

AM MARADONA?



The Maradona whose name was first mentioned during the World Youth tournament in Tokyo in 1979 where he topscored and helped Argentina to the title and thereafter caught the imagination of the soccer-mad public in soccer-mad countries.

The Maradona who is said to have absolute control over the ball, whether it's in flight or on the ground and whether it's with his feet, shin, thighs, head or chest.

The Maradona whose reputation preceded him to England, the birthplace of soccer, in such proportions that experts scrutinised him and had stop watches timing his speed on and off the ball, in their friendly international a year ago. Maradona left them all baffled.

Yet there he sat on the sofa, an ordinary-looking man, sipping water, joking with his officials. A man you might pass in the streets without giving a second glance. He seemed bored.

It was as though he had gone through this mill before. Many times before. He was waiting for the questions to come. They came slowly at first and then in rapid-fire.

And he answered, speaking through Juniors' Public Relations man Felix Acosta who acted as interpreter. Maradona doesn't speak English.

There have been reports that he is getting married. Is it true?

Maradona takes a sip from his glass and grins. Yes, he replies. After the World Cup in Spain.

Who is the girl?

Claudia, a 19-year-old student.

How did he meet her?

We knew each other from childhood, he says. We were neighbours.

Won't marriage affect his playing?

Not if it improves it. I'll be very happy then and will play much better. (The glass is empty and he reaches out for a glass of orange squash).

Won't she mind all the time that he has to spend on the field?

No. She won't.

There have been fabulous offers from big-spending European clubs. Has he any intentions of leaving Boca Juniors?

(This time it's a Boca Juniors official who answers.) We will do everything to make him stay with us, says the official. (Maradona gives a whoop of delight and claps his hands cheerily.)

Who does he rate as the best footballers in the world now?

Kaspar, Ruben Paz, Ruyterinego.



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He comes from a very poor background. Has his lifestyle changed now?

(That cheeky grin again.) I am earning a lot of money now. Yes. But I still live with the same family and have the same girlfriend. (Maradona's family and fiancée were with him on the tour. They stayed back in Hong Kong where he'll join them.)

(Then the inevitable question.) How does he feel about the comparisons between him and Pele?

(A frown replaces the expectant smile and he slices the air with his right hand. He is annoyed with the

question.) No comparison. Pele is Pele. I am Diego Maradona.

How was the game against Hong Kong?

Good.

That answer said a lot. He doesn't want to be compared with Pele. He doesn't want to be described as the new Pele. He is Diego Maradona, a man who has his own identity. And he will show all the World Cup in Spain. The interview ends as Maradona joins the other team members in the and heads for the hotel.

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