win the World Cup?

Brazil. Or Germany.

Germany?

They will make it to the Final. When you're watching the game and you start to yawn, that's when the Germans are at their most dangerous, when you can be sure they will score.

In the Final 20 years ago, you, too, nearly fell foul of the Germans. You

were two goals up, then they clawed their way back and equalized.

There are occasions in our lives that we can never forget because they seem to last an eternity or flash by in seconds. Your brain starts to function as it does after an accident. The pace of what you're experiencing changes. We were leading 2-0, and all of a sudden there was a kind of hiatus. I started to take in the things around me: the game, the stadium, the spectators – as though I were an onlooker, watching everything from afar, rather than a player caught up in the emotions of the match. It was a great, thrilling game and a wonderful day; even the light seemed different to me. In my view the pictures of the match bear that out as well. So I was watching the game and – maybe to help myself grasp the momentousness of the occasion – telling myself: Yes, Jorge, you've won the World Cup. And before I knew it, Germany had scored twice.

A rude awakening from a wonderful dream?

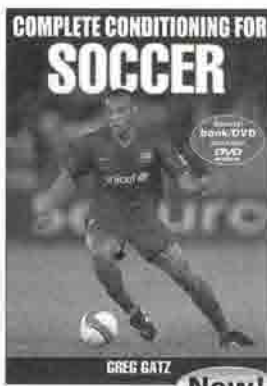
After the Germans had equalized, we were lining up in the center circle, Maradona, Burruchaga and I. And I said: "Just now we had the World Cup in our pockets. Now we have to start from scratch again." Maradona didn't respond. But Burruchaga, who never opened his mouth, suddenly started talking. "I'm feeling good," he said, as if he were in a bar, sinking a beer. "We're feeling good, aren't we?" And then he said: "No problem, this one's in the bag." Just minutes later he slotted in the winner. It was very strange, as if he had had some sort of premonition. And that isn't fiction. That's a fact. ☹

The preceding interview was first published in SPIEGEL Magazine.

Correction

Due to an oversight during submission, a third author was omitted from the byline for an article in the March-April 2009 issue of Soccer Journal. The authors of "In-Season Weekly High-Intensity Training Volume Among Professional English Soccer Players: A 20-Week Study" were Adam Lee Owen, Pui-lam Wong and Karim Chamari. We regret Chamari was not included in the byline.

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