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# C'EST TOUJOURS MIEUX AILLEURS !



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# IT'S ALWAYS BETTER ELSEWHERE!

## CHANCE, INTELLIGENCE, AND HUMOR: AN INTERVIEW WITH GIANLUIGI BUFFON

Mariano Castillo Delall

Gigi Buffon is an original. His raw talent rocketed him into the Number One slot on both Parma FC and Italy's national football team, while his personality is characterized by outspoken and arrogant statements to the press, his fearlessness on the field, and the seemingly suicidal maneuvers that send the bulls—the feet of unflinching players.

Buffon was born in Carrara, Italy into an athletic family. His mother, Vera Stella was a soccer player, his father Adriano a weight lifter. His two sisters play volleyball and his uncle was a basketball player. He is the nephew of former Milan and Italy goalkeeper, Lorenzo Buffon. Growing up, Buffon began his career as a midfielder but decided to change his position to goalkeeper because he lost the will to run. This proved to be a stroke of good luck for the game, as Buffon is now perhaps the greatest goalkeeper in the world.

How did you start as a goalkeeper?

I entered my present profession by accident—a series of geographic, personal, and legal coincidences. A blend of boredom, curiosity, and wit.

Do you regard football as a pastime or as your primary obsession?

You know, the grass is always greener elsewhere. I have an immense curiosity about everything. My interests vary widely and I have the feeling that I will never answer all the questions that life poses. When I get very obsessed by something, I relax immediately that what interests me is something else entirely or, rather, not anything precise but everything that comes out from what I already considered. The relationship between one thing and all its possible variants and alternatives—everything that can happen in time and space. My approach to knowledge is playful. I am a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. If I choose a particular discipline, the charm would be gone, because choosing one means abandoning the others. Even just, I resist my ignorance, otherwise I would be impossible to maintain my sense of humor. For me, intelligence is always linked to irony, otherwise I become monotonous and boring. In order to solve this dilemma, I need to learn the possibilities, to find an activity in which I could keep the amusement, the pleasure, but within very specific rules so that I wouldn't get lost and distracted by everything. By choosing football, I lost contact with the stars. I never really learned how to play. I just started playing as a child in the streets. I know nothing about tactical technique. I control my thoughts, my opinions, are not immediately visible; they are made visible through gestures, reactions, and reflexes. They depend as well on a very specific situation that I need to react to at that particular moment, there is no time for hesitation.

In the end, every game is a game with long legs so

I am just taking my mental activity to the moon, astronaut and absurd level.

Who is the audience for you?

On the one hand, so someone's behavior is always predictable: they are smart, simple, they are children, but you never know what exactly will happen or the degree of intensity; it's like a mountain of sand, made of an infinite number of particles. Quite spontaneously, these systems reach a critical state: If you drop grains of sand and by one into a pile, they build up and go into a cone until an avalanche starts. The slope of the side of the cone varies down to a critical value, at which point it undergoes tiny avalanches and big avalanches (and avalanches at every scale) in between. The behavior is independent of the size and the shape of the sand grains, and in general it's impossible to deduce anything about the building from its behavior. In other words, the scale and timing of the avalanches don't depend on the size or shape of the sand grains.

The spectators of a football game can have diverse characters or qualities and be spread out in different spaces, countries, and situations. Some people go to the stadium, but in general they watch the match on television or listen to the radio or read the newspaper. In this sense, the audience is not fixed in space or time. It also depends on the distribution of the information, whether it's live at the stadium or on TV where the story has already been transformed by the camerawork, editing, and the narration of the sports commentators who explain the movement of the game. I have always been very curious about this mechanism, a routine, made up of a sequence of figures and numbers, directions, strategies, predictions. It has a specific vocabulary and rhythm—very technical but, also full of prefabricated remarks, and packed with players' nicknames, adjectives, descriptions, and quotes.

What do you think about the media's reception of your activity?

I am responsible for introducing the ball at a critical moment, but I only succeed or fail in my attempt. The records of my actions are minimal—repetitions of the critical moments, whether they are mistakes or achievements. I have the idea that although a man's life is composed of thousands and thousands of moments and days, those many instants and days can be reduced to a single one. So my single image in the media is precisely about the moments when I try to stop the ball. They are all sorts of instantaneous decisions. At the end of the day, it's a collection of images where I always appear smiling. Being like that, the entire record of my life is of it occurring in the air.

I am amazed that I can watch an image of myself at the precise moment when I am trying to catch the ball. I am catching the ball and the media is trying to catch my image, the difference is that they are bombarding me with their cameras and I have a single chance. They will always



capture me; I can always fail. Later, the same instant is broadest from different angles at different speeds: slow motion, still, backward and forward. Speech also supports the magic; they talk about my career, my common mistakes and virtues, all the statistics around my movements, how many balls I stopped in my life, how many I've let through.

**Why do you think football is so popular?**

Football is about enchantment. For an hour and a half, the world stops because a ball is being chased and a different kind of time unfolds, capturing the concentration of the players and the audience and generating its own story. One player or another is praised or blamed, bats are placed. Afterwards, the world is normal again and the spell evaporates. The game's interest lies not in the plot but in the shifts, in the changes in the many micro-plots. I'm reminded of Frazer's ring story. You know the story? The one where the Emperor Charlemagne falls in love with Hestala. The barons are in his court, extremely worried because they see that Charlemagne is neglecting the affairs of state. When



the girl suddenly dies, the courtiers feel relieved—but not for long because Charlemagne's love does not die with her. The Emperor carries her body to his bedroom, where he refuses to part from it. The Archbishop Turpin

suspects an enchantment and insists on examining the corpse. I hidden under the dead girl's tongue he finds a ring. As soon as the ring touches Turpin's hands, Charlemagne falls passionately in love with the archbishop and quickly has the girl buried. In order to escape the embarrassing situation, Turpin flings the ring into Lake Constance. Charlemagne thereafter falls in love with the lake and never leaves its shores.

The real protagonist of the story is the magic ring, because it is the movement of the ring that determines the actions of the characters and establishes the relationships between them. Around the magic object

there is a kind of lowfield, which is the territory of the story itself. We might say that the magic object is a visible sign that describes the connections between people or events.

For me, the ball plays the role of this magic object in that for a short period, a group of people are pursuing it and millions of viewers are following its route.

Maybe it's stupid to put it this way, but it's like a moving compass. I remember when I was a child we did an experiment at school in which we built our own compass, affixing a cork with a magnetized needle. If you float it in a bowl of water and wait until it's still, the needle will work as a compass, pointing north. The problem is that the needle is hardly still and its economy is very fragile and sensitive to the smallest movement. I like the idea of this improvised and fragile object that nevertheless maintains a rule.

**Many people talk about football as a circus, and I find it curious that your name—Buffon—means "clown" or "joker." What do you think about this strange coincidence?**

I like to think that I am a buffoon, a clown, entrusted with the task of entertaining people, playing a very stupid role. I'm often blamed for playing dirty tricks, like if I suddenly start kicking the ball outside my area, forgetting my own line at the goal. Being a clown is also a question of playing with the rules. If you play with the rules, you may become a joker or a criminal, but in a sense you change people's own rules of thinking. Many people don't, like the way I play; they think I am overacting, screaming too much, trying to win the attention of the cameras, but I do that intentionally to maintain the link between sport and the notion that it is truly just a circus. Anyway, everyone knows that barking dogs don't bite.

**There is a common notion that football players are stupid and ignorant, and that they merely know how to move their legs. What do you think about that?**

For me, intelligence isn't about knowledge, but is rather an activity related to humor, pleasure, and curiosity. I take an aesthetic pleasure in an idea. I love its form and shape, rather than its tendency to harden into a series of irrefutable facts. Maybe I am talking about an invisible kind of intel-



ligence that doesn't need to be written. It relates more to a conversation between friends or with the things that cross my mind when I am traveling from one city to another. It's about being awake, outside of common ideas about the world; an instant resource, a joke, a trick, a flip of meaning that makes you laugh. There is a space opened behind my mind. Sometimes I think that interesting things are always behind senseless connections, they stay hidden there because people are too serious and they don't play with notions of truth.

It is a very common mistake that we think we're ignorant of something because we are unable to define it. You could say that we can move toward a definition of something only when we know nothing about it. Perhaps the human mind has a tendency to deny statements. Arguments convince nobody because they are presented as arguments. No one has ever won an argument and anyone who believes you can is living in a fantasy world. We look at them, we wag our tails, we turn them over, and we decide against them. But when something is merely said or—better still—hinted at, and maybe that's a trick too, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination and we are ready to accept it. I think that games are one way to open this space in people's imaginations.

**What is the role of chance in the game?**

I think in general, games are about a tension between chance and rules, that's what keeps the attention alive: the desire and the possibility of breaking the rules, of being lucky or of seeing something unexpected. Maybe in the case of football, this situation is more evident for the audience. Anyhow, every time I start playing I really don't know what will happen, especially because my position as a goalkeeper is very much about observing, waiting, and then reacting at the right moment. No matter how much I practice, I am unable to control the whole situation and I really

enjoy this uncertainty.

**As an athlete, do you need to have strong discipline?**  
At the end of the day, when push comes to shove, I am a very lazy person. I like to think about everything at the same time but I have no patience to linger for too long on any single subject. I chose an activity where I need to make instant and fast decisions about complex situations. This was one of the main reasons for taking this shortcut, if we can call it that. As a goalie, my working hours are very short; I really need to put all my attention into what I'm doing.

**Is it true about the goalkeeper's fear of the penalty kick?**  
I don't think I have committed every possible mistake—because mistakes are innumerable—but many of them, and I really enjoy falls and that people keep talking about the mistake for weeks. Maybe it's one of the few moments of the game when they can blame one person, and that's mo-

