

through the newspapers that I followed Brazil's and Italy's almost inevitable march towards the final. The very first time I would associate the name Romario to a face would be in the grand final. It was almost like meeting a long lost friend, except that the feelings I harboured for him were anything but welcoming, to me he was Baggio's and Italy's nemesis. A man I loved to hate, without ever having seen him, a name without a face and I would have loved for it to have stayed that way.

My parents decided not to fight with me and even before I asked they gave me permission to watch the final. The stage was set, and back then when I was blinded by religion I had no trouble in believing that if I prayed enough for Italy to win, they would. I prayed day and night, I would have been satisfied with a Baggio hat trick and four nil to Italy. My belief in a team that I had only once seen play (and lose) was admirable, nothing could convince me otherwise. I had not fully learned the lessons of the defeat to Ireland. That night I ate dinner silently, tensed and nervous about the game. I seemed to be going through the feelings and emotions that the players must have. The wait between dinner and the start of the game seemed endless, but eventually at some unearthly hour the game started. The first few encounters were cagey, like the opening rounds of a boxing match both teams seemed to be feeling out each other. There were no real attacks, just nervous jabs. Baggio was a shadow of the player I remembered and had read about, he seemed preoccupied and sluggish. The game was far from what I had imagined, the Italians had lost all their artistry and Brazil seemed to play the role of Ireland, all workmen like without much bite. If it really were a boxing match they did not land a punch on each other till the 15th round.

That round should rightly be called penalties, the game remained scoreless after full time. And even with extra time, they both seemed happy with a draw. But this was a World Cup final, there were no draws. The game was to be decided on penalties, this was no place for the faint hearted. I don't remember much of the penalties, but I do remember that after it was all said and done, the Brazilian goalkeeper was to be known as "Saint" Taffarel. It came down to Baggio and he had to score to keep Italian hopes alive. With his thigh strapped and shirt half out he coolly stood before the ball, gently ran up and kicked it with his right foot. The ball went high over the crossbar as he put his hands on his hips and looked to the earth to swallow him. The Brazilians celebrated as my hero walked away dazed, the divine ponytail was only human. The rest is a blur because even now it's tough to see with tears in one's eyes. ■

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