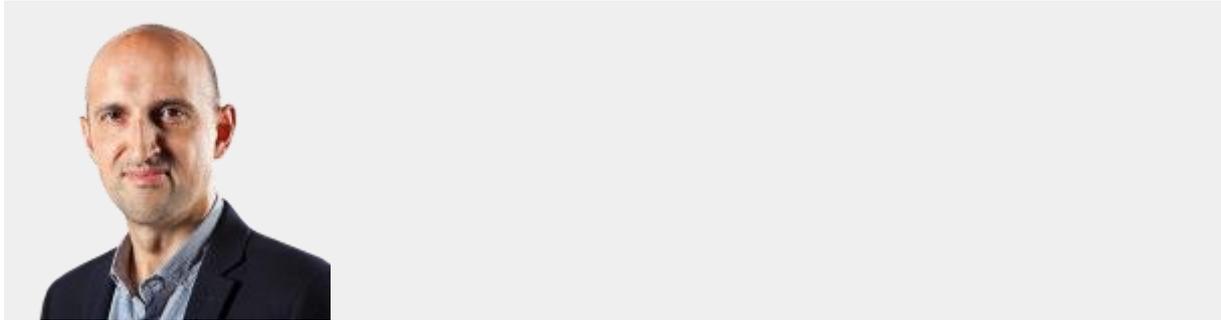


MATTHEW SYED

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Alberto's goal still reduces me to tears

matthew syed, sports journalist of the year



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Carlos Alberto, who died yesterday aged 72 after a heart attack, scored arguably the most beautiful goal in the history of football. It wasn't a free kick from the edge of the area, or an overhead strike of the kind that Wayne Rooney scored for Manchester United against cross-city rivals Manchester City, causing meltdown on social media in February 2011, or a piece of individual brilliance that we witnessed (through barely parted fingers) when Diego Maradona subdued a valiant England side in the 1986 World Cup quarter-final.

No, this was a goal born of team dynamics of the kind that Alberto, right, loved so dearly. The captain of the most flamboyant and joyful team in the game provided merely the last touch, the final note of the symphony, the last brush-stroke in a masterpiece of such intricacy and wonder that it bears watching again and again. Yesterday, that fourth Brazil goal from the 1970 World Cup final brought tears to my eyes, reflecting not just on the majesty of that team, but the joy they brought to so many.

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Watch Carlos Alberto's iconic World Cup goal

Pelé, who caressed the final lay-off to Alberto, christened football “the beautiful game”, an epithet that has been ridiculed rather a lot over the years. But I defy anyone to do so while reflecting upon the music and magic of that Brazilian team. I was born in 1970 and came to adore the South American way of playing the game. Like most fans, Brazil were my second team.

It wasn't just the passion and the daring. It wasn't just the skill and feeling that — even while carrying the weight of expectation of a nation and the pressure of contesting a World Cup — they were enjoying themselves. No, it was the subversive sense that these individuals were knitted together by something more than team spirit, something more even than patriotism. They exuded a collective intelligence that defines greatness.

The goal started when Antonio Julian, who had come on as a sub for Italy, was intercepted by Tostão, the No 9 tracking back into his own half. Tostão passed the ball back and it is knocked forward to Clodoaldo who, with one touch to control the ball, laid it off to Pelé. The great man passed it, first time, to Gerson, who flicked it, again instantly, to Clodoaldo. The ball was still midway in the Brazilian half. They were slowly, systematically finding new space.

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Clodoaldo ducked a couple of challenges rather magically, stepped over the ball to avoid a third, and then knocked it sideways to Rivelino. Already, the spectators were beginning to sense the beauty of what they were seeing, like concertgoers listening to the closing bars of the Adagio of Sergei Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 2, and anticipating the start of the Allegro.

Rivelino passed it down the wing to Jairzinho, the ball now midway into the Italian half, the crowd volume growing as he controlled the ball and, as he did so, inverted his body to step inside, just as Mário Zagallo, the Brazil coach, had advised during the pre-match team-talk. Giacinto Facchetti, the Italy captain now backed away, almost as though afraid, as the magician Jairzinho, who had scored in every round of the competition, encroached upon the penalty area. The pass to Pelé, delivered across the outside of the penalty area, opened up the right side of the pitch and he almost languidly held the ball up, knocking it from left to right boot, engaging the Italian defender, but aware in his peripheral vision that Alberto was now sprinting into the space to his right, the full back having charged almost the length of the pitch to deliver the coup de grâce.

Alberto, who was born in Rio de Janeiro, that great incubator of legendary footballers, exuded passion for the game from a young age. He joined Fluminense at the age of 19 and captured instant attention for his intelligence, reading of the game, and cerebral use of space. Above all, he had that rare capacity to enhance those around him, knowing when to bring them into play, and provide them with cover. He also knew when to dash forward to support an attack.

You glimpse an unfolding symphony of movement and mastery

Pelé's lay-off was almost, but not quite, flippant. So certain was he of the velocity of Alberto's approach, and so sure of his own mastery, that he scarcely looked up, dabbing the ball on the diagonal as the Italian defensive unit realised that they hadn't contemplated the possibility of an overlap. The ball bobbed at the precise moment that Alberto's boot reached it, as if the footballing gods were teeing it up for posterity. The rest is history.

In his spellbinding essay *Ant Fugue*, the author Douglas Hofstadter writes about a colony of ants. When you look closely at any given individual, the actions seem simple. As one of the characters says (the essay is written as a Socratic dialogue): "An ant colony is simply a bunch of individual ants running around at random looking for food and making a nest". In other words, the group is simply the sum of the parts.

But this conception is quite wrong. When you take a step back and assess the colony as a whole, you begin to see new, rather amazing things. Every action fits neatly and seamlessly into every other action. The group is capable of solving complex problems. You glimpse a thrilling collective intelligence. The whole, in fact, is so much more than the sum of its parts.

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Alberto parades the Jules Rimet trophy in the Azteca Stadium after Brazil's 4-1 victory over Italy in the 1970 World Cup final GIANNI FOGGIA/AP

This tells us much about life. You cannot understand a symphony through an analysis of its individual notes, but only by confronting it as a living whole. In the same way, the greatest teams and organisations (and perhaps even nation states) can only be comprehended by appreciating the collaboration and empathy that enable them to excel.

The Alberto goal was, in that sense, a metaphor. It was not about the individual actions of those who touched the ball on its journey across the pitch. Indeed, there were no mesmerising detonations of skill or silky step-overs, with the one exception of the cameo by Clodoaldo. Instead, there were short passes, gentle touches and well-executed lay-offs. In totality, however, you glimpse an unfolding symphony of movement and mastery.

“We only realised how beautiful the goal was after the game” Alberto would say years later, shaking his head with humble disbelief. “The emotion, of course, when I scored was incredible. But after the game, and still today, I realise how beautiful and how important that goal was because everybody is still talking about it.”

We still are, Carlos. And we always shall.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/albertos-goal-still-reduces-me-to-tears-zd3s8mvrn>