

In Praise of Garrincha



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NEW YORK — Twenty years ago, Garrincha — the Little Bird, one of the all-time greats of Brazilian soccer — died of alcoholism and neglect. He was 49. An appalling end for the most exciting soccer player the world has ever seen.

Exciting, oh yes — I say that with conviction, even though I never saw him play. I'm relying on old film footage, most of it in black and white. They don't usually help, those old clips. They destroy dreams and memories, starkly revealing how slow the old games were, how funny and dated the players look with their silly hair styles and their short little shorts.

But not Garrincha, not Mane, as he was also known. He's the incredible exception. There it is, how he played, what he did, and it is pulsating and wonderful to watch. The small muscular body, a coiled spring of extraordinary soccer talent, the fakes, the acceleration, the violent power of his shooting ... those breathtaking images of him in full flight, with both feet off the ground as he hammers the ball goalward.

You can see, too, how the opposing defenders suffered, as Garrincha stood before them and taunted them with ravishing fakes — these thrusts and tricks were later held to be the origin of the cries of "Ole!" at Latin games.

To Mane it was all fun. He knew nothing of coaching, was utterly uncoachable. So he repeatedly fell foul of coaches. He dribbled too much. One day a despairing coach plonked a chair down on the training field and told Garrincha he could



POPPERFOTO

Garrincha, the Little Bird, prepares to trick an opponent in an encounter prior to the 1958 World Cup, the first of his two great triumphs.

dribble as far as the chair — then he must pass the ball. Garrincha dribbled up to the chair, nutmegged it ... and dribbled on.

A true story? Who knows, but certainly it ought to be true. It captures the image of a player who did what appealed to him — not because he wanted to be perverse, but simply because his spur-of-the-moment instincts always dominated. And that meant having fun.

Dangerous enough on the field, such instincts were disastrous in Garrincha's life. He fathered eight children, left his wife for a night club singer (whose mother died when a car that Garrincha was driving somersaulted), and sank relentlessly into alcoholism.

He was born poor, he died poor. His club, Botafogo, treated him badly, paying him far below his worth as a match-winner and crowd-pleaser.

In short, tragedy stalked his life, mocking him, warning him that there would be a price to pay for being that carefree. There was something of Chaplin in

Garrincha, the little man who gave all the other little men such pleasure and such hope, but who never could be seen as a winner.

Garrincha's soccer talents reached their climax at the 1962 World Cup in Chile. Pele was the star, the name on everyone's lips, but an injury in Brazil's second game took Pele out of the tournament. Amarildo received fulsome praise as Pele's substitute, but it was really Garrincha who took over, who forsook his typical wing play to roam wherever he liked, who headed goals, who blasted viciously swerving free kicks, who taunted and demoralized opponents with his devilish antics.

He took the Brazil to the final — and another Garrincha legend was born. He scored two goals in the fiery semifinal against Chile but had then been ejected for retaliation. Would he be suspended for the final? He should have been, of course, but he wasn't. Who knows what strings were pulled, what arms were twisted.

Brazil took the trophy — but then it was downhill for Garrincha. He continued to play alongside Pele on the national team — and Brazil never lost when the two were together. But the 1966 World Cup was a disaster. Pele was injured again, Garrincha a shadow of what had been, and Brazil went out in the first round.

Garrincha never played for Brazil again. His career drifted off into nothingness, while his private life, his desertion of his wife, lost him the affection of his fans.

A 1963 film called him *Garrincha: Alegria do Povo* — the joy, the happiness of the people. Once he had been just that ... and the all-embracing love would return, but only after his death. His funeral saw crowds lining the streets as his coffin was driven from Rio to his little home town of Pau Grande, followed by mob scenes at the cemetery.

Garrincha struck a chord with the poor people of Brazil, the people who made up the mass of soccer fans. His impish skills and the feral way he used them — yes, the show he put on — brought beauty and breathtaking excitement to the sport.

a non-Brazilian, I watch those old images, and I feel maybe a small part of the siren call of Garrincha. Something emotional always catches in my throat whenever I watch Garrincha.

Strangely, but insistently, my mind supplies a sound track for Garrincha. Nothing Brazilian — it is the haunting, unmistakable voice of the French singer Edith Piaf.

The parallels in their lives are uncanny. Piaf, too, was a tiny creature, she too had a bird nickname, the Little Sparrow. And she was a poor kid who rose to international fame, whose life was beset with tragedies, who scandalized even the French with her succession of lovers.

And when she died in 1963, age 47, the people of Paris forgave her everything and turned out in their tens of thousands for her funeral, halting the city's traffic for the first time since World War II victory celebrations.

No one played like Garrincha, no one sang like Piaf. Their turbulent careers reflected the raw soul of their people — perhaps those souls have already moved on, as Brazil and France

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The Little Bird, surrounded by a stadium full of 100,000 adoring fans, thrilled them with a passionate taste of something that they shared, sparked something that lived deep within them, something essentially Brazilian.

No one played soccer like Garrincha. No one ever will. As

have moved on, to become new countries with different values.

Changes that make it certain we shall never have another Garrincha or another Piaf. They were of their times. The tapes and the recordings remain, prosaic artifacts if you like, but they tell the simple, poetic truth of immortal artistry. ■