Maradona, despite woes, remains a revered figure

by Mark Zeigler

Diego Maradona was admitted to a Buenos Aires clinic on March 28 and he stayed there for 13 days, receiving around-the-clock treatment for what doctors described as acute hepatitis brought on by too much alcohol, too much eating, too much smoking. Too much Maradona.

He was discharged a week ago or, more accurately, he discharged himself. His personal physician begged him to stay for more testing, and the private clinic made him sign documents, "for legal reasons," confirming he was leaving of his own volition.

Two days later he collapsed at his girlfriend's home at 5 a.m. with severe abdominal pains and was rushed to a local hospital. Five hours later he was transferred to another private clinic, with TV crews and paparazzi in hot pursuit.

So it goes for Diego Armando Maradona. It is the eighth time he has been hospitalized in the past 10 years, most of them life-threatening emergencies and nearly all of them for maladies associated with decades of cocaine and alcohol addiction. In recent months he was spotted in Buenos Aires restaurants and nightclubs, a drink in one hand, a cigar in the other.

But one thing never changes: the unwavering love for Maradona by Argentines, no matter the gravity of the transgression.

"We're going to love Maradona forever, no matter what," says Argentine Mariano Bollella, who played for the San Diego Sockers before they folded in 2004 and currently coaches youth teams. "He's always going to just be Maradona, no matter what he does."

There is widespread grief in Argentina, certainly. There are all-night vigils outside Los Arcos Sanatorium and posters proclaiming "Fuerza Diego" taped to its brick walls. There is nonstop live television coverage updating his condition. There are pages upon pages of newspaper stories, and an endless supply of rumors about what pushed him over the edge this time.

There is sympathy. There isn't, however, shame.

"Argentines love soccer, and because they love soccer they love Diego," says Carlos "Cacho" Cordoba, who played with Maradona in Argentina in the late 1970s. "And it's an unconditional love.

"We always judge Diego for what he did on the field. I don't see what he does off the field. That's not my business."

Maradona, now 46, looks nothing now like the young kid of humble means who mesmerized crowds at halftime of Argentine league matches with his magical foot skills or the 25-year-old captain of the national team who captivated the planet in the 1986 World Cup with a 70-yard slaloming run through the vaunted English defense. He looks bloated. His hair is graying. He has tattoos up and down his arms. He moves slower, more methodically.

But Cordoba, who lives in Milwaukee and still keeps in touch with Maradona, doesn't see that. He still sees a 20-year-old Maradona wearing the blue and yellow jersey of famed Buenos Aires club Boca Juniors. He sees him in the middle of the field on that damp night in 1981 against bitter rival River Plate.

He sees himself dribbling down the right side, cutting back and sending a hard cross into the penalty area.

He sees Maradona acrobatically sticking his left leg above his head and delicately bringing down the driven ball with his foot, "like it was his hand."

He sees Maradona juking the onrushing goalkeeper so badly he literally almost broke his ankles, then slotting the ball past a defender who had run into the goal as a final, futile line of defense.

"How he controlled the ball, how he cut the ball, how he finished the shot ... " Cordoba says, the sentence drifting into a haze of nostalgia.

Cordoba played against Maradona for several seasons and with him for two.

"I traveled all over the world with Maradona," Cordoba says, "and I saw things with my own eyes that I never saw or heard about with Pele or anyone else. We went to Japan once, and I saw 300 people sleeping every night outside our hotel, just so they could see him walk out in the morning and say hi to him.

"We went to Kuala Lumpur (in Malaysia). It was crazy. It was like people saw God. I have never seen that with anybody, not with presidents of countries or kings. I have never seen somebody wake up the passion in

people like Maradona."

Some say it was all too much, too young. Others, such as Cordoba, blame the people around Maradona as much as Cordoba blames the man himself, claiming they knew years ago he was addicted to drink and drugs but looked the other way because "Diego was a machine that made people money."

These things never seem to end well. Northern Ireland great George Best had a similarly tragic career arc: incredibly talented, incredibly famous, incredibly alcoholic, dead at 59.

"I feel bad, I really feel bad for him," Cordoba says of his lifelong friend. "I never wished he'd get in this situation. But he's very strong. He probably thinks he can get out of this. He probably thinks he can dribble out of it one more time.

"I really hope he can do it. I just don't know if he can."

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