

ARGENTINA WORLD CUP 1978 / First Round
Mar de la Plata, Estadio Mar de la Plata, 2 June 1978

ITALY - FRANCE

2-1

FROM A THRILLER BEGINNING COMES THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ITALY

Thirty-nine seconds. The time for the opening whistle, to throw a ball into the French half-field, caught by goalkeeper Bertrand-Demanès, and then to see Six go off on the left like an arrow, with Gentile late in the chase; a perfect cross into the middle and Lacombe's header overtook Bellugi, who was also late. Zoff beaten, the '78 World Cup for Italy seemed to start in the worst possible way. A World Cup long awaited by the Italians in search of redemption after the disappointing performance in 1974 and made even more precious by the qualification against none other than England. A World Cup without any great favourites, with many greats arriving in less than brilliant conditions: reigning champions West Germany lost their most charismatic men, from Beckenbauer to Müller, from Uli Hoeneß to Breitner; the Netherlands presents itself without Cruyff and its club teams no longer rage in Europe, a generation of champions is leaving the scene. Italy and Brazil then have not yet rebuilt themselves after the flop of the last World Cup, or so it seems. Italy is entrusted to Enzo Bearzot, a man of few words and many deeds, who prefers the concept of 'group' to individual champions; he brings to Argentina the Juventus block, a team that has dominated the last two Italian championships and won the 1977 Uefa Cup, relying in attack on a young semi-doubt, Paolo Rossi, 22 years old, top scorer of the last championship who dragged the newly promoted Vicenza to a resounding second place behind Juve. The whole world will learn his name and surname. As for Antonio Cabrini, 20 years old and absolute debutant in the national team, the last few days were decisive in convincing Bearzot to change the hierarchies and bet on them: out with Maldera and Ciccio Graziani and in with the youngsters, with a record average age if it were not for the 36-year-old Zoff between the posts. Let's go back to the match, because Italy was like being bitten by a tarantula and after the goal they immediately conquered the field with perfect movements between midfield and attack, France closed in on defense and suffered: in the 3rd minute, a great opportunity for Bettega on an assist by Rossi, shot over the crossbar; in the 5th minute, an opportunity for Causio on an initiative by Cabrini, but his touch was not precise either. The Azzurri played splendidly and gave half an hour of great attacking football: overlapping, insertions, touches, dribbling and heel touches, France was dazed by the Italian rhythms. Rossi was like an eel and slipped out of every marker brilliantly, Causio and Cabrini were also excellent in their insertions. In the 17th minute, from a free kick, Causio threw in a pass for Bettega in a dubious position, the Juventus striker stopped with his chest and put into the net but the referee immediately cancelled for offside. In the 26th minute the powerful Benetti advanced and crossed from the three-quarter line, Roberto Bettega's exceptional header was taken and Bertrand-Demanès was forced to make a great intervention to remove the ball from the bottom corner to his left. It was the prelude to the goal, which arrived shortly afterwards in an action that was, to say the least, disastrous: a long cross by Gentile cutting across the field for Cabrini, unleashed on the left as always, a clever touch back for Bettega who hits the ball on the volley in a disjointed manner but his deflection becomes an assist for Causio who has inserted himself in the area and hits a header with a sure shot, the crossbar, the ball caroms onto the stopper Rio who would make a sure own goal but Causio on the momentum is unable to avoid the ball and rejects it on the line, so Paolo Rossi finally scores again. Italy breathed a little and ended the first half in a draw. France played the young Michel Platini, the 22-year-old from newly promoted Nancy who led to the

winning the French Cup. His class was already evident, but Hidalgo kept him confined to the midfield, leaving the directional booth to the passionate Guillou. Bearzot, on the other hand, changed his director Antognoni, who was not at his best, and inserted Zaccarelli, who crowned his World Cup debut with a great goal in the 6th minute of the second half: Zaccarelli set up Gentile, a quick triangle with Rossi and Gentile's cross from the back, low and backward, a feint by Causio who took away two French defenders and a volley by the unmarked Zaccarelli, a beautiful diagonal shot that went in to the goalkeeper's left. Italy deservedly took the lead! Hidalgo ran for cover and moved Platini to play as a *trequartista*, Bearzot stamped Marco Tardelli on him, who followed him like a shadow and Italy did not suffer, administering the advantage with order and without fretting. France took the match into their own hands, but theirs was a sterile domination made up of good manoeuvres that were unable to scratch the Azzurri's defensive wall and never trouble Zoff. In the 76th minute the Italian counter-attack started as in the best *catenaccio*, a long throw by Scirea to free the ball, Bettega went on the ball and jumped over Janvion running, finding himself alone in front of the goal, but instead of kicking, he tried to make an assist on Rossi and the excellent Tresor managed to intervene, foiling the danger. The only thrill for Italy came five minutes from the end when Bossis set off from the midfield with the ball on his feet and reached the edge of the area undisturbed, then, before the defenders intervened, fired a great right-footer that grazed the post. A curious episode in the 90th minute: there was a dangerous free-kick from the edge of the penalty area for France but the referee blew the whistle without letting it be taken and without conceding any recovery, amid protests from an irate Platini, a specialist in free-kicks from the edge of the penalty area. Better for the Azzurri, who thus began their World Cup in the best possible way: in the other match of the round, the hosts Argentina beat Hungary 2-1, so with a victory in the second match against Hungary, qualification for the second round would be certain.

ITALY: Zoff 6.5, Gentile 7, Cabrini 7.5, Benetti 7, Bellugi 6, Scirea 7, Causio 7.5, Tardelli 7, Rossi 7.5, Antognoni 6.5 (*from 46' Zaccarelli 7*), Bettega 7. All. Enzo Bearzot.

FRANCE: Bertrand-Demanes 6.5, Janvion 6, Bossis 6.5, Michel 6, Rio 5.5, Tresor 6.5, Dalger 6.5, Guillou 5.5, Lacombe 6 (*from 75' Berdoll sv*), Platini 7, Six 6.5 (*from 76' Rouyer sv*).

Manager: Michel Hidalgo.

Referee: Rion (BEL)

On 1' Lacombe 0-1; on 29' Rossi 1-1.

In the 54th minute Zaccarelli 2-1.



A very young Michel Platini at the 1978 World Cup.



The 1978 Azzurri national team.