

While cricket may always be my sport of choice, football has never been too far behind. In fact my earliest memories of sport come from the 1994 Football World Cup, well before my passion for cricket was ignited. It is simple to understand why football is the world's favourite sport, all one needs is a ball and more than one player to kick it. Its universal appeal stems from its simplicity; it is an art from without a real medium, it turns paupers into princes, it gives wings to our dreams and will always remain quite simply, "The Beautiful Game".

The 1994 World Cup in the USA was my arrival into the world of sports. When one is asked why one likes a sport, we always find some childhood anecdote that relates appropriately. If one were to ask me why my life is seemingly dedicated to the world of sports, I would say the reason is the '94 World Cup. I was in awe of the stadiums that were seemingly filled to capacity, every single one of them looking at the twenty two players on the field. I wondered what was so interesting about them that people would pay money, sit down, look and cheer. It boggled the mind, then I decided to actually watch a game and see what the fuss was about. All the games seemed to be played at some ungodly hour of the night, not something my parents were going to allow. After much begging and promising to sleep in the afternoon they let me stay up with my older brothers and sister to watch one full game, till then all I had seen was a few minutes here and there.

I still remember the first game I saw, it was Italy versus Ireland. The game seemed highly charged and to be honest now I seem to remember the commentary more than the game itself. Baggio, that name was repeated over and over again, the commentator called him the greatest player in the world, and all ready he had become my favourite. His natural charm and charisma was even evident to me, half way around the world. The Italians were all style and class, the Irish were workman like and rugged. The result was an eye opener, style without substance was not a good combination. Baggio and his team mates sulked off the field as lowly Ireland beat mighty Italy by a goal to nil. I had stayed up all night to watch the match, and when it was over sleep was the last thing on my mind. That night I tossed and turned in bed, wondering why Italy lost. The beauty and artistry came from

Penalties and Ponytails

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them, surely they deserved to win. Why should any game be that cruel to deny the rightful winner a victory?

It was indeed a bitter pill to swallow, and I completely immersed myself into the tournament, I knew all the local papers World Cup supplements by heart and Italy was the team closest to my heart. As they fumbled towards ecstasy, I was busy eating up anything and everything I could find about the World Cup. I also remember a fat player with a hairstyle resembling a skunk creating a fuss. Only years later did I realise who he was and what a drugs test actually did. "Cocaine" was added to my vocabulary, so was the word "cheater". People took out processions across the city and on the news it seemed as if this one fat player was bigger than the World Cup itself, little did I know that was partially true.

The World Cup had me caught in its web, there were a few other stories here and there that interested me. Saudi Arabia qualified for the round of 16 and was hailed as the next big Asian team. The players were offered fabulous sums of money and they became superstars over night in the

Middle East. This only served to show me how sport can make dreams come true. Even I realised the enormity of their achievement and only after that did I realise that sport actually changes people's lives.

Throughout the tournament while I may have focussed my attention on the Italians even I had to admit that Brazil were slowly but surely coming up in the tournament. And one name I heard over and over again was Romario. I must have heard his name a thousand times before I actually saw him on the field, and much like Baggio he had become some sort of mythic creature. Funnily enough I followed most of the tournament in the papers, two days after most of the games had taken place, my parents did not take kindly to me wanting to stay up every night just for the sake of football. Every now and then on a Thursday or Friday night I would be given the rare privilege of watching a match, the only rules were that I had to stay awake for the game myself (which at that age was as good as not staying up at all) and that the volume had to be turned down because the T.V was in my parents room. Much to my disappointment I could hardly stay awake for the games, but the newspapers the following morning were the next best thing. It was