



What was Diego Maradona like at Barcelona?

The Argentine megastar is being remembered by the club and the city who saw him up-close

By Luis Mazariegos | @luism8989 | Nov 30, 2020, 7:12pm CET



Diego Maradona is a name that will live on forever. His exploits are world-famous, and after his recent passing, his achievements were once again reviewed by longtime fans and newcomers alike.

He's remembered mostly playing for Argentina and Napoli, but he made his mark in many other clubs. He started out playing for Argentinos Juniors, before moving to one of Argentina's biggest clubs, Boca Juniors. It was his time at Boca that convinced Barcelona to make a record breaking purchase to secure his services. Later in his life, he played for Sevilla, and as Lionel Messi reminded us, Newell's Old Boys, before returning to retire at Boca.

It was in his first stint with Boca, in 1981, that he won the Argentine league, a campaign so brilliant it made Barcelona make their move. They paid £5 million, a record fee at the time, in

order to secure his services for the next season. Coincidentally, the 1982 FIFA **World Cup** took place in Spain, and Argentina's first match was at Camp Nou, which was perfect for the Catalan audience awaiting to see their new star.

The defending champion Argentina, however, stumbled out of the gate against Belgium, losing 1-0. Maradona was considered to have disappointed, as the Argentine team struggled to mesh its new faces with the veterans who won the 1978 World Cup. Maradona was desperate to impress after missing out on being a part of that team that won the World Cup, but the Belgian defense took the view that if you could stop him, you could stop Argentina, and it didn't much matter how you did stop him, so long as you did. This set the tone for the tournament, as teams took turns fouling Maradona persistently, and referees generally took a lenient view towards the behavior.

Argentina won their next match 4-1 against Hungary, with Maradona scoring twice. Those would be his last goals in the tournament, however. Argentina did make it past the group stage but faltered in the second group stage. With Argentina losing 3-0 to Brazil, and looking at an almost-certain elimination, Maradona got himself sent off in the 85th minute. The albiceleste pulled one back in the 89th, but time expired and Argentina were sent home.

Maradona's temper and excess are now legendary, but at the time it was a persistent source of trouble for a new star trying to adapt to the Spanish league. Barça had hoped to improve upon their showing in the 1981-82 season, when they were second, but it wasn't to be. They also were unable to defend their Cup Winners' Cup crown, crashing out in the quarterfinals.

But despite it all, Maradona was the team's top scorer that season and showed at times why he would later be considered, perhaps, the best of all time. His time at Barcelona would be marked by a bout of hepatitis, some successes, fights, a long injury, the "discovery" of cocaine, a near-riot, and a transfer to Napoli - an ultimately frustrating but sometimes brilliant two years.

In his first season, he scored a memorable goal in the league in March 1983, when **Real Madrid** were leading 1-0 at Camp Nou. After a free kick resulted in a scramble in the box, Maradona (who was famously short) headed the ball in for the equalizer. And later on, Maradona beat the offside trap and crossed for Perico Alonso, who finished expertly to make it 2-1.

Manager Udo Lattek was sacked in March, with José Luis Romero taking charge on an interim basis until César Luis Menotti was appointed. The thinking was that as a countryman

and World Cup winner to boot, Menotti would get the best out of Maradona and improve the team's defending with his famous "closing down spaces" system. There was improvement, but it took time.

Athletic Bilbao were going through a golden age at that time, and they would win the league that season. They defeated Barcelona in the first meeting 2-0, and while Maradona did score against them in the second meeting, it was a consolation goal only as Athletic won 3-2.

Barcelona lost their first leg against Athletic in the Copa del Rey, by 1-0 thanks to a penalty. The second leg would be just a few days after Barcelona had lost to them in La Liga, and they had already lost three times to Athletic that season. But Menotti's men responded well to the challenge. Lobo Carrasco scored in the opening minute to level the aggregate score, then Alonso would put Barcelona ahead in the 69th, and finally Maradona himself would deliver the final blow to make it 3-1 on aggregate.

Barça would dispatch Real Sociedad 4-1 on aggregate in the semis, with Maradona scoring in each leg. The final was set up for another round of **El Clásico**. Maradona was the star man, dribbling past defenders and being hacked down as was often the case. But that only lasted for so long. In a typical play from the era, Bernd Schuster would drive a long pass towards Maradona. The number 10 got behind the defense and cut the ball back to Víctor Muñoz in the box with a clear scoring opportunity. He did not miss, and Barcelona led the final 1-0.

A horrific defensive mistake let Madrid equalize via Santillana, but Barcelona would win it in the last minute thanks to a diving header by Marcos Alonso, that came after Julio Alberto crossed from the wing, having himself received a long pass from Maradona.

Barcelona were Copa del Rey champions, and the future looked bright.

A few weeks later, Barcelona got past **Atlético Madrid** in the semis of the inaugural Copa de la Liga tournament. The other finalists were once again Real Madrid. The first leg took place at the Santiago Bernabéu, and Maradona once again wowed the crowd with his typical dribbling and vision. Early in the second half, he skipped past three defenders in a trademark run, before crossing to the far post. Carrasco was there to meet it with a looping header that made it 1-0.

Madrid's troubles would increase when Maradona received the ball in total solitude in front of the keeper. The #10 dribbled past Agustín, and stopped as an onrushing Juan José made a last-ditch attempt to block him. The defender instead crashed into the post, and Maradona

calmly finished into an empty net. The goal drew a rare roar of approval towards a Barcelona goal from the Madrid crowd, something repeated only by Ronaldinho and Andrés Iniesta since.

To the home side's credit, Vicente del Bosque, who would later win the World Cup as a manager, and Juanito would score and save a draw for Madrid, 2-2.

At Camp Nou, Maradona scored a penalty and then Alexanko made it 2-0. Santillana would score a late consolation, but that was it. Barcelona secured a double of Copa del Rey and Copa de la Liga wins that was never repeated by any other club.

For the 1983-84 season, there was optimism that Barcelona could capitalize on their cup successes. There was hope that after a year of settling in, plus the appointment of Menotti, might tame Maradona, at least a little.

But even Menotti could not control "el Diego." Maradona's failure to appear at morning training was said to have led the manager to schedule trainings for afternoons, lying to the press that this was better for the players metabolism since most matches took place in the afternoon.

Maradona's house was said to resemble a hotel where friends and acquaintances came to party at all times. In unauthorized biographies about his life, it was revealed that this bad company he kept in Barcelona introduced him to a habit that would come to control his life: cocaine. Still, the drugs would not come to define his tournaments with Barcelona as they would later, and the problem was much less understood at the time.

Regardless of the storm clouds perhaps gathering, Barcelona would win the next season's Supercopa de España in October 1983, against the league champions, Athletic Bilbao. The budding rivalry between the sides would explode during the ensuing 83-84 campaign.

It was under that rivalry that the first of two big calamities that season would come.

Ironically, the blaugrana played an excellent game in the first meeting between the sides in La Liga that season. With Barcelona ahead 2-0 in the second half, Maradona was on the ball and Andoni Goikoetxea, known as the "Butcher of Bilbao" by some for his aggressive playstyle, dove into his left ankle. The injury would put Maradona out of action for four months, and is usually thought of as the beginning of the end for "el Diego's" time in Catalonia. Barcelona won 4-0 but that was obviously tempered by Maradona's serious injury.

Maradona would return to play, but it seems the magic from the end of the previous season perhaps had faded. Once again he was the club's top scorer that season (14, tied with Marcos Alonso), but this time Barcelona did not win any more titles after the Supercup.

The bad feeling between Maradona and Bilbao only increased after he returned from injury. In a tense meeting, Maradona scored twice in a 2-1 win in the league against his hated rival, but Bilbao got their revenge by winning the Copa del Rey final against him. That game featured this all-out brawl, with Maradona in the middle:

The fight resulted in something of a riot, with some of the 100,00 fans in attendance throwing solid objects onto the pitch. Sixty people were hurt in the chaos, with all of Spain watching on TV and the Spanish King Juan Carlos in attendance.

Fair or not, Maradona was largely blamed for the scenes. It would be his final game for Barcelona, with executives later admitting it was the final straw.

He was sold to Napoli for another record-breaking fee (£6.9 million). Amazingly, Maradona's greatest triumphs - and his most notorious controversies - were still ahead of him.