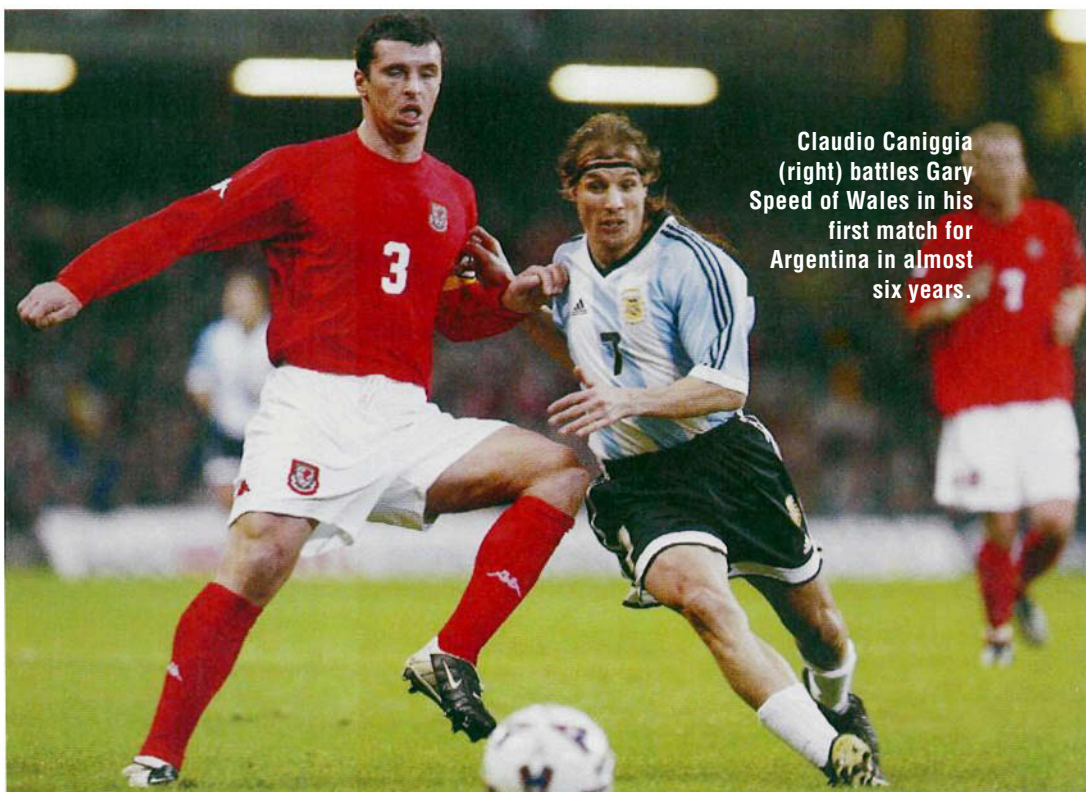




# WORLD CUP 2002

ODD ANDERSEN/AFP



Claudio Caniggia (right) battles Gary Speed of Wales in his first match for Argentina in almost six years.

**Claudio Caniggia's comeback in Scotland last season was dismissed as a publicity stunt, but the 35-year-old striker has made good in his bid to return to Argentina's national team.**

**By Paul Kennedy**

## **CLAUDIO CANIGGIA** **The Bird flies high again**

Claudio Caniggia continued one of the most remarkable comebacks in Argentine soccer history when he returned to the national team for its friendly match with Wales Feb. 13.

The 35-year-old striker's start in the 1-1 tie in Cardiff marked his first appearance for Argentina since July 1996.

Caniggia's career appeared over when he moved to Scotland in late 2000. Everyone dismissed Caniggia when he said he was joining tiny Dundee to resurrect his international career, but the Argentine is having the last laugh.

He had five goals in his first six games for Dundee and moved to Glasgow power Rangers last summer in a \$1.5 million transfer.

Caniggia, nicknamed "El Pájaro" ("the Bird"), debuted for Argentina in 1987 and was one of the stars at the 1990 World Cup when he had goals in Argentina's wins over Brazil and host Italy.

Caniggia, who scored both goals in Argentina's 2-1 win over Nigeria at USA '94, was best known

for his partnership with Diego Maradona. Unfortunately, Caniggia's career suffered for the same reasons that Maradona fell from grace.

In 1993, Caniggia was suspended for 13 months after testing positive for cocaine. He made a comeback with Boca Juniors but fell out of favor with Argentina national team coach Daniel Passarella and didn't make the '98 World Cup squad.

Caniggia's seriousness has impressed Passarella's successor, Marcelo Bielsa. Caniggia skipped Maradona's testimonial match last fall in order to remain with Rangers — even though it was an off-week.

Caniggia faces stiff competition to make Argentina's World Cup team. It's loaded up front with Gabriel Batistuta, Hernan Crespo, Claudio Lopez, Kily Gonzalez and Javier Saviola.

Bielsa fielded an experimental team against Wales — Caniggia was teamed with another longshot, Bologna's Julio Cruz, up front — and the Argentines struggled.

"It's not easy to play with a team for the first time and after only one practice with the whole squad," said Caniggia.

Back home in Argentina, many are rooting that the popular Caniggia will get another chance.