

More beautiful than ever

Journey through soccer world makes for fascinating history lesson.

A GRINNING DIEGO MARADONA hoists a glass toward the camera and says: "For Shilton. For the goalkeeper Shilton. All goalkeepers are useless. You're no exception. Relax. You were had, but don't worry. ...

"Shilton, if the ball rolled just over the goal line and you swept it away, would you go to the referee and tell him it wasn't a goal?"

It's a scene from "History of

Soccer: The Beautiful Game," a 7-DVD box set, comprised of 13 one-hour episodes and three-and-a-half hours of extras.

We get footage of Maradona punching the ball over the England goalkeeper in the 1986 World Cup. And then Maradona's goal three minutes later, when he dribbles from his own half, evading five English foes before beating Shilton again.

The concern when faced with watching a sports docu-

mentary is that the talking heads will bore an audience that craves game footage. In this case, the interviews are fascinating — if not always as provocative as Maradona's — and there's no shortage of soccer action.

We watch Brazil dazzle in its 1958 World Cup final win over Sweden and then Pele joins us, explaining his tears after the final whistle.

"Television and telephones weren't like they are now," he explains. "I didn't know if my father and the Brazilian people knew what we had done, and

that's when I got so emotional."

Footage of the first West Germany-Brazil encounter, in 1963, is followed by a jolly Uwe Seeler: "We Germans said we'd break our own legs if we tried to do with the ball what came so naturally to the Brazilians."

The documentary episodes, filmed in more than 50 nations, are especially satisfying because they offer so much insight into the non-European countries that often get short shrift in soccer history.

We're treated to action from early-century Argentine, Brazilian and Uruguayan soccer, and the Colombian pirate league of the 1950s where Alfredo Di Stefano played before going to Real Madrid.

There's plenty from the modern game and the traditional powers, but the really intriguing stuff comes with the previously under-appreciated soccer histories of countries like China, Ghana, Iran and, yes, the United States.

In every case, with archive footage, informative narration and revealing interviews, the documentaries convey the cultural and political intricacies of virtually every corner of the earth. So much so that they'd serve well in a history class, regardless of the students' soccer interest.

The extras include highlights from every World Cup final through 1998, European Championship finals, African Nations Cups, Asian Cups and turn of the century FA Cups.

"History of Soccer" doesn't gloss over the darker chapters of the game's history, but after digesting this entire package, soccer seems more beautiful than ever.

— Mike Woitalla

Among the gems in "History of Soccer: The Beautiful Game" are highlights from all World Cup finals through 1998.

