

## Nicknames in Italian Popular Culture – The case of professional football players’ nicknames in the media

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### Abstract

Italian media make extensive use of nicknames when reporting about professional football players. The present paper, after an introductory paragraph on definitional problems, will focus on the different groups of name-givers and the functional aspects of nicknames in sports coverage. Besides these two elements, the aim of the paper is to show the characteristics players’ nicknames share with proper nicknames and the elements distinguishing both groups.

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### 1. Introductory remarks

In Italy, football plays a central role in popular culture and enjoys an extensive media coverage. As many as three daily newspapers with nationwide distribution – *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Corriere dello Sport* and *Tuttosport* – together with various TV shows on public, private and pay TV channels cover the topic on a daily basis. Besides the media, football is a constantly present topic in private conversations and small talk. In his analysis on the history of Italian football, Foot (2007) goes as far as defining football a “fanatical civic religion – where loyalty is total and obsession the norm”.<sup>1</sup> Constant elements of media coverage as well as of private and public discourse on football are the football players’ nicknames. The present paper deals with the circumstances which lead to the creation of these nicknames and with the functional aspects of their usage.

In general, sports as social and media phenomenon is handled within different fields of scientific research. In sociology, ethnology, historical and cultural sciences as well as linguistics, for instance, a vast literature on different sports-related topics is available. Nevertheless, the bibliography on nicknames in a sports context is limited to the research on baseball and American football players’ nicknames in the United States carried out by an American sociologist (Skipper 1989a; Skipper 1989b; Skipper 1986; Skipper 1984; Skipper 1981) and to small chapters in works focussing on other sports-related phenomena.

The present paper is subdivided into three sections. The first section consists in a definitional approach with the intent to outline the special features of sports nicknames in opposition to nicknames in general. After that, the second section will deal with the circumstances of the formation of nicknames and with the name-givers – commentators, journalists, supporters or fellow football players – in the Italian football panorama. In the closing section the focus will lie on different forms of usage and the various functions of nicknames in the sports coverage in Italy.

The present paper is based on a corpus which is mainly composed by written texts taken from newspapers, books and websites; the data has been collected over a ten-year span. In this paper, examples are taken exclusively from books and articles published in edited books; for reasons of space and readability, no newspaper material is used in this article. However, the examples have been selected in order to give evidence of the overall tendencies

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gessmann (2011:55) from a philosophical point of view describes football as a phenomenon capable of fascinating the masses considered by some critics a modern successor or even replacement of religion.

represented in the whole corpus. Where possible, the examples refer to currently active players.

## 2. Definitional aspects of nicknames

The meaning of nickname usually varies with the different national research traditions. What in English is simply called *nickname* and in Italian *soprannome* corresponds in German to many different terms with – sometimes only slightly – different semantic value, like *Spitzname*, *Übername*, *Spotname*, *Schimpfname* – the latter two indicating respectively mocking or insulting nicknames. Dealing with the different categories in German, Kany (1992) uses, for instance, the hypernym *inoffizieller Personennamen* – unofficial personal name. This term is then modified by an attribute to reveal the character or function of the personal name. Furthermore, in the Internet context, a nickname also indicates a kind of pseudonym used in several Internet-related activities like chats or forums. In this paper *nickname* will be used in its broader meaning similar to *soprannome* or *inoffizieller Personennamen*, as derivation of the Anglo-Saxon ‘eke name’ (extra name) (cf. Ashley 1996:1750) excluding, of course, the internet-related meaning.

In many cases, research on nicknames refers to small close-knit groups in rural settings. As far as Italy is concerned, the available research is therefore often related to a context of traditional dialectological research like the work of Rohlf (1984) on nicknames in Sicily. In urban settings, research on nicknaming practices is usually focused on small groups with intense internal contact, e. g. like a class of school children (e.g. Morgan et al. 1979). Lastly some research with a broader focus has been carried out, like Kany (1992), including also public persons and their respective nicknames.

Despite some terminological differences, English, Italian and German share the majority of elements of the respective *nickname* definitions. The central element of most definitions is the close personal contact between the name-giver and the nicknamed person, this meaning that the name-giver usually knows the denominated person very well and chooses a nickname that reflects physical or moral properties, behavioural characteristics or particular events related to the bearer of the nickname. The assumption of a close connection and personal acquaintance between designator and designated person is usually the reason for analysing nicknaming processes in close-knit communities where such close contact situations are most likely to persist.

Closely associated with this first aspect is the function of nicknames as expression of approval or disapproval in relation to the social norms of the community. In this case, nicknaming practices are used to exercise social control (cf. Putzu 2000:308). Morgan et al. (1979:69) summarise the function of social control as follows: “By marking, emphasising and stigmatising the abnormal, nicknames serve to publish what is acceptable among those who promote such names and who direct their contempt upon those unfortunate enough to be their bearers.” Therefore, in many cases, there is evidence of negatively connoted nicknames highlighting bad habits or abnormal physical or moral characteristics, so “nicknames very often home in on just those characteristics” the denominated person “would prefer to forget” (Morgan et al. 1979:5).

A possible but not necessary element of nicknames is the ephemeral character of many of them. In fact, a same person may carry different nicknames which vary with their different life stages or different environments; in other cases, instead, nicknames are very constant in time. This is the case, for instance, of childhood nicknames which are carried along to the adult life. An enhanced version of this type are nicknames inherited from one generation to the next as described by Putzu (2000:37) in a historical prospective: “[M]olti soprannomi

*sono effimeri, ma altri durano per alcune generazioni e una parte di questi divengono nomi di famiglia ufficiali, opacizzando l'originario significato.*"<sup>2</sup>

Especially when considering the use of nicknames in school or kindergarten environments – but also in the headlines of sports newspapers – there is evidence of the ludic or playful dimension of nicknaming.

The last element of nicknaming considered here represents a synthesis of what has been said so far, as it is closely related to the dimension of approval and disapproval as well as the ephemeral character and the playful use of nicknames: There is no limit in the number of nicknames that can be attributed to one and the same individual. In relation to different domains, different name-givers, groups of name-givers or different stages of life, one person can bear different nicknames (cf. Putzu 2000:225; Morgan et al. 1979:42).

Even if many of these definitional features of traditional nicknames are modified or are lacking at all, additional or attributed names of sports professionals are usually called *nicknames*. A case apart – not considered in this paper – are the *pseudonyms* especially those carried by Brazilian footballers, which are an element of popular culture in Brazil in general and not exclusively a phenomenon related to sports (e.g. former Brazilian president 'Lula'); those pseudonyms are in fact not limited to a particular environment and usually remain unvaried in all domains. A general feature distinguishing pseudonyms from nicknames is that the first are usually chosen by the bearer while the latter are attributed by a name-giver (cf. Marcato 2009:96-97).

As pointed out before, the nicknames of professional football players offer sometimes adding, sometimes substituting aspects with respect to usual nicknaming in the private sphere. Usually, personal contact between name-giver and denominated person is the exception. Therefore, the choice of a nickname is mainly based on suppositions deduced from the public representation and the performance of the football player on the pitch.

Nicknames are used, especially by supporters, to establish a relation and an illusion of intimacy and confidence with the idolised player, building up a one-way emotional relation between supporter and player. Even considering the fact that also a professional football player can have an emotional tie to his supporters, the idea of the supporters actually knowing the player as a human being and not as a combined product of the on-field performance and the media presentation is illusory.

In the Italian media, nicknames are also used by commentators and journalists as a metaphor and an element of variation to avoid annoying name repetitions in the coverage. Alongside a potential nickname, this function of variety can also be covered by the player's first name, a demonym or similar.

### 3. Who are the name-givers?

Historically, as pointed out by Porro (2008:51), the role of the media in the popularisation and orchestration of football as a spectacular event in Italy was decisive. In the same way, many of the players' nicknames have been coined by commentators and journalists – especially in the printed press. As mentioned before, especially in order to avoid repetitions in an article or during a TV or radio live coverage, journalists make use of nicknames; nevertheless, some of them also express their appreciation for a player by using benevolent or affective nicknames. An active example of a journalistic name-giver is Gianni Brera, a former journalist publishing in some of the most prestigious newspapers of Italy, like *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and *La Repubblica*. Brera was probably the most skilful writer in the history of Italian sports journalism as "he invented a completely new language for talking

<sup>2</sup> "Many nicknames are ephemeral, but others persist for several generations and a part of those become family names shading the original meaning." [my translation]

about football” (Foot 2007:304). Among the enormous amount of nicknames Brera created for players and managers, probably the best known are ‘rombo di tuono’ (‘thunder’) for Gigi Riva and ‘abatino’ (‘little priest’) for Gianni Rivera, two of the best Italian footballers of the Sixties and Seventies (cf. Foot 2007:307).

Alongside serious journalistic contribution on football, in Italy also satirical or comical TV and radio shows as well as columns in newspapers are well represented. In these programmes and articles, nicknames are often used to mock players and their performance; positive or encouraging commentary is completely lacking in this genre. Major exponents of the satirical and comic coverage on football are the Gialappa’s Band in radio and TV, and Gene Gnocchi, who originally published his columns in newspapers, but has lately become a frequent guest in TV programmes too.

Two other groups of name-givers are worth mentioning: supporters and insiders. Usually, club supporters coin nicknames for almost every player of the team. Many of these nicknames remain however on the stands in the stadium and don’t gain broader attention. A case apart is represented by illustrious supporters of a club, very often active in panel talk shows on football in regional or national TV. Such illustrious supporters are usually public persons – like politicians, writers, actors – known for their football passion. In the agitated debates in these talk shows they have the role to defend their club from, sometimes fierce, attacks of the whole panel. These illustrious supporters are, however, much more similar to journalists than to regular supporters in their function as name-givers.

The miscellaneous group of insiders is the last group of name-givers considered here. As insiders are meant here those people working or living in close contact to the denominated player. Such insiders are fellow players, coaches, staff, but also friends and family. Nicknames given by insiders, in most cases, remain inside a close circle of persons, e.g. the team or the family, and are therefore to be considered nicknames in the proper sense as described above, especially because of the high level of intimacy: “Within a family there are often private nicknames, terms of endearment, inside jokes – another level of intimacy” (Ashley 1996:1751).

A hybrid form of name-givers between illustrious supporter and insider are the club owners, who often release public statements on players and their performance. Usually, the club owners are closely in touch with the players and feel free to comment on and criticise the team and single players in public, sometimes referring to players by using their first names or their nickname. Probably the best example of this category was Gianni Agnelli, the former owner and chairman of Juventus F.C. and CEO of FIAT. Agnelli – a public person due to his role as one of the leading industrials in Italy – used to keep in touch with many of the Juventus players and coined a lot of nicknames for them. The nicknames coined by Agnelli often had a ironic second level, because he used to coin apparently affective nicknames, which possessed a critical connotation only recognisable at a second glance. An excellent example for his very special and unique style of creating nicknames is probably the case of Zbigniew Boniek, a former forward for both Juventus and Poland. Boniek was called ‘il bello di notte’ (‘beautiful at night’) by Agnelli, alluding at the often exceptional performances of the player in European Cup competitions, which usually are played at night. On the other hand Agnelli intended to criticise Boniek for his often poor performance in normal championship games, which usually are played on Sunday afternoon – at daylight.

In conclusion of this paragraph, it is important to emphasise that, once the player’s name has been established and diffused, nicknames are used by the media or by supporters irrespective of the name-giver. Since the creativity of the name-givers is nearly unlimited, the replacement of existing nicknames or the coexistence of nicknames is very frequent. This last observation will be resumed at the end of the following paragraph.

## 4. Usage of nicknames in the media

As regards the usage of nicknames in the media, two central aspects will be considered: nicknames as examples of the epic categories used in the particularly Italian style of sports coverage and multiple nicknaming processes.

The first aspect – the ‘epic’ categories in sports coverage – is closely related to the very particular style of Italian sports journalists, characterised by the use of many metaphors related to war and battle, struggle and deprivation, pride and strength. This style of coverage, typical of all popular sports in Italy, has recently been described by Puccio (2011) referring to the mythological discourse used in cycling coverage. The categories used in the coverage are in many cases emphasised by nicknames referred to the players’ skills or character. In a functional perspective, these epic categories are used to collocate single players in the general discourse of the match or the game in general, as well as to collocate the single player inside the hierarchy of his team and in the football universe as a whole.

Secondly, multiple nicknaming processes will be analysed as a reflection of the stages of a player’s career on the one hand and expression of sympathy or antipathy on the other. Especially the first case is very interesting since there are nicknaming patterns referring directly to the hierarchic structure of a football team. A talented young player is seen first as an apprentice who needs to confirm the expectations set for him in order to become a real player. This attitude, as it is going to be evidenced below, is clearly traceable in a player’s changing nicknames.

### 4.1. *The epic categories*

In the following paragraph six categories will be described. These categories are to be seen in the context of a hierarchically organised structure. The categories described here represent a non-exhaustive selection aimed at explaining how the connection between epic categories and nicknames work, by using linguistic material which semantically fits the context of the category. Similarities to the use of nicknames in the coverage of professional cycling (cf. Puccio 2011:174-177) hint at a universal value of this aspect in Italian sports journalism.

#### *The Leader*

The typical nickname attributed to leaders is ‘Capitano’. In this case the nickname is usually given by the supporters and sometimes used even years after a player has ended his career. This nickname is used by supporters all across Italy to honour a player who has shown dedication, an emotional tie to the club colours and charisma on and off the field as well as outstanding performances. Thus, to become ‘Capitano’ it is not enough to wear the captain’s armband. The nickname ‘Capitano’ is not to be confused with ‘capitano’ (without initial capital letter), the latter meaning simply ‘team captain’ as an official role. Since this nickname is rather frequent, to understand the person it is referred to, it is necessary to know which club the user of the nickname supports. Well-known examples of players carrying the nickname ‘Capitano’ are Francesco Totti of A.S. Roma and Alessandro Del Piero of Juventus F.C.

Another example of this category is the nickname ‘Re Leone’ (‘lion king’) given to Gabriel Omar Batistuta during his time playing for A.C. Fiorentina, where he had become not only the leader of the team but also an idol to the supporters; after he moved to A.S. Roma, supporters in Rome continued to use this nickname as well. This case is an example of a nickname being used even after the end of a player’s career.

#### *The Warrior*

The category of warrior refers to players with strong character and highly developed fighting spirit on the field. A well-known example is ‘*Ringhio*’ (‘the snarl’) Gennaro Gattuso of A.C. Milan, world-wide known for his temper after the World Cup winning campaign of the



Italian national team at the FIFA World Cup 2006 in Germany, who gains his nickname because of his snarling at the opponents.

Also the nickname '*Pitbull*' carried by Edgar Davids from the Netherlands has to be interpreted in the same way. In Italy, Davids played for A.C. Milan, Juventus F.C. and Internazionale F.C. and was known for his aggressive defending style and his character of never giving up. Warriors are, in most cases, but not exclusively, defenders or defending midfielders.

### ***The Divine***

Players considered to be divine are skilful players known for technique and in most cases well developed goal scoring abilities. One of the best representatives of this category is 'il fenomeno' ('the phenomenon'). Ronaldo, the Brazilian superstar of Internazionale F.C. during the late Nineties, was called 'fenomeno' because of his incredible skills, his enormous speed and his dominant role on the world-wide football panorama until his career slowed down due to repeated injuries.

Roberto Baggio, most famously playing at A.C. Fiorentina, Juventus F.C. and the Italian national team, was called '*Divin Codino*' ('the divine hair tail') throughout his career. He is widely considered to be one of the most talented Italian footballers of all times and gains his nickname through his exceptional hair cut in combination to his divine skills of ball handling and goal scoring.

### ***The Prodigy***

The category of prodigy is usually transitional and temporarily limited to the early years of a player's career and can be considered as describing a talented apprentice, as mentioned above.

After the initial stage as prodigy, the evolution of the player decides whether he has really become the good player his talent was hinting at. The special case of creating a nickname referring to a former football player is highlighted by Kany (1992:164): "Nachbenennungen im Sport erfolgen überwiegend mit Personennamen von Stars." Such nicknames represent an honour and, at the same time a burden for the young player, because:

"Die Kehrseite der Ehrung bildet die Verpflichtung, die für den Betreffenden erwächst. Nachbenennungen entwerfen Gegenbilder. Denselben Vorgang findet man auch bei offiziellen Nachbenennungen, bei Trägern von Eigennamen (berühmter) Vorfahren: Sie sollen durch die Nachbenennung auf deren Eigenschaften usw. verpflichtet werden. Der Vergleich nach oben, mit Bezugspersonen und -gruppen, ist nicht nur bei der Vergabe von offiziellen Personennamen, sondern auch bei der von inoffiziellen Personennamen als Ansporn beliebt." (Kany 1992:196)

The 'Pibe de Bari' Antonio Cassano earned his nickname in relation to the nickname of Diego Armando Maradona 'el pibe de oro' ('the golden boy'). Cassano is a good example of a prodigy failing to play constantly on the highest level, since his career so far is characterised by constant ups and downs playing in different clubs. During his time in Spain, he gained the very disrespectful nickname 'el gordo' ('the fat man') due to his lack of fitness and his overweight. In the meantime, playing for A.C. Milan he is usually referred to as 'Fantantonio'.

Daniele De Rossi is considered to be the future captain of A.S. Roma and therefore he is called '*Capitan Futuro*' using the name of the comic strip hero Captain Future combining his prospect as club captain – it is widely assumed that he will take over the captain's armband from Francesco Totti, once the latter ends his career – with his role as a prodigy.

### ***The Delicate Genius***

The delicate genius category is very similar to the prodigy. Usually, a player is referred to as a delicate genius when he possesses great skills, while his physical strength or his character is doubted. Former Juventus F.C. chairman Gianni Agnelli labelled Alessandro Del Piero as

'*Pinturicchio*' referring to his skill to 'draw' incredible trajectories with the ball, which call to mind the art of the homonymous Renaissance painter. At the same time Agnelli alluded, with a slightly ironic tone, to the fragility and lack of power of the player as a young man.

### ***The Outlaw/Goon/Bad Boy***

The role of the outlaw is, usually, covered by players who are dangerous for the opponent's safety on the pitch and often possess an uncontrollable temper. The line between outlaws and warriors is usually drawn by the positive or negative image of the player. '*Animale*' Pasquale Bruno, the so-called animal, was a violent player known for his violent play and outrageous character. The Uruguayan Paolo Montero – known as 'Paolo il caldo' ('Paolo the hotspur') – is the player holding the record of career red cards in the history of Italian football. He was known for his rough and often vile play as well as for his undisputable skills as a defender. Especially in close and intense matches he had severe difficulties to control his temper and his nickname is therefore more than striking. However, it needs to be considered that outlaw players are often idolised by their own supporters.

### **4.2. Multiple nicknaming**

As said in the introducing paragraph, in the first case of multiple nicknaming the different nicknames reflect the stages of a player's career. In order to show this practice, we will take a short glance at the nicknames carried by Alessandro Del Piero of Juventus F.C. throughout his career.

Initially, as young player, Del Piero was called 'bocia' ('boy' in Venetian vernacular; cf. Cortelazzo and Marcato 1998:82) because of his Venetian origin. After arriving at Juventus F.C., the club owner Gianni Agnelli called him 'Pinturicchio' (see above). During a long period of rehabilitation from injury in which the player didn't perform at his former level for quite a long time, despite still being the club's top earner, the same Agnelli, in a newspaper interview, called Del Piero 'Godot' referring to the screenplay of Samuel Beckett on an expected person never arriving during the whole play. Finally, after becoming the undisputed leader of the squad and the idol of the supporters, Del Piero is today nicknamed 'Capitano'.

The second case of multiple nicknaming is the case in which differing nicknames are used contemporarily to reflect sympathy or antipathy. A good example for this case is Jürgen Klinsmann, a former player of Internazionale F.C. in Italy and the German national team. Among his estimators, Klinsmann was known as 'Kataklinmann' (playing with the word cataclysm) due to his power and capacity to confuse the opposing defence. The performers of the satirical TV program Gialappa's Band coined the much less benevolent nickname 'Pantegana bionda' ('the blonde rat'). This nickname was chosen because of his always complaining behaviour on the pitch and his tendencies to trick on opponents and referees; thereafter this nickname was used in different contexts by people who didn't like the player.

Interestingly, during his time in England with Tottenham Hotspur, Klinsmann earned another nickname reflecting antipathy: due to his attitude to simulate on the pitch he was called 'the diver'. Eventually, he managed to turn around this image by deliberately 'diving' on the pitch after every goal, showing a strong sense of irony which was well appreciated by the English public. This example from England – and therefore not properly part of the topic of this paper – shows excellently how social control through nicknames works: a bad habit is transformed into a disapproving nickname and forces the denominated person to accept the own shortcoming.

## **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the faculties of nicknames of professional football players in Italy can be summarised in comparison to proper nicknames of ordinary people. The metaphoric use of nicknames in Italian sports coverage to avoid repetitions and create variety of an article or

commentary is a completely unknown element to usual nicknaming practices. This feature is clearly a media phenomenon which is probably also extended to other national writing traditions in journalistic texts.

Unlike nicknames in general, there is an enormous amount of positive nicknames attributed to football players who are seen as heroes by their supporters, attenuating the common expression of the nickname as 'the hardest stone the devil can cast on you' (Van Langendonck 1996:1228). Therefore, nicknames of professional football players can be compared to labels worn with pride by the players and used like brand names to underline their position in popular culture.

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