

WORLD CUP USA 1994 / Round of 16 Boston,
Foxboro Stadium, 5 July 1994

ITALY - NIGERIA

2-1 *d.t.s.*

THE AWAKENING OF THE DIVIN CODINO

The first American World Cup in history contrasted a perfect organisation, stadiums always full of spectators and the novelty of the names on the players' shirts with absurd match times, which for the television needs of European spectators were largely played at midday, in a torrid and humid climate that brought the players to the limit of their physical effort and the game to be forcibly slow, waiting, without any pressing. This partly limited the effectiveness of Arrigo Sacchi's Italy, who was trying to repeat the revolutionary successes he had had a few years earlier with AC Milan precisely on pressing and rhythm. Italy started badly, losing 1-0 to Ireland in their debut match without ever showing any semblance of a game (but even in April, without the American climate, they had lost 2-1 to Pontedera, a C2 team, in a friendly), then after 21 minutes in the decisive match against Norway they were reduced to 10 players due to Pagliuca's expulsion, so Sacchi took off Roberto Baggio, the reigning Ballon d'Or winner and announced star of the World Cup, to reinforce the midfield: It went well for him, Dino Baggio scored a header and Italy stayed in the running, even though they lost captain Baresi to a meniscus injury. In the last match against Mexico only a draw arrived thanks to Massaro's goal, and the Azzurri passed by the skin of their teeth as repechaged. In the round of 16 comes the surprising Nigeria, revelation of the World Cup for having won their group ahead of Argentina and Bulgaria. It was the match of truth and Italy took the field in Boston more determined than ever to erase the previous opaque performances. In the 12th minute, Baggio hit a volley on the volley from a Signori assist, but a Nigerian defender blocked it with the goalkeeper beaten. In the 24th minute, Signori again drew Maldini in front of Rufai, but despite the goalkeeper's uncertainty, the Azzurri captain did not take advantage. Nigeria kept the pace low to contain Italy's superiority, but at the first opportunity they struck hard: Finidi's corner, Maldini controlled the ball badly and it ended up in the hands of Amunike, ready to mock Marchegiani from two steps. Italy suffered the blow, the Africans were skilful in closing the spaces and athletically much more performing, moreover, in this climate it took minutes to set up an attacking action and the forces seemed to run out. In the 33rd minute, Donadoni's beautiful play, a long throw for Massaro's header, who played back for Baggio in front of the goalkeeper, who was blatantly moved by Nwanu with a push. For Mexican referee Brizio Carter there was nothing. In the 39th minute Signori again crossed for Maldini, unmarked at the second post, but his header went over the crossbar. In the second half Sacchi put Dino Baggio on in place of an ineffective Berti, and the Juventino came on and hit the post after a minute, volleying over Mussi's cross. Italy produced maximum effort and the Nigerians defended with repeated fouls, which the referee rarely sanctioned with yellow cards. The young Nigerian number 10, Okocha, enchanted the crowd with sleight of hand, he handled the ball with an almost unnatural grace and allowed Nigeria to breathe, keep the ball and restart on the counter-attack. In the 60th minute Signori jumps a man, penetrates the area and is run over by Eguavoen, but the referee cautions him for simulation. Sacchi seemed to see a different game, he took off Signori, the only dangerous Italian and put on Zola, leaving Roberto Baggio on the field, who also stumbled in the second half dribbling on the grass. In the 73rd minute Dino Baggio in the box skipped past Nwanu with a tunnel and was tackled, but this time too the referee let it pass. When, two minutes later, the onrushing Zola aimed at Eguavoen, jumped over him and fell on the opponent's rush, it finally seemed that Brizio Carter could not refrain from conceding a deserved penalty, but nothing happened.

He collapsed to the ground and the Mexican referee made a fool of himself by sending poor Zola off. The same referee had sent off Bolivia's Etcheverry in the opening game against Germany, who had also just entered the field in a similar circumstance, for a light kick against Matthaus. An absolute failure. Italy in 10 seemed to be at the end of the line: Yekini pointed at Maldini and Costacurta and pierced them like a knife through butter with a monstrous progression, Maldini clung to his back and tackled him, knocking him to the ground. This would be a sacrosanct expulsion but Brizio has a straw tail and pulls out the yellow card. It was over by then, Nigeria was playing for time waiting for the final whistle, but Italy had one last gasp, Donadoni launched Mussi who entered the area, won a clash with Oliseh and served the assist of a lifetime to Roby Baggio in the middle of the area who volleyed a shot into the corner where Rufai could not arrive: it was the incredible equalizer less than two minutes from the end. Going into extra time, Italy seemed pervaded by a new energy and the man down was no longer a problem, the match was open to every solution. On 4' of the first overtime, Oliha leads the way for Yekini, who finds himself face to face with Marchegiani, a miracle and the shot is repelled. In the 10th minute, Roberto Baggio illuminated with a lob to lead Benarrivo into the box, who was then fouled by the dishevelled Eguavoen: this time it was a clear penalty, and even that asshole Brizio Carter could not fail to whistle. Roby Baggio displaces Rufai from the penalty spot, the ball hits the post and enters the net with a shudder. Italy 2, Nigeria 1. Nigeria responds, Emenalo wins a clash with Costacurta, enters the area from the left and passes into the middle to Yekini who controls poorly but knocks Marchegiani out of the way, the ball rolls towards the net as Dino Baggio arrives to sweep it over the line. The Azzurri counter-attack started with Benarrivo, inexhaustible, the ball was passed to Roby Baggio who somehow juggled three opponents and then went for a left-footed shot, anticipating the better placed Massaro: a save by Rufai. What a match! In the second overtime all the Azzurri have cramps, Mussi is injured and leaves Italy in nine, it is a stoic resistance that gives value to the feat of Italy, which also manages to produce dangerous restarts thanks to the plays of Baggio, Massaro, Benarrivo and Donadoni. Nigeria had no more, Italy went through to the quarter-finals. Baggio became in a few minutes from scapegoat of the elimination to National Hero. Sacchi from incompetent to seer. The beauty of football.

ITALY: Marchegiani 6.5, Mussi 7.5, Benarrivo 7.5, Costacurta 6, Maldini 6, Berti 5 (*from 46' D. Baggio 7.5*), Donadoni 7.5, Albertini 6.5, Massaro 7, R. Baggio 8, Signori 6.5 (*from 67' Zola sv*). Manager Arrigo Sacchi.

NIGERIA: Rufai 5.5, Eguavoen 5, Emenalo 7, Oliseh 5.5, Okechukwu 6, Nwanu 5.5, Finidi 6, Amokachi 6 (*from 35' Adepoju 6*), Yekini 6.5, Okocha 7, Amunike 6.5 (*from 57' Oliha 6.5*).

Manager: Clemens Westerhof.

Referee: Brizio Carter (MEX) 4

Sent off in the 75th minute Zola.

On 25' Amunike 1-0.

At 88' R. Baggio 1-1.

At 100' R. Baggio (Rig.) 2-1



Zola's resounding sending-off by referee Brizio Carter



Roberto Baggio scored the goal of the hard-fought victory on a penalty kick.