



ALESSANDRO

THE GREAT

Like Alexander The Great, Del Piero generated immense expectations by conquering his world when he was still young. Alison Ratcliffe meets a maestro of football – and diplomacy

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“**M**ichel Platini has always been my idol... but that poster of him I had in my room when I was little isn't there any more.”

Wry words from Alessandro Del Piero back in August. The French granddaddy of all number 10s had said Del Piero “used to be a quality player”. It's not the first time the former Juventus great has suggested as much. In November 1998, he said that “everyone knows” Del Piero has never been the same since that ligament-crunching challenge at Udinese the day before his 24th birthday.

Do they? If the story is as clear cut as Platini says, why, in 2002, did Marcello Lippi fret that Juventus were “delpierodipendente”? And why, when Del Piero flew back from Italy's World Cup qualifier against Moldova in Chisinau the night before his Turin rendezvous with *Champions*, was he greeted with such headlines as: “Del Piero, a light in Italy's darkness!” These peaks in form are attributed, by the media, to a character known as ‘the Old Del Piero’. The unassuming 29-year-old at the centre of all this armchair debate and second guessing could be forgiven for wishing that, like his idol Al Pacino, he was in the movie business;

a field of endeavour where it is much easier to trade on former glory.

“It's hard to accept the criticism he's received because he's done a lot, not just for his club, but for Italian football,” Ale's Juve strike partner David Trezeguet told *Champions*. “He knows that, with the press, sometimes things go for you and sometimes they don't. But at this stage of his career it doesn't affect him, he has all the qualities to come through it.

“His strengths are there for all to see. I'm an attacker who stays largely in the same area, but he moves a lot; he goes all over the place. His technical qualities are very impressive. He's scored more than 150 goals for a top club and that as a support striker. In the beginning it

Del Piero's idol Pacino can, as a movie star, trade on former glory. That isn't an option for Juve's bandiera

was up to me to adapt to him and little by little we started to take pleasure in playing together. For me as a forward, to be by his side helps me a lot and elevates my game.”

The month before the Moldova match, Lippi left Del Piero out of the national side so he could “improve his general condition”. Three weeks after came a tendonitis-enforced lay-off. But the afternoon after the Moldova game, he is relaxed like a man who's just scored a trademark goal – his first for Italy in a year.

The man nicknamed ‘Pinturicchio’ after the renaissance artist has proved he can still win games single-handedly and when we meet, looks appropriately, yet quietly, satisfied.

He has grown used to being labelled by the press. But ‘il giovane vecchio’ (the young old one) is one press tag that seems justified. With the media, he avoids controversy as deftly as he evades an opponent. Trawl through an archive of his interviews and you realise what a superb diplomat he is. His favourite food is his mum's bolognese sauce. His footballing heroes are Marco van Basten, Maradona, Paolo Rossi and Zico. You can understand why there are so many rumours that his latest contract promises a future seat on the board. →

"Ale is part of club history. He's been here for ten years now, he's won everything. He's a symbol of our club and its mentality," says Trezeguet. "He's someone who likes a challenge, someone who's marked history. There are players who have finished their careers in the time he's been at Juve. He's played here since he was 19 and now at nearly 30 his desire is one of his main qualities." He has, as his partner suggests, become what Italians call a *bandiera* (a flag) for the club.

As a player he has been the subject of controversy since he persuaded Juve in 1995 that they could live without Roberto Baggio. First, there's the issue of selection: Del Piero or Totti? And now Del Piero or Ibrahimovic? Then there's fitness. The horror of Udinese has been followed by too many niggles and strains. No one minds these as badly as the player himself, who confessed, in one lay-off, to missing everything – even the fouls. Because one thing the 'new Del Piero' has in common with the 'old Del Piero' is that they both live to play football. The difference being that, these days, he can play where he wants, when he wants, without asking his dad to take the car out of the garage and turn the headlights on, so he could see where he was kicking the ball in the dark.

Is it true your mother made you play in goal when you were a kid?

Yes, it's true. She said I would sweat less and so I would get ill less often.

And were you any good?
I'd say excellent!

What position did your brother play?

Central midfield. We hardly ever played together though, because he's nine years older than me. But we did play together in and around the house. He often taught me things when it was just the two of us playing, I learned from him when I was small and I used to watch him playing with his teams. My dad and I used to love watching him play. My brother was important to my progress. And he was important later too, not just in a footballing sense.

Do you remember playing your first match for Padova?

Yes. My first year there wasn't the greatest unfortunately. I was 14, it was the first time I'd been away from home so much – for a whole year. It was difficult. Sometimes I played, other times I didn't play so much. Let's say the later years were more enjoyable.

Did you ever doubt your ability when you were there?

No. My ability? No. But at the time I did think about going back home.

Do you think the Italian game has changed much over the last decade?

I think football has changed over the last 15 years, not just in Italy but abroad too, more or less in the same way. It's become faster, more physical, thanks above all to some of the new rules, like the back-pass rule, attacking full-backs, and the new generations, who are always physically stronger. And managers have evolved tactically as well.



Del Piero by numbers

- 1** The amount, in millions of pounds, Juve paid for him when he was 19
- 3** The goals he has scored against Wales – in four meetings
- 4** The months he spent on crutches after the horrific knee injury against Udinese
- 6** Juve's Serie A position 1998/99. Before his injury, the Bianconeri were top of the table
- 7** The longest run of Italy games he has gone without scoring – his first seven internationals
- 10** His Juventus shirt number. He has worn 7, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18 and 20 for Italy
- 14** His appearances for Padova in Serie B before Juve signed him in 1994
- 15** Years he will have been at Juve when his latest contract expires in 2008
- 21** His highest goal tally in a Serie A season in 1996/97. In 2001/02, he scored 16
- 24** His goals for the Azzurri, three fewer than Roberto Baggio
- 31** Goals he has scored in the UEFA Champions League since 1996
- 65** The Ballon d'Or votes he won in 1996, when he came fourth in the poll



Del Piero evades Andreas Moller of Borussia Dortmund in 1995, before scoring a 90th-minute winner

When Ronaldo was at Inter, he compared the Italian game to chess and said football sometimes suffered as a result. Do you agree?

Certainly in Italy there are far more 'chess players' than there are in other countries, in the sense that such huge importance is given to tactics and above all to defence. So it's rarer to see spectacular attacking play, harder to score a lot of goals, so I can understand what he means, compared to Spain or England.

But would you prefer to win a game 4-3 or 1-0?
Me? 4-3, and my goalkeeper no doubt 1-0!

How did you feel when Marcello Lippi left Juventus?
It wasn't really a surprise to me. He reached the right moment, perhaps he'd reached it even the year before. The time had come for him to leave. It was the right thing to do.

How did he influence your game?

I played under him for seven years. We won a lot so our relationship was very intense. He was a very 'concrete' coach: he gave the correct importance to tactics, the mental aspect of the game, aggression. He gave his players freedom because it is important to have inventiveness going forward and to be able to make a mistake without worrying about it. He also introduced a new way of playing – at the time you never played with three forwards in Italy. A lot of teams followed his lead. They were good times.

What current players do you most admire?

There are so many and more than one at Real Madrid, Barcelona and Arsenal too. I'm talking about Ronaldinho, Zidane, Roberto Carlos, Ronaldo, Raúl, Figo, Kaká's very good too, Adriano, Vieri... There are so many.

If you could change one aspect of Italian football, what would it be?

I'd like to change more than one but I would like it to be more about sport and less about work. For everyone.

When you were in Moldova for Italy's World Cup qualifier, you said it was like being a kid again. Did you appreciate the contrast with Italian football?

Yes. We arrived at the ground already changed and ready to train and went back to the hotel to shower because the showers weren't working. That's what it's like when you're small – you organise a game in a field behind someone's house, go there ready to play, play as long as you want to and then go home to shower. It's a different reality and I like different realities. I love travelling to games around the world, seeing how the football experience is lived in other places. It's fascinating.

Do you have an ambition outside football?

I'm so absorbed by football that I don't really have time to think about my future.

You're not thinking of coaching, perhaps?

No. [Wryly] I'm already a coach, so no... Who knows. It's possible, but at the moment I couldn't say.

If you could have played for any team in any era, who would it be?

Perhaps for Italy in 1982, to win the World Cup would be... awesome. Then there are so many other teams, but it would have been nice to play for Real Madrid or Barcelona.

Do you remember the 1982 World Cup win?

Oh yes, I was eight and there were about 50 of us in our neighbour's house. So many good memories... missed penalties in the beginning, to the goals, the joy and the partying, going round in cars with flags. I remember it well.

And your memories of Italia 90?

That was great too, because Italy had a good run, very intense, one win after another, then unfortunately they came unstuck in the semi-final against Argentina.

Which sportsperson do you most admire outside football?

I like loads of sports – from basketball to golf, to tennis. I like to take time to watch a great champion in another sport. The Olympics was an amazing event, you have the cream of every sport and you get interested in sports you haven't watched for four years, like fencing. The Italian basketball team had a great Olympics, but they lost – to Argentina again.

Can Juventus win the UEFA Champions League?

Yes. We have the quality to win it.



Clockwise from top left: Del Piero looks on as his former Juventus mentor Marcello Lippi thinks aloud at a press conference; Michelle Pfeiffer and Del Piero's all-time favourite actor Al Pacino trip the light fantastic in the movie *Scarface*; Del Piero, the Azzurri skipper, celebrates his first goal for over a year for his country, a goal which won the World Cup qualifier for Italy; and finally – this boot was made for football: Del Piero brandishes the new F50 boot from adidas



“There are more chess players in Italy. So attacking play is rarer”

If Juventus don't, who could?

Perhaps Real, with the champions they have, but Milan, Arsenal, Chelsea, Barcelona too.

You don't think there'll be any surprises this time?

It's difficult these days to have an upset. There are so many good teams who might produce their perfect season, and it's easier for the big teams to experience such a season. The smaller teams only manage it every now and again.

Do you prefer to play against a man marker or a zonal defence?

It depends... If they mark badly, then either is good! [Laughs]. There are some very strong man-marking teams, but zonal defending is becoming stronger because you're not just playing against one player but against a whole section. Normally with a zonal defence, there's more space. But I don't really have a preference.

Do you have to change your game much when you play for Italy?

A bit, but not too much. Instead of varying my attacking options, I'm more limited to one area, almost always the left.

Are there any aspects of your game you'd like to improve?

Yes, especially my consistency. My consistency and my fitness, because over the last three years I've had some major lay-offs.

When you were growing up, did you try to copy any particular player?

No. I admired several players, but I tried to take note of the good points of each player when I watched them on TV without trying to copy one in particular.

And you have an accountancy diploma. Do you enjoy studying?

I was really pleased I succeeded in getting the diploma after the years of studying, but I never use it. I have no reason to. Although what you learn at school, you use every day of your life.

Is it true you still drive the same car that you bought with your first pay cheque from Juve?

Yes and no – I still have a car I bought at the beginning. I don't drive it any more. I just keep it in the garage and use my other cars. But it was a car I really like so I've still got it. ★