

WORLD CUP FRANCE 1998 / Round of 16
St. Etienne, Stade Geoffroy Guichard, 30th June 1998

ARGENTINA - ENGLAND

6-5 *d.c.r.*

OWEN'S PRODIGY ENCHANTS THE WORLD

The World Cup in France continued without any major surprises and in the round of 16 the most eagerly awaited challenge was that between Argentina and England, who faced each other again in a World Cup after the fiery challenge of Mexico '86. Both teams have high expectations after the bitter disappointments of the last World Cup and both arrive at this appointment at the height of enthusiasm and convinced they can reach the quarter-finals: Passarella's Argentina dominated their group, closing it with a full score, with Batistuta and a pair of three-quarter players in splendid form, Ortega and Veron; Hoddle's England, after the fear of defeat against Romania in the second match, changed their skin, with the young Beckham, Neville, Scholes and Owen, and Colombia were swept away 2-0 on the last day, regenerating enthusiasm that had long been dormant. The match got off to a dizzying start: 18-year-old Michael Owen showed his speed in the second minute, panicking the Argentine defence and then being stopped by a super-tackle from Ayala in the box. Le Saux came on and kicked first time, Shearer arriving at the back post with a moment's delay. Two minutes later Ortega fired in from the right, Batistuta touched in a header for the insertion of Simeone, who anticipated Seaman and was run over by the goalkeeper: penalty. Batistuta shoots, Seaman touches but does not hold Batistuta's shot and Argentina take the lead. Less than five minutes passed, Le Saux recovered and threw in Scholes, a header to set up Owen, who aimed for goal like a madman's splinter and was caught in the box by Ayala: another penalty. From the replay it was clear that the contact was minimal and Owen's flight misled the Danish referee Nielsen: penalty awarded. Shearer went to the penalty spot and scored: 1-1. The game continued at a high tempo with Beckham sending Owen running with an unearthly naturalness from the outside, he was quick to outmanoeuvre Chamot, pointed and skipped past Ayala into the box and struck Roa with a diagonal right-footed shot into the top corner. Wonderful goal by 18-year-old Owen: a star is born! The comebacking Argentina suffered the blow but did not give up and continued to grind out the game with Ortega and Veron very inspired, but the English were focused and ready to restart: in the 38th minute on Seaman's long throw, Shearer's tower for Scholes to insert himself who, on one-on-one with Roa, clumsily missed. With time running out, Argentina benefited from a free-kick from the limit, Batistuta feinted the shot and Veron surprised everyone with a passing touch for Zanetti, who popped up from behind the barrier and scored. A brilliant play that put everything back on level terms! One expects a second half to the death, but instead in the first minute of the second half there is a foul by Simeone on Beckham in midfield, who from the ground kicks him right in front of the referee's eyes, and he is sent off! Clamorous ingenuousness of the Spice Boy, the 23-year-old Manchester United player who has made headlines not only for his fantastic season but also for becoming the boyfriend of Victoria of the Spice Girls, the most famous girl-band in the world. England were in trouble with ten men, and Ortega put in the centre for Batistuta, who had a free header that went clumsily wide. Shearer tried on a free kick but his venomous shot was blocked by Roa in the corner. Ortega was unstoppable, serving Lopez in the box, his shot and a great intervention by Le Saux who deflected it into the corner. In the 60th minute Veron started in progression, then launched "El Piojo" Lopez, who eluded Campbell and put in the middle where Vivas was even anticipated by Shearer's rebound! The whole of England were locked in their own area to resist the Argentine assaults, and they succeeded thanks to an inexhaustible Ince, who countered on every

ball, and to a relentless Campbell who cancelled out Batistuta. In the 74th minute Owen tried again on the counter-attack, skipped past everyone at speed but then had none left for his shot and missed the target. Shortly afterwards a foul of Adams' hands in the box on Chamot's cross triggered Argentine protests, but there seemed to be no grounds for a penalty. England did not give up: in the 80th minute, on Anderton's corner, Roa missed his exit and Campbell headed into the net. Unbelievable, England in the lead with 10 men! But the referee cancelled for a foul by Shearer on the goalkeeper, a decision that was certainly questionable. Ortega again played the ball into the net for Crespo, who came on for a tired Batistuta, who hit Seaman in a desperate effort (but the game was stopped for a very dubious offside). It reached the 90th minute and it was already a half miracle for England. Nothing more could be asked of the English lions, who spent all the extra time sweeping the ball away from their own goal, with Argentina no longer lucid enough to invent new offensive solutions. So it goes to penalty kicks. A nightmare for the English, who lost the Italia '90 semi-final and the European Championship '96 semi-final at home, always on penalties, and in practice have never won this lottery. History seemed likely to be changed when Seaman flew in to save Crespo's penalty, after Berti and Shearer had brought the score to 3-3; but Paul Ince, one of the best on the pitch, had his penalty saved by Roa and the score was tied. Then everyone scored: Veron, Merson, Gallardo and Owen. It went to the last penalty and Ayala beat Seaman. It was the turn of David Batty, Newcastle's gladiator who had entered in extra time and was therefore fresher, but Roa blocked and once again the fairytale for the English turned into a nightmare. Despite a legendary game, a fantastic goal by Owen and exhausting resistance until the 120th minute, Argentina won in the end. A major British newspaper will headline the next day 'Ten Lions and a Donkey'. It would take David Beckham three years to wash away this disgrace, leading England to the next World Cup, but that is another story.

ARGENTINA: Roa 7.5, Ayala 6, Chamot 6, Vivas 6.5, Almeyda 6.5, Zanetti 7, Lopez 6.5 (*from 68' Gallardo 6*), Simeone 6.5 (*from 91' Berti 6.5*), Batistuta 6 (*from 68' Crespo 6*), Ortega 8, Veron 8.

ENGLAND: Seaman 7, Campbell 7, Le Saux 7 (*from 71' Southgate 6.5*), Ince 7, Adams 7, G. Neville 6.5, Beckham 4, Anderton 6 (*from 97' Batty 5*), Shearer 7, Scholes 6 (*from 78' Merson 6.5*), Owen. Manager: Glenn Hoddle.

Referee: Nielsen (DAN) 5

Sent off: Beckham in the 46th minute

On 5' Batistuta (Rig.) 1-0; on 10' Shearer (Rig.) 1-1; on 15' Owen 1-2; on 45' Zanetti 2-2.

On penalties: Berti 3-2; Shearer 3-3; Veron 4-3; Merson 4-4; Gallardo 5-4; Owen 5-5; Ayala 6-5.



Beckham and Owen, the two young protagonists, in negative and in positive, of the superfight with Argentina.