

A look at Diego Maradona's legacy in Spain

Synopsis

The player was known as one of the three greats in the history of football.



Diego Maradona found the net 27 times in 62 La Liga games – for both Barcelona and Sevilla.

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LaLiga, Spain's top tier football, paid tribute to Diego Armando Maradona, who passed away on Wednesday, by holding a minute's silence before all matches played during the weekend. The highlight of the last game week might have been Lionel Messi peeling off his Barcelona jersey after scoring against CA Osasuna to reveal a vintage **Maradona** jersey, but friends and contemporaries of the late Argentine footballer also spoke fondly of his time

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in Spain.

Spain was Maradona’s first port of call as a youngster, who was then an untested commodity outside his home country. Regarded as a promising youngster, but relatively rough-around-the-edges, he took his baby steps in European football by joining Barcelona for a then-world-record fee of \$7.6million after starring for Buenos-Aires club Boca Juniors.

Joan Gaspar, who was vice-president of **FC Barcelona** at the time the deal was sanction, said in later interview that directors of the club who travelled to Argentina to complete the signing had to travel in a military tank because local authorities feared for their safety. Argentina, which was ruled by a military junta at the time, was facing economic problems, public discontent following its defeat by the United Kingdom in the Falklands War.

Prising Maradona away from the Boca Juniors faithful was a difficult manoeuvre, as the top brass at Barcelona found out in Buenos Aires. However, it was one they would not regret, as Maradona enthralled fans at the Nou Camp before being sold at a profit to Napoli. Injury and illness meant that the Argentine’s playing time was restricted, but that did not stop him from leaving a mark on the Spanish top flight.

“I remember our early training sessions with him, where the rest of the team were so amazed that they just stood and watched him,” Lobo Carrasco, a Barcelona player at that time, recalled when looking back at that era. Maradona was also afforded a standing ovation at the Bernabéu, the home of Barcelona’s biggest rivals Real Madrid – a feat that was repeated only once hence, when Ronaldinho put on a masterclass in the Spanish capital in 2005.



Maradona embarked on his Italian adventure after 2 seasons at Barcelona, but he soon returned to La Liga in 1992, signing for Sevilla FC.

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Madrid fans, notorious for booing their own players, applauded Maradona by waving white handkerchiefs in the air as he evaded the pursuits of Real defenders before slotting the ball into the net. Maradona embarked on his Italian adventure after two seasons at Barcelona, but he soon returned to **La Liga** in 1992, signing for **Sevilla FC**. He was then reunited with Carlos Bilardo, who was Argentina coach when Maradona led them to victory in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

Maradona scored the winning goal in his home debut, but his form wilted as the season progressed as he had been out of the game for a year, whilst serving a ban for drug use. Sevilla fans, however, thronged to stadiums to watch Maradona warming up and dispensing advice to young players in the squad, like the present Sevilla Sporting Director Monchi, and Diego Simeone, who is currently manager of Atletico Madrid.

“He helped me in a spectacular way at Sevilla,” Simeone remembered. Monchi, meanwhile, has often told a story that sums up Maradona’s generosity: “I was walking with Maradona one day and he saw that I had a **Rolex**, which I admitted to him was a fake one. Then, after training one day, he told me to wait behind and he gifted me a Cartier so that I’d never have to wear a fake watch again.”

It was Maradona’s intention to stay at Sevilla for a while, and he even planned to bring his fleet of sports cars to the city. However, he returned to Argentina at the end of the 1992/92, bring to an end, his days in Spain. Fans of Barcelona and Sevilla weren’t the only ones to watch Maradona play at their home stadiums. In 1987, the Argentine featured for Granada in a friendly match against Swedish side Malmö, lining up alongside his brothers Hugo and Lalo, who were recently recruited by the Andalusian club. It remains the only professional game where the three Maradona played for the same team.

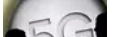
While **Diego Maradona** might be best known for his exploits with Boca Juniors and Napoli, but the Argentine held considerable sway over Spanish football during his time in La Liga. “The greatest in history is leaving, the best footballer in the world. I am very sorry for his family and for the pain they will feel right now. I was lucky to play with him, to be his friend, to enjoy his football, to share a dressing room. I feel a great sorrow. The greatest is leaving us,” said Davor Suker, who played alongside him at Sevilla.



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