

## **Sport Italia: 150 Years of Disunited Italy?**

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*Abstract: Since the Swiss grammar school teacher Rudolf Obermann introduced gymnastics into the Royal Artillery of the Savoy army in 1831, sport has played a key but consistently unrecognised role in modern Italy's development and the formation of identity. Considering sport's impact upon identity formation in Italy's 150 years of history, this paper will reveal its national importance and how, as arguably the mass popular cultural activity, it potentially offered the only focal point around which all Italians might have been able to find and develop some sense of commonality. Capable of transcending Italy's various class-based, regional, linguistic and cultural divides, sport's immense power to influence and direct will also be seen to have contained negative potential, in terms of national identity. This analysis of sport's capacity to shape Italian identity since Unification, will be conducted through brief comparison of four case studies: the glorious failure of the marathon runner Dorando Pietri, in 1908; the black boxer and European middleweight champion Leone Jacovacci, under Fascism; Neapolitan calcio and Lega Nord politics; plus the case of current international footballer Mario Balotelli. Raising complex questions these examples, as outsiders, reveal much about identity formation in post-Unification Italy while continuing to underline sport's capacity to unite and confront what is now one of the country's greatest challenges: the acceptance and embrace of a multi-cultural future.*

*Keywords: sport, identity, nation, racism, Lega Nord, Balotelli*

The issue of the Italian nation has provoked great debate and difficulty for many academics from a variety of disciplines. In an attempt to define the nation a number of stringent models have been applied, such as the sharing of common land, culture, values, language and history. While providing different methodological frameworks that facilitate the analysis of identity formation, these rigid definitions have frequently resulted in an interpretation of Italy's post-unification history as a series of failed, state-based attempts to create Italians.

Analysis of Italy's borders, which have shifted, expanded and occasionally contracted, and its citizens, whose shared common language only really emerged in the post-1945 era, reveals how rigid concepts of nationhood cannot realistically be applied to the peninsula's inhabitants.

One major consequence of this has been the exclusion of certain groups from national status (Forgacs and Lumley, 1996: 20), which this article will reveal and discuss through the medium of sport. Engaging with Italian history at macro and micro levels, sport offers unrivalled snapshots of the myriad of identities within the Italian collective while, at the same time, providing arguably the only moments of national unity, something that even the 1945 liberation failed to achieve.

Rather than displaying a failed united Italy, analysis of the nation through the prism of sport and its various athletes offers an alternative, more flexible means of framing its identity where, in real rather than imagined Italy, difference and diversity can be seen as pillars of an arguably successful nation. Raising questions about Italian identity, the nation's sporting 'outsiders' offer insight into identity formation in post-Unification Italy while underlining sport's capacity to confront what is perhaps the country's greatest challenge: the acceptance and embracing of Italy's multi-cultural future.

### **From Turin to White City**

In 1831, at the request of the King of Piedmont-Sardinia Charles Albert, the Swiss grammar-school teacher Rudolf Obermann introduced gymnastics into the Royal Artillery. The foundation stone of modern sport in Italy, the subsequent formation of the Turin Gymnastic Society, in 1844, was fundamental in the development and diffusion of sport throughout the peninsula. Italy's late industrialisation however, resulted in a slow development of its sporting culture, especially when compared to more industrially advanced European nation states. Italian sport finally came of age at the 1908 London Olympic Games. For the first time, the national press was forced to dedicate significant column inches to a sporting event and the nation to take notice of its athletes' achievements.

At just over 1.5 metres tall and weighing a paltry sixty-two kilos, Enrico Porro was one of the many Italians who embodied the country's historic malnourishment and poverty by falling well short of the minimum army recruitment height. Taking gold in the wrestling lightweight category, his defeat of a Russian weighing seven kilos more, demonstrated his superior tactical, technical and physical strengths. The subsequent celebration of his style, as much as the victory, was an early example of how Italians would consistently take great pleasure from the nature and ways in which their sporting heroes achieved their successes: the technique and occasional craftiness (*furbizia*) that separated them from their adversaries often being seen to have compensated for what they were at times lacking physically. As *La Gazzetta dello Sport* declared:

Porro's victory makes each of us proud, as it shows that even without possessing gigantic, Herculean, huge-chested men, Italy is first, as in the times of ancient Rome ... Despite their [opponents'] methodical and diligent preparation, a memory and muscular intelligence is within us, which often makes us superior to northern peoples (Carpani, 1908: 3).

The combined individual gymnastics event, or athletic pentathlon, was claimed by another diminutive but exceptionally talented Italian, Alberto Braglia. Lionised by *La Gazzetta dello Sport* he also, apparently, connected modern Italy with ancient Rome. 'His body is shaped in perfect equilibrium ... He demonstrates and recreates the harmonious, classic system; that of the Greeks, the most elegant and civilized people, and the Romans, the most powerful in the world' (Anon., 1908a: 3).

The triptych of triumph was almost completed by Dorando Pietri who, although small, with a handlebar moustache, wearing a baggy vest, red shorts and a knotted handkerchief, nonetheless still became the country's first, internationally recognised sporting hero. Having led the marathon from around the thirty-kilometre mark he entered the White City stadium in first place, turning left rather than right, before falling and being helped to his feet. Some ten minutes later he collapsed as he staggered across the finishing tape where, having received assistance during this final lap, he was disqualified. To make matters worse, he reportedly entered a coma, with some evening newspapers even announcing his death.

Recovering miraculously, he emerged twenty-four hours later to enjoy a triumph far greater than he might have expected in victory. One of the great 'chokes', or failures, in sporting history, *La Gazzetta dello Sport* unashamedly trumpeted his achievement: 'even if he doesn't bring first place in the marathon ... he does win one of the greatest and most illustrious trials: that of brilliantly affirming, in front of the admiring eyes of the world, the immortal heritage of Latin strength and virtue' (Carpani, 1908: 3). Gushing with national pride following Italy's unprecedented achievements, the newspaper's editorial proclaimed that: 'Porro, Pietri [and] Braglia... have solemnly confirmed to the entire world that the ancient Roman race still isn't finished, and is marching wonderfully towards a superb resurrection of Italy. Long live Italy!' (Anon., 1908b: 1).

### **The first black Italian**

Born in the Congo to an Italian father and Congolese mother, the boxer Leone Jacovacci grew up in Rome. On 24 June 1928, his bout with the Milanese Mario Bosisio, for the national and European middleweight titles, provoked a spat between the cities' newspapers. The first black Italian to win a sporting title of any sort, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, in compliance with

the Fascist regime's strict censorship rules, expressed deep suspicion about him and his victory.

'He is perhaps far from my Latin spirit', wrote Adolfo Cotronei (1928a: 1), 'even if I know he is precisely and incontestably Italian. I am a diehard fanatic of my race and, for a peculiarity of my spirit, I can't see or love it other than with the lightest of colours, and my psyche doesn't appreciate all the shadows and black'. 'Neither is revoking his nationality in question', continued Cotronei (1928b: 1) the following day: 'Instead, it appears a purely spiritual issue: our reluctance to put white and black on the same level. It is a passion of the race. The athlete, with his virtues, competitive style, his values, is beyond discussion'.

Cotronei's identification of the 'other', thereby defining the nation by what it is not, indicates one of the few, consistent means by which some have tried to form an idea of just who and what Italians exactly are. One direct consequence has been discrimination in Italian football stadiums with particular reference to Neapolitans, who, in turn, have also used sport as a means of affirming their identity.

### **Outsiders within**

The shipping magnate Achille Lauro was one of the first businessmen in Italy to develop populist politics through investment and the appropriation of a football team: SS Napoli. Coinciding almost entirely with his term as the city's mayor, during the 1950s and 1960s, his catch-all slogan throughout was: "'A great Naples for a great Naples'" (Papa and Panico, 2000: 45). His spending unquestionably reflected his ambitions for the team and the Neapolitan council elections, translating the south's battle against the north into a language understandable by the city's mass electorate while, at the same time, restoring hope to Napoli fans. Yet, despite significant spending Lauro's Napoli failed to win the league title, and his project only further underlined the economic gulf between the peninsula's haves and have-nots.

Lauro was no longer owner of the club when Napoli finally realised its title ambitions, in 1987. Emerging as a football force more or less at the same time as Silvio Berlusconi's AC Milan, Neapolitan sporting ambitions provoked another battle between Italy's north and south, its rich and poor. After sixty years of waiting, Napoli's 1987 *scudetto* victory was celebrated across Italy and the world by Neapolitans and anti-Milan fans alike.

The club's triumphant talisman was the Argentine Diego Armando Maradona, who stimulated southern pride at the exact moment that intensifying northern sentiment, regionalism and prejudices were stimulating extreme anti-Neapolitan banners on northern terraces: "'Welcome to Italy"; "Forza Vesuvio"; "Neapolitan, help the environment,

wash yourself"; "No to vivisection, use a Neapolitan"" (Bromberger, 1999: 35).

Threatening Milan's hegemony and representing resistance to the club and city, Maradona became a football freedom-fighter for downtrodden, rebellious Neapolitans. At the same time, for many in the north he appeared to embody all of the customary, negative stereotypes of the *Mezzogiorno*. Photographed in jacuzzis with Camorra bosses, hard-partying, tax evasion, a contested illegitimate son, pimping and cocaine abuse were among the scandals that plagued him. The north-south fissure that he exposed was further widened during the 1990 World Cup, held in Italy. Argentina opened the tournament against Cameroon, in Milan, where its national anthem and Maradona's name were universally jeered and whistled. The Cameroon team received widespread support in the stadium and its shock victory was celebrated with gusto. 'After the match Italians ran down the streets greeting every black they met with chants such as "Ca-me-roon, Ca-me-roon", and "Maradona, fuck you". Perhaps some of these new Cameroon supporters were the very same fans who had previously daubed anti-black graffiti and slogans on walls around the stadium' (Giulianotti, Bonney and Hepworth, 1994: 74).

Meeting Italy in Naples, in the semi-final, the boot was on the other foot. While Italian political leaders and sportsmen implored Neapolitans to support the national team, Maradona counter-attacked by declaring his love for the people of the south's 'capital'. Underlining their status as forgotten, national outcasts, he questioned whether it was really worth supporting Italy. While it would be misleading to suggest that Neapolitans abandoned their nation in the stadium that night, their call to arms reflected Maradona's capacity to provoke their underlying identity crisis.

### **The League of Gentlemen?**

As much as African immigrants, southern Italians were also a focus for the Northern League's populist politics. When the national anthem played prior to the second-leg of the Coppa Italia Final between Vicenza and Napoli, on 29 May 1997, half of the stadium reportedly remained 'provocatively seated' while the red and white crossed flag of 'Padania' and that of the League flew inside and outside the ground (Sema, 1998: 139).

Through its daily mouthpiece, *La Padania*, the Northern League blamed the Government's patriotic use of the national football team that gave a political, irredentist significance to what was a sporting event (Confalieri, 1997: 23). Opposed to national television's and journalism's exploitation of Italian footballers, the League campaigned against what it considered a fundamental part of a patriotic 'propaganda machine' in northern bars, piazzas and sports grounds. Contrasting with previous

attempts to use football to create some sense of national community, the Northern League used it to promote its anti-national agenda and regional identity.

The Mayor of Alassio launched an 'anti-azzurri' association 'throughout Padania', to cut the weapons of Italian footballers from the hands of 'patriotic television and journalists' and to impede the use of their victories 'against Padania' (Sema, 1998: 141). As he explained:

The initiative has been created by the nausea of seeing every sporting event involving Italian athletes being used by the regime, through the media, for nationalistic purposes, for political speculation, in defence of the so-called motherland ... In Rome they have understood that sport is the last glue that can still hold together some pieces of a state in disorder (Siegel, 1998: 18-9).

Forming its own 'national' team in 1998, (Les, 1998: 19) 'Padania' won the VIVA World Cup (for stateless nations), in 2008. However, outside of its stronghold, the League's regionalism had the opposite effect in encouraging a rediscovery of Italian identity. As Antonio Smargiasse noted: 'To those who raised red and white crossed flags and greeted those who came to the north with cries of "Africans, Africans" and "soap and water", the response was the tricolour, the national anthem and an outstretched arm' (Smargiasse, 1993: 70).

### **Super Mario**

In 2009, when on international duty, the black, then Internazionale, striker Mario Balotelli was insulted in a Roman bar and bananas were thrown at him (Angeloni, 2009: 35). Questioned about the significance of the incident, the black athlete Andrew Howe's response was interesting:

I don't believe it was a racist incident even if I can't deny that racists exist... They are simply lunatics, people without personality, perhaps complex-ridden, from the world of football. I want to believe that it might be just this, only an expression of football extremism ... If I really must find a reason that isn't skin colour, it might be in some of Balotelli's unfortunate gestures... I think black has nothing to do with it: if he had been Argentine for example, they would have insulted him in another way... This is the ugly side of football (Howe, 2009: 35).

Later that year, during Inter's visit to Turin, Juventus fans chanted: 'There are no black Italians' (Gamba, 2009: 62). Clearly directed at Balotelli, Italy's Under-21 manager Pierluigi Casiraghi concurred with Howe: 'It's his personality that's irritating, it's not racism... He has a big character but

sometimes exaggerates' (Crosetti, 2009: 66). Quite how then national team coach Marcello Lippi could justify asserting to 400 high-school students that 'cases of racism in football don't exist in Italy', remains unclear (Mensurati, 2009: 67).

If it is difficult to understand how the unquestionable racism that Batolelli has experienced can be his responsibility, comparison with English football in the 1970s and 1980s offers some insight. For anybody who experienced the racist abuse, the chants, the bananas and the passing of the buck onto the game and the player, the scenario is all too familiar.

In Dave Hill's account of racism and football in Liverpool in the 1980s and 1990s, one black Liverpool FC fan stated: 'Liverpool is racist...but the people do not think of themselves as racist' (Hill, 2001: 120). It was exactly the point that *Il Venerdì di Repubblica* made on its front cover, dedicated to Balotelli, on 26 June 2009 (Anon., 2009). After interviewing the former Liverpool player Howard Gayle, the parallels between Dave Hill's interpretation of what constituted character in English football in the late 1970s and 1980s, and Italy today are striking:

Consider the politics of the field of play. Rule One: don't retaliate when opponents bait you. The ref will send you off, not the other guy. Rule Two: don't lose your rag with the crowd when they shower you in spit as you back away to take a corner kick, when they goad you with monkey chants and throw bananas on the pitch just to let you know that they think you are no better than an ape. Rule Three: don't get upset when your own teammates behave in exactly the same way. Break any of these rules and they say you've got a temperament problem (Hill, 2001: 137).

For all its distastefulness however, Balotelli's presence and ability have drawn huge attention to one of Italy's most pressing social issues: the fact and future of multicultural Italy. In November 2011, Balotelli visited the presidential palace with the Italian national team and a number of 'new Italians'; schoolchildren born in Italy to immigrant parents. Recognising the team's contribution to the development of national identity, President Giorgio Napolitano made specific reference to those half a million children born in Italy who remain foreigners in the eyes of the law, plus the almost one million foreign resident minors, of which 700,000 are educated in Italian schools but deprived of citizenship, and thus of rights and recognition. In effect, he described Balotelli's life so far, and his future role. Against the background of the Northern League's ever-intensifying populist racism, the President's words drew a clear line in the sand. Referring to their integral part of the Italy of today and tomorrow his discourse was quite clear: you are one of us.

I am convinced that the immigrant babies and children are an integral part of the Italy of today and tomorrow and represent a great source of hope.... These young children that we saw in the film, 'Seconda Generazione', the testimonies ... the victory of that rhythmic gymnastics team ... all Italian even if from different origins, have confirmed our opinion that ours has become a national community in which the children of immigrants count not only as numbers, but also for the skills that they express. We are talking about a presence that contributes to providing that vital energy which, today, Italy desperately needs. More generally, failing to understand the importance of the migration phenomenon and how much it is, has been and might be necessary for our country, simply shows an inability to look at reality and the future (Napolitano, 2011).

However, strong local accents and an Italian education are not enough in terms of the law (n. 91, 5 February 1992), which does not offer citizenship on the simple basis of having been born in Italy (*Jus soli*). The legal message is clear: You are not one of us. For the children of immigrants nationality is dictated by that of their parents, who can apply for citizenship after four years (EU citizens), five years (stateless) and ten years (others) of legal residency.<sup>1</sup> In this case, Italian citizenship can also be granted to their children (*Jus sanguinis*). If they do not qualify by this route, the law only allows for children born in Italy to apply for citizenship within one year of their eighteenth birthday, on the condition that they have lived in the country for ten years without interruption. The obvious problem is the potential derailment of any such application by a mere couple of months spent abroad or a late birth registration. Consequently, a huge number of children of immigrants, born in Italy, live in national limbo, excluded from a series of rights that demand the qualification of citizenship.

Sport, arguably, directs the brightest spotlight onto this national limbo. Raised in Brescia by foster parents, but never legally adopted, Mario Balotelli was selected to represent Italy's Under 15 and 17 squads but was unable to accept the call-up due to his citizenship status. As his 'adoptive' mother explained, in 2006: "Every two years I go to the police headquarters to renew Mario's permit to stay. After queuing for hours, I hand over my number and the documents and am given a piece of a paper. Just as if he had arrived in Italy yesterday" (Novaga, 2006). On 13 August 2008, some eighteen years after his birth in Palermo, Balotelli received his citizenship and identity card. Finally, he was officially Italian. Moreover, he was now in possession of the necessary documentation to begin his international football career.

Since his transfer to Manchester City, in 2010, even journalists writing for so-called high-brow British dailies have hardly exercised their critical skills in their analyses of Mario, who is more often than not portrayed as a buffoon. As Sam Delaney felt qualified to affirm in a diatribe, which was initially published anonymously in *The Guardian* online;



He is an imaginative idiot. His brain is curious and enquiring, always seeking out new ways of being massively stupid. And that's what separates him from his dreary idiot-contemporaries, who are happy to play it safe with their predictable acts of street-brawling and incessant adultery ... Liam Gallagher recently said of him: 'Mario's smart, I like the way he's a bit of a headcase.' And so the torch was passed from the previous incumbent to the next: Britain has its new Idiot Laureate (Delaney, 2011).

With the recognised caveat that Mario has provided journalists with their fair share of free hits and lazy lines he has also, on occasion, proven to be an engaging, apparently modest, far from stupid individual. Moreover, he might just be breaking the mould to become an icon of new Italy while, in turn, highlighting one of sport's potentially most positive aspects.

Throughout modern Italian history sportsmen, in possession of the cultural capital that few Italians could rival, have consistently proven to have been among the few members of society capable of confronting restrictive social norms and forcing change: cyclist Fausto Coppi and footballer Valentino Mazzola's challenges to the sanctity of marriage being clear cases in point (Martin, 2011: 125-8). Furthermore, as Panikos Panayi points out in his history of immigration in Britain:

the road to this level of success ... had been littered by a variety of racist obstacles. One of the most obvious of these, which became particularly prominent as Black players began to increase during the 1970s and 1980s, consisted of abuse.... By the 1990s direct racism became increasingly difficult to articulate as clubs tried to clean up their act, threatening to ban anyone who used racist abuse. Such developments partly resulted from government pressure, as well as from the Let's Kick Racism out of Football campaign (Panayi, 2010: 293).

Noting how migrants from the New Commonwealth have transformed aspects of British society and popular culture, such as dining, popular music and sport, Panayi demonstrates how television, cinema and sport have also been media through which black citizens in particular, have come to be seen in an increasingly positive light (Panayi, 2010: 292-4). While racism has certainly not disappeared from English football, the strides made in the last two decades give scope for hope in Italy.

Great attention surrounded Viv Anderson when he became the first black England international footballer in 1978. Thereafter, roughly one in four England debutants have been black, evidencing how the combination of educational programmes, political initiatives, the Football Association and club community schemes, and the 'Kick it out' campaign have had significant impact. With such support networks, black players have become

strong forces in the campaign for racial equality in general, and not just on the pitch. One recent example of this increasing empowerment was a lecture given by the former England international John Barnes, at the University of Liverpool, on 17 May 2012. Delivered in the wake of the polemic following Liverpool FC's Luis Suarez' racial abuse of Manchester United's black, French defender, Patrice Evra, the abstract for Barnes' lecture proposed that football's anti-racism initiatives were doing little to rid the problem from wider society.

Barnes certainly had a point but, as Dave Hill has also argued:

Throughout most of the Seventies the sons of immigrant families ... learned as they became established [players] ... that they just had to learn to live with the spit and bananas that rained down on them every time they took a throw-in or a corner, the low, loathing, collective boo that rose up against them every time they touched the ball in open play. What else could they do? They were far too isolated to speak out against it... The only course of resistance available to them was to show by their deeds that they would not be driven out of football, just as their families would not be driven out of Britain by the attentions of Fascist organisations such as the National Front. They did so with fire and fortitude and, though unrecognised at the time, this has proved enormously important (Hill, 2001: 18-9).

Mario Balotelli certainly isn't lacking in fire, fortitude and talent and, given the growing amount and nature of media scrutiny that he inevitably finds himself subject to, is he really misguided to ask, 'Why is it always me'? In terms of ability and profile Balotelli, albeit not by choice, has been lumbered with the leadership of a lonely campaign, which even some elements of the Italian press continue to undermine with their ignorance.

On 17 June 2012, during the group stage of the European Football Championships, *La Gazzetta dello Sport* reported on the racist abuse against Balotelli during Italy's match against Croatia (Licari, 2012: 11). The following week, on the morning of Italy's quarter-final with England, the paper's daily cartoon depicted Mario as King Kong mounting Big Ben, rather than the Empire State building, from where he swatted away footballs fired in by the English (Marini, 2012a: 23). It was senseless at best. That Balotelli is black and King Kong an oversized gorilla rendered it distasteful, for some at least.

Monday's edition saw an apology or, more specifically, an apology for any offence caused: a non-apologetic apology. We've done nothing wrong, but are sorry if you were offended, sorry if you misunderstood. The paper did concede 'that it's not among the best work of our talented cartoonist...poor Marini. In current times and with these stadiums' - which were presumably references to those of Poland and Ukraine rather than Italy's - 'more prudence and good taste than ever are required because everything, absolutely everything, can be misinterpreted' (a.mo., 2012: 23).

True enough, but is there anything to misinterpret in the depiction of a black Italian footballer as an oversized gorilla? Employing literary *catenaccio*, *La Gazzetta's* defence stood firm: 'This paper has always fought any form of racism in the stadiums and has always denounced the "boos" directed at Balotelli, as an unacceptable form of incivility. To think that some sick mind might have wanted to insinuate, on our pages, the link with King Kong, the big black monkey, more than being offensive it is frankly twisted and absurd' (a.mo., 2012: 23).

Following Balotelli's outstanding performance and two goals during Italy's subsequent semi-final defeat of the old enemy, Germany, *La Gazzetta* couldn't bend far enough backwards to assert his Italianness. 'THIS IS US!!! Super Balotelli: the whole of Italy celebrates', screeched its front-page headline, on 29 June. It was certainly better than that of the Turin sport daily *Tuttosport*: 'Li abbiamo fatti neri'. Translated literally as 'we made them all black', its jingoistic reference to having upset the Germans was somewhat inappropriate alongside an already iconic image, from the night before, of Balotelli flexing his torso.

Amidst the Mario-mania that followed, *La Gazzetta's* editorial declared, 'A star is born': 'the symbol of new Italy: SuperMario Balotelli, the dreamboy' (Monti, 2012: 1). Besides his outstanding performance, however, Mario's masterstroke was his demonstration of an imagined, fundamental Italian characteristic that he had previously appeared to have been devoid of: emotion. Heavily criticised for not sufficiently celebrating his goals for Italy, following his second strike he removed his shirt and posed, revealing a sculpted torso that sent shock waves of inadequacy and excitement throughout the entire Italian population. Albeit an exaggeration, *La Gazzetta's* correspondent appeared to interpret it as a 'Kennedy moment'.

We are sure that there will be at least three generations who...will ask themselves: 'Where were you when we won in Warsaw with that double-strike from Balotelli?'...Now there are children who will be able to say 'I was there', even if it was only in front of the TV. They will be lucky enough to be able to savour the memory of having seen Mario score and celebrate just like any average boy (Cecchini, 2012: 6).

Within the space of ten days, King Kong had been transformed into the Italian Incredible Hulk. On the morning of the final, Marini's cartoon depicted Mario ripping open his shirt to display the national flag underneath (Marini, 2012b: 25). Enhancing Balotelli's appeal was his reaction to the final whistle, after what had been his finest performance for Italy thus far. Climbing into the crowd, he sought, hugged and kissed the special woman in his life: 'Silvia Balotelli, his mother, the person who, more than anybody else, knows how to be in tune with the emotions of that rough and fragile boy, who has more scars from life upon him than we can

ever imagine... At that moment, at the end of the match, there is a universe of words in the way in which the black giant hugged and kissed his mum' (Cecchini, 2012: 6).

Much like in Mexico 1970, when Italy's defeat of West Germany resulted in the first genuinely national celebration in the post-war period, the final proved a let-down. The first team to lose a European Championship or World Cup final by four goals, Balotelli and his teammates Montolivo, Bonucci and Pirlo were united with tears streaming down their faces. 'The giant Brescian had dreamt of another final.... He wanted to shout his joy to the sky, his pride in being Italian, above all for his mother Silvia and then for his father Franco' (Graziano, 2012: 17).

By the end of the tournament the shouts of "*Vai Negrone*" that I had heard in a bar in Rome since the beginning had diminished, if not disappeared, but it remains to be seen if there is enough political and sporting will adequately to support Italy's leading black athletes and maximise their unquestionably powerful potential to aid the country and nation's passage through its multi-racial growing pains.

## Conclusion

Threaded throughout the course of Italian history from Unification until the present, the issue of identity has been ever present: not only what it constitutes but also how it might be created and undermined. In a nation state built upon diversity, such as language, region, geography, history, sport offered a unique means of inculcating political loyalty under whatever regime governed it. Helping to foster national integration, through shared moments of triumph and disaster, extending to wider sections of the population than arguably any other social activity, easily understood and enjoyed, cathartic, and permitting emotional release, was there really a better alternative?

Following the birth of international sporting organisations, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894, sport became an important means of creating a sense of national belonging, developing loyalty and creating attachment to an abstract entity. With participation in the international sporting system practically a statement of membership in a community of nations, for the great powers, winning more medals than rival powers became increasingly important while for smaller or younger nations, such as Italy, it was equally vital to participate respectably and thereby join the club. Through athletes, diplomatic representatives, the flag and national anthem, sport was a crucial means of forming and shaping the image of nations as they entered the international order, and nowhere was this more important than Italy.

However, as this case study also reveals there is only so much that even highly talented sportsmen with huge exposure can achieve, which is

further undermined by the multi-faceted nature of the country. Yet even if some sections of the nation continue to use sport to define themselves by creating and identifying images of the outsider, the lack of commonality among Italians that this displays nonetheless reflects the diverse and ever-changing nature of real Italy, rather than any singular, stringent definition that exists only in the homogeneous nation of the imagination.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ministero dell'Interno, Legislazione, Cittadinanza, Legge 5 febbraio 1992, n.91, 'Nuove norme sulla cittadinanza, Art.9, d, e, f, available at: [www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/site/it/sezioni/servizi/legislazione/cittadinanza/legislazione\\_30.html](http://www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/site/it/sezioni/servizi/legislazione/cittadinanza/legislazione_30.html) (accessed 26 July 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The VIVA World Cup is a tournament for stateless 'national' teams unrecognized by FIFA.

<sup>3</sup> Roma, Fiorentina and Udinese were also fined in the 2008-09 season for racist chants against Balotelli. See *La Repubblica*, 21 April 2009, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Public lecture: "What is the cause of racism in football?" <http://alumni.liv.ac.uk/netcommunity/page.aspx?pid=1387> (accessed 23 May 2012).

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