

WORLD CUP ITALY 1990 / Opening match Milan,
San Siro Meazza Stadium, 8 June 1990

CAMEROON - ARGENTINA

1-0

THE AWAKENING OF AFRICAN FOOTBALL

For the World Cup that returns after 56 years, Italy has prepared a sumptuous welcome, building new stadiums and enlarging the old ones: they will be the theatre for a national team aiming at the title, after having added experience to the beautiful game shown at the 1988 European Championships. The new stadiums have swallowed almost double the budgets and in many cases will prove to be too big (San Nicola in Bari) or lousy to watch a football match (Delle Alpi in Turin), but the World Cup really does inspire dreams of 'Magical Nights', as the official anthem sung by Edoardo Bennato and Gianna Nannini screams. The San Siro stadium in Milan, equipped with a very ugly 'third ring', hosts the Opening Ceremony in grand style and the opening match between the World Champions Argentina and Cameroon, who return to the World Cup after their excellent performance in 1982, when they came out of the competition undefeated after three draws and only because of a better goal difference than Bearzot's Italy. Many in Milan are imagining a resounding triumph by the Africans against the unfriendly team of the 'Neapolitan' Maradona, but nobody really believes it. African football still seems light years away from the professionalism of Europeans and South Americans. After the scudetto 'snatched' from Milan by Napoli, in fact, the whole of neutral Milan sided with Cameroon and the Argentine anthem was loudly booed. But the World Champions got off to a flying start, immediately highlighting the tactical limitations of the Africans and their apparent slowness in disengagement. Maradona immediately drew Balbo in front of N'Kono, the Argentine centre forward tried to surprise him with a lob that half succeeded and the African goalkeeper awkwardly repelled. It looked like the antechamber of an Argentine promenade, but instead, as the minutes passed, Cameroon took on compactness and the physicality of the Africans put Argentina in difficulty, who struggled to find space and suffered from the fast counter-attacks of their opponents, adept at setting in motion the arrows Makanaky and M'Bouh with throws from the back and the finishing touches of M'Fede. In the 23rd minute Tataw crossed the whole field with the ball on his feet, then put in the centre for M'Fede; Basualdo anticipated him by touching towards his own goal and overrunning Pumpido as he came out: only Ruggeri's providential intervention on the line avoided the resounding own goal to the roar of the crowd. In the 29th minute Maradona launched for Burruchaga, who touched the ball ahead of N'Kono's exit but the goalkeeper saved himself with an instinctive movement of his foot.

Maradona seemed to be in great form and to stop him the African defenders resorted to repeated, even blatant, fouls. Cameroon became more and more surprising and enterprising, showing an athletic overflow and considerable technical skill: when it went on the attack it was frightening. In the 38th minute Omam Biyick unleashed a great left-footed shot from outside the area that committed Pumpido to a difficult intervention. It went to rest at 0-0 amid the applause of a public amused by the skill of the Africans. Bilardo risked it all in the second half by fielding the agile striker Caniggia in place of full-back Ruggeri, trying to hit Cameroon at speed, but it was the Africans who were increasingly dangerous on the counter-attack. In the 60th minute, however, Caniggia ran into the Cameroon half and was tripped from behind by Kana Biyick, who was sent off by referee Vautrot. He was the first victim of the tightening up of refereeing assessments so much flaunted by Fifa on the eve of the tournament to safeguard the champions: interventions from behind must be punished with a red card. But frankly, given the yardstick adopted so far, the expulsion seems decidedly excessive. A few minutes later, Cameroon, in 10, took advantage of a free kick from the left, close to the area: the ball dropped into the centre where M'Fede and Simon arrived.

at the same time prolonging the trajectory of the ball, which rears up in a strange steeple. Omam Biyick made a vertiginous take-off, surpassing Sensini by at least a metre and smashing the ball over his head with a formidable flick of the kidneys: Pumpido was surprised by the technical gesture of the opponent's striker and bungled the ball, causing it to slide into the net. It was a sensational goal that made the whole footballing world, excluding Argentina, explode with enthusiasm.

Bilardo also threw Calderon into the fray in place of Sensini, risking wide openings for Cameroon's counter-attacks. N'Kono put on a show with reckless, if not always timely, exits. The last twenty minutes were an Argentine siege at the Cameroon goal, but N'Kono seemed insurmountable on high balls and the defence made no mistakes. In the 84th minute, Caniggia took off down the right and crossed centrally for the head of Balbo, who, ahead of the defenders for once, wasted his shot by fumbling and clumsily putting it out. Shortly afterwards Caniggia, the best of the Argentinians, took off at supersonic speed, skipped past Kunde, past N'Dip and past Massing, who mowed him down brutally, even losing a shoe in the violent impact. Once it was ascertained that the blond Caniggia was still alive and with all his limbs attached to his body, Vautrot with satisfaction drew a second red card, leaving Cameroon with nine men. There were two minutes to go and thanks to the skill of 38-year-old Roger Milla, who came on in the final, Cameroon took no risks by hiding the ball from their opponents, indeed in the 91st minute they failed to make a resounding double on a counter-attack with M'Bouh, who shot high from an excellent position. It is the most resounding of surprises in the opening matches of the World Cup, which promises to be a spectacular tournament of great balance.

CAMEROON: N'Kono 7, N'Dip 7, Tataw 7, Kunde 7, Massing 6.5, Ebwelle 7, M'Bouh 7, Kana Biyick 6.5, M'Fede 6.5 (*from 65' Libiih 6.5*), Omam Biyick 7.5, Makanaky 7 (*from 81' Milla sv*). Coach Valeri Nepomniachi.

ARGENTINA: Pumpido 5, Ruggeri 6 (*from 46' Caniggia 6.5*), Simon 6, Fabbri 6, Basualdo 6, Lorenzo 6, Batista 6, Sensini 5 (*from 70' Calderon sv*), Burruchaga 6.5, Balbo 4.5, Maradona 6.
Manager: Carlo Bilardo
Referee: Vautrot (FRA) 6

In the 67th minute Omam Biyick 1-0.



Omam Biyick's incredible header surprised the Argentine defence.