



# MARADONA must be smiling

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While the fans of Italian football continue to struggle to convince their peers from the English Premier League and LaLiga about the relevance of Serie A in European footballing hierarchy, it is with a renewed optimism that they can now boast about Napoli – the new entertainers of European football.

The Serie A may have lost much of its sheen following the Calciopoli scandal in 2006 and the overall economic downturn in the peninsula, causing the once-world's-best football league looking enviously across its shoulders. However, even during the relative lull of the last decade-and-a-half, the country has seen some fascinating revolutions, albeit for brief periods, from some of the lesser clubs.

First it was Zdenek Zeman's ultra-attacking Pescara side in Serie B in 2011 – a perfect retort to those who still like to believe that Italian football relies mostly on defensive pragmatism rather than attacking flair.

Then there was Sarriball at Napoli, a style of play which impressed one and all, including Pep Guardiola himself. Next came Gian Piero Gasperini's Atalanta and Roberto de Zerbi's Sassuolo, both teams turning heads not just in the peninsula but also across Europe.

Each team had their own philosophy and style of play, and was entertaining and successful to an extent, in their own way. Latest in that line and arguably the most entertaining of all is Luciano Spalletti's Napoli.

Since the shaven-headed Tuscan took over from

Gennaro Gattuso ahead of the 2021-2022 season, Napoli have been one of the most entertaining sides in Europe. After finishing a creditable third in the Serie A table last season, The Blues have unleashed their full array of entertainment this season.

They have scored a whopping 64 goals already in 27 matches – behind only Bayern Munich, Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain across the top five leagues in Europe. They have also scored the most goals in the Champions League group stage and are already into the quarterfinals of Europe's premier club competition for the first time following a 5-0 aggregate win over last season's Europa League winners Frankfurt. At home, they are all but assured of a third Serie A title with a 19-point lead after only 27 match days.

But something that might easily escape notice of casual observers is the fact that Napoli have been the second-most frugal team across top five leagues, second only to Xavi's Barcelona. And they have suffered only two defeats in the league thus far – the best record alongside the Blaugrana.

This is what sets Spalletti's side apart from the Pescaras and Atalantas and the Sassuolos of the past few years. The Partenopei have been able to entertain while making sure they do not endanger their title ambitions by doing so.

The biggest surprise is, Napoli are tearing up Serie A and Champions League order after having experienced an exodus of star players, including Lorenzo Insigne, Dries Mertens, Fabian Ruiz, and Kalidou Koulibaly.

The Neapolitan revolution did not come in one day, it was 20 years in the making. Once bankrupt, the club was lifted from the depths by

ambition of its flamboyant owner Aurelio de Laurentis. With their lofty ambition, there was some astute management as well, who made some bargain buys in the preseason transfer window, offloading ageing stars and replacing them with young and promising players. Some of those acquisitions include Kim Min-Jae, Frank Anguissa, Mathias Oliveira and, of course, Khvicha Kvarashkhelia, with the latter having already become a star after forming a lethal partnership with Victor Osimhen.

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Before Maradona arrived in the peninsula, no team from the south of the country had ever won a league title. The power structure in football was symbolic of the great north-south divide, which was probably more real in Italy than anywhere else at that time. The Argentine great changed it all and gave the eternally neglected Neapolitans and the southerners a reason to take pride in, an occasion to see the 'superior' northerners eye to eye. It was a watershed moment in the history of Italian football, and indeed of Italian society as a whole where football is no lesser a religion than Catholicism.

Since Maradona's acrimonious departure from Italy though, Napoli had slipped into obscurity as the hegemony of the north, perpetuated by the likes of Juventus, Milan, and Internazionale once again set in.

But it looks like de Laurentis and Spalletti are bringing back the good times with the class of '22-23. And Maradona would surely be cheering from above when the likes of Osimhen and Kvarashkhelia proudly hold aloft the coveted Serie A trophy at the Diego Armando Maradona Stadium.



## A higher purpose

SAMAMA RAHMAN

While takeovers from wealthy financiers have been very much in vogue across top-tier European leagues, one that continues to do its best to resist that trend is the Bundesliga in Germany.

Although the German Football Association (DFB) recognised the need for outside investment and abolished the law that clubs could only be owned by members' associations, they found a place just north of the middle ground and introduced the "50+1 rule". It allowed investment, but ensured that the members would always maintain a majority of voting rights.

The only clubs in the Bundesliga that see private entities hold majority stakes are Bayer Leverkusen, owned by pharmaceutical company Bayer, and VfL Wolfsburg, owned by Volkswagen – solely because the clubs were owned by those companies before the inception of the Bundesliga itself.

And while clubs such as RB Leipzig have managed to find loopholes to circumvent the rule, it has never worked against the league as a whole. In fact, it could be argued that the rule is what makes the Bundesliga boast one of the highest average attendances in world football and enables



the infectious fan culture.

The level of football has not suffered greatly either and there is true competition all the way down the ladder. This season, Union Berlin and SC Freiburg became the 12th and 13th German teams to reach a Europa League round of 16. No other nation has had as many.

The caveat, of course, is when you look at the top of the food chain. It has been almost 11 years since Germany saw a champion other than Bayern Munich.

While that could all change this season with Bayern Munich in second place, one point behind Borussia Dortmund with only nine games left, the perennial German champions could restore the natural order when Dortmund travel to Munich on April 1.

There is reason to believe Bayern are the most exposed they have been in recent years, especially after coach Julian Nagelsmann lambasted a "snitch" at a press conference after German outlet Sport Bild published a couple of pages from his playbook for the game against VfL Bochum.

But for fans of teams like Freiburg – who meandered on in the second tier for 15 years until finally earning promotion to the Bundesliga for the first time in their history in the 1993-94 season – and Union Berlin, perhaps no trophy would be worthy of the sacrifice they have made to bring their club so far.

When Union were at risk of losing their licence in 2008 because three terraces on the sides of the Stadion An der Alten Försterei had fallen into disrepair, 2,500 fans volunteered to rebuild the stadium. In the early 90s, when their club was on the verge of bankruptcy, fans initiated a blood drive, naming it "Bleed for Union". It was a simple slogan that encapsulated exactly the lengths they were willing to go to.

It was not until the 2018-19 that the club had made its way into the top tier of German football. Since then, they have stubbornly climbed up the table and battled for European spots until, this year, finding themselves in a title race.

Union are five points off the top. Their hopes are slim. The inevitability of Bayern is depressing. Yet, you can rest assured in the knowledge that every person in the stands believes in a collective dream. It is not a dream bound to trophies, but to a simple core philosophy: Iron Union.

