

## Football - A day with the *Ultras*

“Football fans are getting more and more violent and are looking to attack the police. There is a real risk this escalating violence will have a serious effect on the traditional place of football in Italian life,” according to a spokesman for SISDE, the Italian police's intelligence gathering unit:



Following a series of incidents during 2004/05, Italian football is facing the new season with some trepidation. On an infamous night during last season's Champions League, Inter Milan fans on the San Siro's *Curva Nord* (north terrace) hurled more than 30 red flares toward the AC Milan goal box. They injured AC Milan's goalkeeper Dida and forced the game to be abandoned.

This was the second time a referee was forced to bring a Champions League match in Italy to a premature end. Roma's group match with Dynamo Kiev was abandoned after Swedish referee Anders Frisk was hit by an object thrown from the crowd.

It is difficult to overestimate how important football is in a country where the name of the ruling political party is '*Forza Italia!*' a football chant meaning 'Go Italy!' The Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is of course also in his spare time the owner of AC Milan.

The core of this crisis in Italian football lies with the *ultras*. The *ultras* are intensely loyal hard-core fans. They are well-organised and perpetrate orchestrated violence that can exert huge influence over the way football clubs are run. SISDE estimate there are as many as 60,000 *ultras* in Italian football and 10 per cent are attached to far-right or far-left political groups.

The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* reports, “In the *curva* you'll find professionals, the lawyers, the good son, the son of the politician, the bourgeoisie...”

For the purpose of trying to understand this blight of violence that is afflicting Italy, why then not find a red-haired Irish man in the *curva* too?

The city of Padua is just a short bus ride south of Venice. Off one of Padua's main squares, there is a small monument with a quotation from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, “The great desire I had to see fair Padua, nursery of arts, the pleasant garden of great Italy... As he that leaves a shallow plash to plunge him in the deep and with satiety seeks to quench his thirst.”

Like Shakespeare's character, I have come to Padua to plunge myself in at the deep end. I will attend Padua F.C.'s final game of the 2004-2005 Season against Sambenedettese,

I need a guide to help me infiltrate the *ultras*. Daniela is a student just a few months short of graduation with her Art History degree. And she is a fully-fledged *ultra*. On the morning of the game she takes me on a tour of the city.

The main plaza of Padua *Prato della Valle* is, Daniela tells me, the largest square in Italy. *Santa Giustina* is the ninth largest church in the world. The university is the second oldest in Italy. Yet in a country of such historical abundance as Italy that is not enough to impress. Padua gets few tourists and has the feel of a town just getting on with its own business.

Padua football team has been largely ignored too. It was founded in 1910 and has had almost one hundred years of mediocrity since. There are positives to this. Italians are possibly the most self-aware nation on earth. They are always watching themselves. The Inter fans knew the world of football was watching when they hurled their flares.

At Padua's Serie C match, I will probably be the only non-Italian. There will be little or no media. I will have a better chance to get a sense of this fierce devotion or *campanilismo* of Italian football fans in its unpackaged state. And as long as I stay with her I shouldn't get into too much trouble smiles Daniela.

We visit the *Cappella degli Scrovegni* with Giotto's famous frescoes and Daniela explains to me the importance of the match. Under a blue-panelled, starry heaven of unfolding biblical narratives, I learn that Padua are in fifth place in Serie C, over twenty points behind Rimini. Above our heads there is



the first depiction of the star of Bethlehem as a comet, probably based on Giotto's sighting of Halley's Comet in 1301. But of more immediate importance, Padua need to beat Sambenedettese by at least two goals to reach the play-offs. If Sambenedettese win, they or Napoli (Remember them?) will take the last play-off spot.

As we walk back outside through Padua's gentle streets and squares, Daniela is regularly saluted by, as I find out later, other *ultras*. She is well known around the town.

Outside one of the expensive restaurants on *Piazza della Fruta*, the owner stops Daniela and they talk about the match. When he hears I'm going too he taps his fist to his chest proudly and introduces himself as Angelo.

The last high point in the Padua FC's history was between 1994-96 when they climbed into Serie A for two seasons. The guitar-playing, goatee-wearing American Alexei Lalas was at the centre of defence. 'You look like him,' says Angelo.

I ask him how long he has been an *ultra*. 'All my life,' he proclaims. 'Any dangerous experiences?' 'A few,' he says and points to a small scar above his right eye. 'What's the attraction?' 'Adrenaline, danger, governing your fears, your weaknesses. Getting through the fight'



He kisses me on both cheeks and promises us a discount if we come back after the game.

The stadium is 5km from the centre of Padua. We drive out with two fellow *ultras*, Giuseppe and Marco, tense and quiet in the back of the car. Surprisingly for Italy, for anywhere, going to a football match, we don't have to wait too long in traffic. The stadium is not going to be full. Without the *ultras* of both teams, it would be almost empty.

"There are fans who become violent because they have transformed the old spirit of local pride into violence and those who try to influence the decisions of their club with violence. There are those who are politicised and, finally, those who are not fans at all but who mix with supporters in order to practice violence as an instrument of political struggle," declared the Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu in May. He warned he would be prepared to close stadiums where trouble occurred.

Seasoned observers of Italian football insist they have heard such rhetoric before only for decisive action to founder when confronted with the power of the *ultras*. When the Inter-Milan match was abandoned there were few signs of outrage from ordinary supporters. They seem to have grown wearily accustomed to their stadiums being used as battlegrounds.

Just two weeks after the death of Pope John Paul, some 85 police were injured during the round of Italian league matches. One journalist noted sardonically that the only peaceful weekends in Italian football nowadays occur when a pope is mourned. At the *Stadio Olimpico* in Rome Lazio fans displayed illegal swastikas and fascist banners. The police took no action and Lazio were fined just £17,000.

After the Lazio-Rome derby, Mussolini's granddaughter described her pleasure at Paolo di Canio's fascist salute to Lazio fans, 'How nice that Roman salute was, it delighted me so much.' During a previous derby match, a rumour started by Roma fans about police killing a disabled boy led to angry fans invading the pitch to persuade captain Francesco Totti to call the game off. In the ensuing riot 150 police were hurt.

Padua's stadium holds 32,000. Daniela whispers to me that it was built on dirty money for the 1990 World Cup. We are thoroughly frisked as we enter the stadium. The *carabinieri* (police) disconcertingly touch my groin and buttocks, inside my socks and shoes.

As we walk up the steps to the stadium, I feel that catch of breath in my chest, the anticipation before a big game. Earlier Daniela brought me to the *Palazzo della Ragione*, a hall of judgement where the judges' specialist areas were indicated by animal symbols on the walls. The stadium is our judgement hall. From the lofty viewpoint of the stands we hand out commandments and scorn on the players like gods. We are brothers (and sisters) together for this ninety minutes escape from life, swapping verdicts on the game. It's a well of conflict at a remove from our own lives, yet passionate and beautiful. The beautiful game. The beautiful Italian game.



The stadium is a disappointment, shabby and dilapidated. There is an athletics track distancing us from the pitch. 'Do they have athletics meetings here?' Daniela shakes her head wearily to suggest that sometimes it's better not to ask why an athletics track is built into a stadium that never stages athletics.

There are maybe 1000 of us on the *curva*. It all seems quiet and peaceful for the moment. At the far end of the pitch the Sambenedettese fans are a swaying mass of black and red.

Many of the Padua *ultras* seem to be only vaguely interested in the 'well of conflict' happening on the pitch. They refuse to sing for the first twenty minutes of the match. They are protesting because a couple of weeks before some of their number were banned from the stadium for three years for fighting with rival fans.

After a match against Parma, most of the leaders of Juventus' *ultras* were arrested for fighting on the pitch. However, new bosses immediately took their place. They are now led by a man who was released after sixteen years in prison for murder. These were part of the group determined to make their point against Liverpool in their Champions League matches, responding to attempts at conciliation with raised middle fingers.

“At the festival of friendship ignorance wins,” mourned Italian newspaper, *La Stampa*.

Padua start the game brightly. They are the better team. Gianpietro Zecchin looks lively up front. La Grotteria, unfortunate sounding name, is Daniela’s favourite player. ‘Oh,’ I say politely. By the end of the game I still haven’t quite figured out why.

Meanwhile, the *ultras* are smoking, drinking and chatting. Some of them have their back to the game. They seem quite serene. They look like people I’ve seen earlier walking around Padua’s placid streets.

After fifteen minutes Padua are hit on the break, a defensive lapse and they are one down.

The *ultras* maintain their silence. There is a chant from the away fans that I don’t understand.

Exactly on twenty minutes the Padua *ultras* finally they find their voices. Banners are unfurled. A man standing alone at the front of the *curva* turns and I see what is written on his t-shirt, ‘IRA- Undefeated Army’. He shouts at the away fans and points at his t-shirt. “*Dimi tutto!* Tell me everything.” I have no idea what connection the IRA have with a match in Italy’s third division but the t-shirt gives him authority somehow.

‘I hate this man,’ says Daniela. ‘He is so...’ she searches for the word. ‘Arrogant.’ He is a bully. He is not the only one. Another man with a megaphone, wearing a Burberry hat in tribute to recent fashion trends among English hooligans, everyone into a tight group in the centre of the *curva*. Giuseppe and Marco get up. Giuseppe shrugs and looks slightly ashamed. ‘We have to go.’ ‘Well, we’re not moving,’ Daniela says firmly and stays sitting beside me. Sometimes, there is an inner strength in Italian women below the glamour and all the things that are initially attractive but finally unsatisfying.

The man with the megaphone shouts and the huddled group of *ultras* chant in reply. “*Non vinciamo mai!*” ‘We will never win!’ It’s amusing rather than intimidating to see how content they are singing this with all their heart. At the same time, their team goes two down. The *ultras* barely seem to notice.

Then my favourite chant of the match. ‘*Non guarda la partita, guarda di me!* Don’t look at the match look at me!’ screams the man with the megaphone. Daniela puts her head in her hands in embarrassment. I think of the *Torre dell’Orologio* that she showed me earlier, with the astronomical clock that dates from 1344. It is pre-Copernican astronomy, with the earth at the centre and everything else revolving around it. The strange inversion of what we now see as normal, seems appropriate.

Padua go in at half-time two down. They haven’t played badly. Apart from the goals, a big apart from I know, Sambenedettese have hardly threatened.



As the players troop off, the *ultras* are screaming, “*Vaite al lavoro!* Go to work!” Beer bottles are thrown over the glass barrier. One fan kicks it furiously. He knows everyone is watching him. When the team has disappeared he walks quietly back and puts his arm around his girlfriend.

It is said that leading members of the *ultras* know where the players, the coaches and officials live. They have been known to use threats to achieve their aims. It was noticeable, for example, how no Inter players came out publicly to condemn the trouble during the Champions League derby.

The *ultras* carry real clout behind the scenes on the streets and terraces and freely use it to enforce their political will. The police and stewards are reluctant to tackle them and the club officials are in awe of a powerful bloc that can make or break presidents and managers.

The *ultras* can shape transfer policy by rioting to prevent a signing, as with Ronnie Rosenthal to Udinese in the ‘90s, or launching pre-emptive attempts to sign a player, as when Lazio fans invaded a Parma training session to demand Lilian Thuram signed for their club. They also turn up at their own training grounds to give mob-handed pep talks to players they think are not up to the job. They have left death threats on smashed Ferraris.



At the beginning of the second half, the Padua *ultras* unfurl a huge banner and tape it to the barrier with masking tape. It says that the coach must go, though not quite so politely. What strikes me is how much time they must have spent preparing it. Masking tape and markers and colouring in, at their kitchen table or their local bar.

Daniela tells me that the Padua fans are of ‘the right.’ The coach Olivera is of the left.’ This is why they want him out. I have no idea what she is talking about. I didn’t realise fans could be either right or left wing. Even less so a coach. Is Alex Ferguson of the left or the right? I didn’t know. Suddenly I wanted it to be important for some reason. It seemed nice to believe in concepts like that again.

Daniela points out a man to me across the *curva*. I can only see the top of his head, but she tells me that he has all the history of Padua tattooed on one of his arms.

I never get to see it but as Padua is one of the most ancient cities in Northern Italy, a Roman municipium from 45BC, I imagine he must have a long arm indeed.

In Italy no-one was surprised that flares, officially banned from stadiums, were in abundance at the San Siro. Nor was there any shock that the stewards and police did nothing to stop the wave of missiles. The *curve* are *ultra* territory. I can see, on a smaller, less menacing scale here in Padua that the *ultras* operate in a 'no-go zone' for police.

A group of *carabinieri* in riot gear pass in line down to the left to take up positions for the end of the game. The man in the IRA shirt strides menacingly towards them. He raises his bottle of beer above his head. At the last moment he veers away. It is all show. Smiling and triumphant he returns to the bosom of the *ultras*. 'Crettino!' mutters Daniela and for once I don't need a translation.

With ten minutes to go, the man with the megaphone announces that we are all leaving. 'If you're a real fan you'll leave now.' Daniela looks at me to say we are absolutely not leaving. The *curva* empties around us.

The man with the IRA t-shirt stops. I don't understand what he's saying to Daniela. Then he looks at me. He points at his shirt and makes a fist.

'Are you sure you want to stay?' I ask Daniela as he leaves. She nods defiantly.

Padua have two great chances to score in the last few minutes but it hardly seems to matter. The *ultras* have already left the building. They are outside in a large group, being eyed nervously by the *carabinieri*. They are waiting at the exit where the players and officials will leave. We leave them to vent their frustrations.

Back in the city, Daniela thanks me for coming to watch her 'silly little football team.' She looks sad and beautiful in the evening sun. I wish Padua the best for next season but even she doesn't seem to really care anymore. She has to go home and study now. Within the next couple of months, she will hope to follow in the footsteps of Elena Lucrezia, Padua and the world's first woman university graduate. The rest of the Padua *ultras* will return to their normal existences too in this quiet alluring city.



As I make my way to the station for the journey back up to Venice, the lion of St. Mark, the symbol of the city, snarls at me from the top of a pillar above the market stalls. It's a reminder that although football is still a beautiful game, its violence as yet remains tamed. Italian football is facing another tough year.