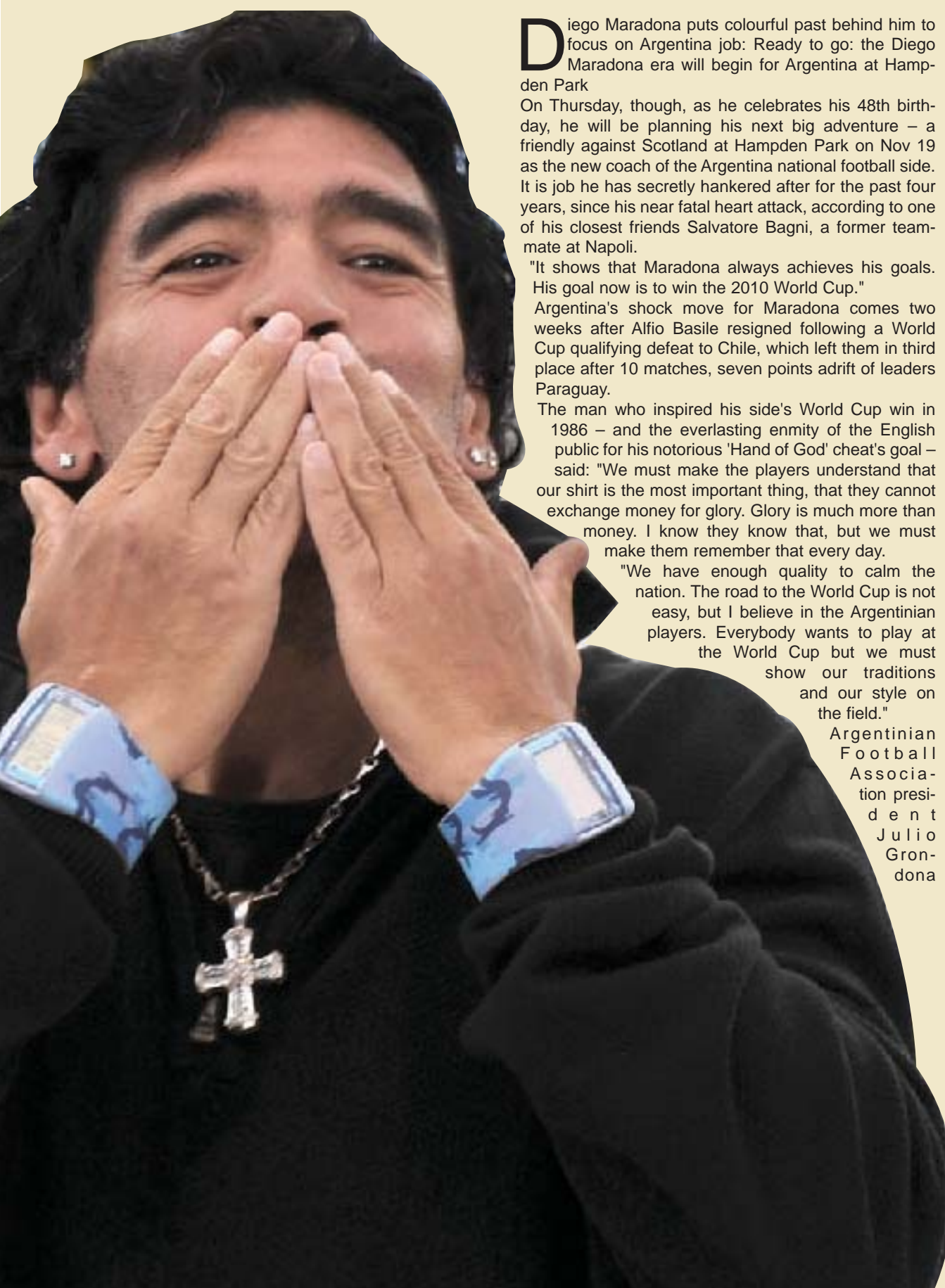


Diego Maradona puts colourful past behind him to focus on Argentina job

Diego Maradona's life has been something of a circus in the past few years. One of the greatest footballers ever, raced from one bizarre sideshow to another, trying his infamous hand at boxing, dancing, fronting a television talk show while fighting a public battle with his ballooning weight.



Diego Maradona puts colourful past behind him to focus on Argentina job: Ready to go: the Diego Maradona era will begin for Argentina at Hampden Park

On Thursday, though, as he celebrates his 48th birthday, he will be planning his next big adventure – a friendly against Scotland at Hampden Park on Nov 19 as the new coach of the Argentina national football side. It is job he has secretly hankered after for the past four years, since his near fatal heart attack, according to one of his closest friends Salvatore Bagni, a former teammate at Napoli.

"It shows that Maradona always achieves his goals. His goal now is to win the 2010 World Cup."

Argentina's shock move for Maradona comes two weeks after Alfio Basile resigned following a World Cup qualifying defeat to Chile, which left them in third place after 10 matches, seven points adrift of leaders Paraguay.

The man who inspired his side's World Cup win in 1986 – and the everlasting enmity of the English public for his notorious 'Hand of God' cheat's goal – said: "We must make the players understand that our shirt is the most important thing, that they cannot exchange money for glory. Glory is much more than money. I know they know that, but we must make them remember that every day.

"We have enough quality to calm the nation. The road to the World Cup is not easy, but I believe in the Argentinian players. Everybody wants to play at the World Cup but we must show our traditions and our style on the field."

Argentinian Football Association president Julio Grondona

said: "Since 1979, I've been looking forward to having Maradona as coach of the national team. Maradona marked a turning point in Argentinian football."

Maradona admitted that initially he thought the news was a practical joke. He said: "I arrived from Georgia at 10am and three hours later I was having a shower to meet Julio. As I was going to the meeting, I thought it was some kind of hidden camera show. The direction Julio wants for the national team is the same I have." One big question mark is over his lack of experience having coached for just six months – two at Deportivo Mandiyu in 1994 and four at Racing Club a year later.

Grondona believes he has solved this by partnering him with Carlos Bilardo, the coach of the 1986 team, as a general manager. Grondona added: "Maradona is the No1. Putting two heavyweight men together is not easy, but we are trying to find excellence."

Excellence was his forte on the field – including the mazy run and goal that destroyed England in 1986 – but off the field the scandals were also part of the story. He was thrown out of the 1994 World Cup in America for failing a drug test and was banned for 15 months. He had also tested positive for cocaine while playing for Napoli.

In recent years, he fought a battle with drug addiction, alcohol-related liver disease and obesity, spending 10 days in intensive care four years ago. There were also serious doubts that he would survive a heart attack and in 2004 hundreds of fans mounted a vigil outside a Buenos Aires clinic for the stricken player. Maradona said he felt was going through a tunnel to death but that fans' prayers pulled him back.

He dismissed any lingering doubts about his health saying: "I have to be fair. Before I wasn't well. Today it's another story." He says he will be travelling to Europe in the next fortnight to meet Argentina's players.

One interesting reunion will be with Barcelona's Lionel Messi, whom Maradona accused recently of being selfish and arrogant. He had said: "Sometimes Messi plays for Messi. He feels so superior that he forgets his teammates."

Messi was diplomacy itself on Wednesday, saying: "These were things said in the moment. He is a great one and I admire him for what he has given Argentinian football." For now, Maradona's challenge is to lift a side that have won just one of their last seven World Cup qualifiers – and predictably the view from South American rivals Brazil was to deride the appointment. Tostao, Pele's striking partner in the 1970 World Cup, said: "A coach has to be balanced and organised. Only Argentina, country of the tango, could have such a coach driven by passion."

Maradona is not fazed. After the small matter of a friendly in Scotland, he has until March to prepare for the next World Cup qualifiers against Venezuela and Bolivia and is convinced it will work. He said: "Football hasn't changed. I don't think there is anything there that can surprise me."