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'Maradona had the ability to feel with the people'

Mariano Schuster in Buenos Aires explains why Argentinians called him 'God' and why he was loved among the poor

Read this interview in German.

Argentina has declared a three-day national mourning after Diego Maradona's death. Of course he was probably the greatest footballer of all time. But isn't that a bit exaggerated – with all due respect to Maradona's achievements? What does he embody for Argentine society?

> I don't think it's an exaggeration, although I understand that some people might think so. There was also a three-day national mourning for former presidents Raúl Alfonsín and Néstor Kirchner. We Argentinians are also known for exaggeration – and many of us don't mind that at all. Of course we mourn for the greatest footballer of all time, but that is not the full story. The identification with him is based on the "footballer Maradona" but goes far beyond his achievements in sports. His chuzpe, the happiness that he brought us, but also his defeats are responsible for this "divine" image of the "human beyond measure". We have called him "God" because he moved our hearts with his excess of deeply human qualities.

Tens of thousands of fans said goodbye to their idol in front of the coffin laid out in the presidential palace – crowded and largely without masks. Is the farewell to Maradona more important than the fight against corona?

> My answer may seem problematic but in my opinion they are two different things. Many people in Argentina have lost relatives to the virus and we all have friends who are affected by the pandemic. This pandemic affects us on a national and personal level. But on the one hand, quarantine measures have been relaxed recently, although of course nobody fathomed such gatherings of people. But people are

gathering spontaneously. They show a love and devotion for Diego that goes beyond everything. Without doubt, the departure of Maradona puts the virus in second place. The sociologist Pablo Semán wrote in a text that Maradona "conveys the image of the struggle that almost all of us must fight at some point: to create something that death cannot touch". In the face of death, saying goodbye to the one who has given us happiness – and life – is a risk we take.

Unfortunately, the situation escalated because of police violence and what should have been a celebration became marred. The repression of the police in front of the government building put a stain on the farewell.

Argentina has been badly shaken by the corona crisis and the economic disaster. Is Maradona's death an occasion that brings society together or does it rather intensify the feeling of misery?

I don't think that Maradona's death has any impact on the polarisation in our country. But in the public squares, around the government building where Maradona was laid out, the diversity of Argentina was presented: poor, rich, middle class, left and right voters; Christians, Jews, atheists, agnostics.

Clearly there are also sections of society that despise Maradona and many of the things he stood for. They ride roughshod over his drug problems or his alleged failure as a "role model". This is a minority that mocks the pain of others, the pain of millions of citizens. There is a popular saying: "I don't care what Maradona has made of his life, I care what he has made of mine".

Maradona sought proximity to the big names of the Left in Latin America, such as Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro. What role did politics play for Maradona – and Maradona for politics?

Maradona had the ability to feel with the people. It is this concept of "God" that we associate with him: he who makes everyone and everything happy, who understands the poor and the suffering. This does not always (but sometimes) have a direct political component. Diego has fraternised with Fidel, with Chávez and Evo, but also with Menem, the neo-liberal Argentine president in the 1990s. Menem was extremely popular and he was at least partially elected by those who suffered most from his policies.

In one of the most moving videos you could see these days, a handicapped boy on crutches from the slums puts up some candles in front of an improvised shrine. To the journalist filming him, he says: "Do you know how happy he made us poor? Sometimes I had nothing to eat, but when I saw him on television, he made me happy." The

happiness of this simple boy has a greater dimension than we can achieve through politics. He is not talking about Fidel or Menem, but about “HIM”, Maradona, in all its aspects, who made him happy.

Maradona has never abandoned a fundamental conviction (which is political, but not necessarily partisan): to defend the poor, to criticise those who offend them, to feel part of the people's sorrows, pains and joys in the broadest sense.

Jorge Valdano, Maradona's team-mate in the 1986 Argentinean World Cup, sums up part of the people's love for Maradona as follows: “He was a man who, because of his genius, knew no bounds from his youth and who, because of his origins, grew up with a proud class consciousness. Because of this, and because he represented so many, the poor won against the rich. The unconditional devotion he enjoyed among the poor was proportional to the mistrust the rich showed towards him. The rich hated to lose. But even his worst enemies had to tip their hats to his extraordinary talent. They had no choice.”



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