Arrivederci Swansea

The Giorgio Chinaglia Story

Mario Risoli

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‘MY HEAD IS AS STRONG AS THE MARBLE OF CARRARA.’

GIORGIO CHNAGLIA

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FOREWORD

I FIRST LEARNT of Giorgio Chinaglia when I was a teenager. My father often told the story of how a young Italian player, discarded by Swansea Town, went on to become one of the world's greatest strikers, helping Lazio win the Italian championship. Like many Italians living in Cardiff, my dad spent most of his bachelor nights in the restaurant run by Chinaglia's father. He remembered a young Giorgio bowling up with his girlfriends and demanding a steak sandwich. He also recounted the contents of a letter he had written to the Italian football newspaper, *Corriere della Sera,* suggesting the then unknown Giorgio Chinaglia should be allowed to play in Italy (because his registration was with the English FA, Chinaglia was classed as a foreigner by his compatriots). My father was, and still is, very proud of the fact that the letter was printed.

Chinaglia's story has always fascinated me. I could never comprehend how a forward deemed good enough to play for Italy in a World Cup and who was, in the early 1970s, among the world's best-paid footballers, had once been on the books of little Swansea Town. It was genuine rags-to-riches stuff, yet in Britain only a small band of people – die-hard Swansea supporters, a few Italian immigrants living in South Wales and a handful of journalists – are aware of Chinaglia's triumph after rejection. I hope that will now change.

PROLOGUE

MAY 12, 1974. The penultimate Sunday in the 1973–74 *Serie A* championship. The sky is clear and the temperature is well into the ’80s. Inside the Stadio Olimpico, the concrete bowl stadium shared by Rome’s two football clubs, Roma and Lazio, there are 80,000 people, all hoping to see Lazio’s first ever title triumph.

The men from Rome face Foggia, a team from southern Italy fighting to avoid relegation. If Lazio win they will be crowned champions of Italy, regardless of what second-placed Juventus do in their home match against Fiorentina. It is two points for a win, and Lazio have a three-point cushion over the Turin club.

The Olimpico is a sea of sky blue, Lazio’s colours. Scarves, flags and banners cover the vast open-air stadium. The supporters had been arriving three and a half hours before the 3 p.m. kick-off. Outside, the roads leading to the Olimpico are jammed with traffic.

In the Lazio dressing-room the atmosphere is tense. The players, 90 minutes from making history, are visibly nervous but their coach, Tommaso Maestrelli, wearing his favourite tweed jacket, is serenity personified. As they prepare to enter the tunnel that leads onto the pitch Maestrelli, as he does before every game, shouts at each one of his players ‘*Chi non lotta*! *Chi non lotta*!– Who is not fighting! Who is not fighting!’

The first half is frustrating for Lazio. Foggia, desperate for a point, build an iron wall in front of their goalkeeper, Raffaele Trentini, and the home side play only in sporadic bursts. It is Foggia who launch the first serious attack, after

nine minutes. Giuseppe Pavone's shot fools Felice Pulici, the Lazio goalkeeper dressed in all black. The ball is heading for the empty net, but Luciano Re Ceccioni turns it away for a corner before it crosses the line. The supporters breath a collective sigh of relief, but within seconds their anxiety returns. The huge electric scoreboard reveals all to those who have not heard the news via the thousands of transistor radios scattered throughout the stadium. Juventus are leading Fiorentina thanks to a goal from Pietro Anastasi.

Lazio take 24 minutes to test the Foggia goal. Re Ceccioni finds Vincenzo D'Amico and his fierce shot hits the post. But the visitors appear to have tamed the *Serie A* leaders and Foggia coach Lauro Toneatto is winning the tactical battle with Maestrelli. Foggia's four-man midfield suffocates the creative Lazio players such as Re Ceccioni and Mario Frustalupi, while Franco Nanni and D'Amico are both playing below par. Toneatto's masterstroke, however, is pinning two defenders on Lazio's giant forward, Giorgio Chinaglia, who is so often his side's match winner. Stopper Novilio Bruschini and sweeper Giovanni Pirazzini follow Chinaglia like two pickpockets stalking their victim through the city's narrow streets.

Francesco Panzino blows his whistle for half-time and the disconsolate Lazio players return to their dressing-room. The plan had been to kill off Foggia in the first 45 minutes and they had failed. Maestrelli tries to calm them. 'You are doing nothing wrong,' he tells them. 'Carry on playing the way you are playing and you will win the game.' They return for the second half but within five minutes they lose their inspirational right-back, Luigi Martini, with a shoulder injury. Five minutes after he leaves the field Foggia hit the crossbar.

But on the hour Lazio get their break. In front of the Curva Nord, the north section of the stadium where Lazio's hard-core *tifosi* gather, Renzo Garlaschelli, Chinaglia's dark partner in the Lazio attack, crosses. Francesco Scorsa, the

man marking Garlaschelli, jumps to intercept the cross but loses his balance. His arm blatantly touches the ball and Panzino has no hesitation in pointing to the penalty spot. Scorsa, not a first-team regular, pleads his innocence. He screams at Panzino that the handball was not intentional. His team-mates surround the Calabrian referee and it takes a full three minutes to restore order.

Lazio's penalty-taker is Chinaglia. He places the ball on the white circle and walks back a few yards for his run-up. The supporters in the Curva Nord, unable to watch, turn away, as does Re Cecconi. He puts his arms on his hips and looks at Felici Pulici in the opposite goal.

Chinaglia strides towards the ball and hits it with his famous right foot. Trentini dives to his left, but he has guessed wrong. Chinaglia picks the right corner. The ball zips along the grass and into the net. The Olimpico erupts and chants of *campione! campione!* – champions! champions! – can be heard from the terraces. Chinaglia starts to run towards the bench. He always hugs Maestrelli after scoring, but this time it will be difficult to reach him. As he heads for Maestrelli, he is stopped by Nanni and before he can wriggle free, the rest of his colleagues are around him. After a couple of minutes normality returns and as Foggia are about to re-start, Chinaglia jogs to the touchline to embrace his coach.

The last quarter of an hour seems an eternity Lazio are reduced to ten men. The tension has taken its toll on Garlaschelli and he is sent off for a retaliatory foul on full-back Rodolfo Cimenti. Foggia attack Pulici's goal as Lazio cling to their lead. Making up for the numerical disadvantage, Chinaglia chases every ball across the pitch. Lazio fans, many of them wearing T-shirts with Chinaglia's face printed on them, make their way to the gates at the edge of the pitch, preparing for the invasion.

According to the scoreboard Juventus are winning 3–1, Anastasi scoring all three goals. But the result is irrelevant.

Lazio’s defence, the best in *Serie A*, holds firm. Panzino blows the final whistle and thousands of supporters flood onto the pitch. In the Curva Nord blue balloons are released into the humid Roman air and a huge banner which reads *Grazie Maestrelli* – Thank you, Maestrelli – unfolds. In the middle of the pitch a fan plants a placard containing the names of all the Lazio players into the ground. Lazio’s captain Giuseppe Wilson, his shirt ripped off his back, is carried aloft by the *tifosi*.

Chinaglia, exhausted, puts his arm around Maestrelli. That penalty not only won his team the championship but ensured he finished the season as top scorer – *capocannoniere* – with 24 goals. That day in May 1996 when he was given away by Swansea Town of the Third Division seems a distant memory.

CHAPTER ONE

CARRARA IS A charming town in Tuscany, north-west Italy. In the province of Massa, it is 55 miles from Florence, the region's major city, and lies at the foot of the Apuan Alps amidst olive groves and vineyards. The town grew around the world's most important marble quarries. At the peak of production, in the nineteenth century, Carrara boasted some 400 quarries all providing marble of different quality and colours. Michelangelo was a regular visitor to the town, supervising work at the mines.

It was here, in the marble capital of Italy, that Giorgio Chinaglia was born, on 24 January 1947. Chinaglia's mother, Giovanna, like most Italian women just after the Second World War, gave birth not in a hospital but in the family's home, helped by a midwife who was paid two thousand lire – the equivalent of just under one pound. He was the elder of two children. Rita, his sister, was born three years later. Chinaglia's mother was from Carrara but his father, Mario, was from Portogruaro, a small town near Venice. A trainee cook in the Army, he had moved to Carrara during the war.

The Italian economy was devastated by the war. Unemployment was rife and the once-prosperous Carrara, which saw much of its 80,000 population employed in the marble industry, was badly affected. Chinaglia's father was among the jobless and his family lived mainly on bread and *zabaglione,* a frugal mix of egg, sugar and coffee, which became the staple diet in most households after the war.

Desperate for work, Mario Chinaglia, along with hundreds of his fellow countrymen, emigrated to the UK in 1955, to take up a post in the iron and steel industry. A severe labour

shortage had affected the heavy industries and the British factories turned to Italy for labour. Job placements were advertised in Italian towns and cities, at the local *ufficio di collocamento* – employment agency.

At the office in Carrara, Chinaglia's father saw an advert by Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds in Cardiff, South Wales. The steelworks had opened a second furnace and needed men to cool the ovens. The pay was six pounds and five shillings a week plus one pound for bed and breakfast. Mario signed up with Carrara-born Andrea Delnero. The pair left Italy in October 1955. 'I remember when we arrived at the railway station in Cardiff it was a miserable day,' recalls Delnero, who shared a terraced house with the late Mario Chinaglia in the Welsh city. 'We had nothing except the watches on our wrists and the gold chains round our necks. It had been a turbulent trip. On the boat from Calais to Dover we were all being sick. We thought we were going to die in the English Channel.'

Mario Chinaglia had left behind his young family who were being looked after by his wife's mother. He promised, once he had earned enough money, to bring them over to Cardiff. It took him a year before he was able to return to Italy to collect them. The family's journey from Carrara to Cardiff took two days. A train to Genoa, then another train to Milan and on to Calais. From there, the ferry to Folkestone, then another train to London, and from London a fifth train journey to the Welsh city.

Giorgio, nine, and Rita, six, arrived at their new home in the early hours of the morning. With no buses or taxis operating at that time, they were driven from Cardiff Central Station to their new address in the back of a Post Office van. Mario had rented a solitary room in a house in Richmond Road, a terrace of large Victorian properties close to the city centre. 'It wasn't a good impact,' Chinaglia recalls, when asked about moving from Carrara to Cardiff. 'It was always

snowing and raining.' The worst feeling in the world, he said, was water seeping through the insole of his shoe.

The Chinaglias stayed in Richmond Road – they had crammed in a double bed for the parents and a put-up bed for each child – until 1960 when they could afford larger accommodation. They moved to a two-bedroom apartment in Talbot Street, again near the centre, but across the other side of the city. Having left the hot, gruelling conditions of Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds, Mario Chinaglia was working as a chef at The Gourmet, a city-centre restaurant. Not long after moving into Talbot Street the Chinaglias invited Andrea Delnero to live with them. Delnero recalls, 'I used to see Giovanna on my way to work. She would say "Why you no come and live here?" I said I was happy where I was. Then one day Mario asked me. "There's plenty of room," he said. So I moved in. They had two rooms but the main bedroom was very big. Rita moved in there with her parents and I stayed in the other room with Giorgio.'

And so began his friendship with *Giorgione* – little George. With the boy's parents working long and unsociable hours – Giovanna was a kitchen assistant at a popular steak bar called The Continental – Delnero became a surrogate uncle to the future Lazio star. 'If I was free in the afternoon we would go to Sophia Gardens and play football.' says Delnero. A popular recreation area in Cardiff, Sophia Gardens was a series of playing fields a few minutes' walk from Talbot Street. 'I used to take Giorgio and Rita. One day there were these Hungarians there. They had come over because of the Uprising. We played football with them and pretended it was Italy versus Hungary They were very kind. Because Rita was in goal they didn't shoot hard. They tried to walk the ball in.'

It was Delnero who taught Chinaglia how to kick a ball, against the wall of their Talbot Street home. He would also watch him playing for his school, shouting advice from the touch-line. 'When Giorgio came home from school,' adds

Delnero, ‘he used to go into the kitchen. It was a nice big kitchen. You know what he would do? He would put the table aside and play football with his sister. I played with him as well because he always won against his sister.’

Delnero, still employed at the steelworks at the time, often played cards in Café 41 in Tiger Bay, a bustling, multi-racial (but now demolished) area in Cardiff’s docklands. His card games were sometimes interrupted by Chinaglia who wanted him among the spectators for a football match. ‘I remember one time he was playing for a team from the Ely estate called Ely Bridge. They used to ask him to play because he was good. His father would never be there because he was working so he wanted me to come because I would shout *tiro!* – shoot! – when he was near the penalty area,’ recalls Delnero.

‘I used to tell him, “There’s only a little boy in goal, so shoot.” He would score two or three goals at a time because he would take shots. Another time he came to the café and said to me, “I have to play in Newport for the school in the cup.” I was playing cards but I had to leave everything there to go and watch him. His team won 2–0 and Giorgio scored both goals.’

Chinaglia’s first school was St Peter’s Primary, the nearest Catholic junior school to Richmond Road. At first, he could not speak or understand a word of English but by the time he left the school, when he was 12, he could converse with his schoolmates, albeit with a heavy Italian accent. ‘In a month,’ he later recalled, ‘I learned the language, which was pretty good.’

Chinaglia quickly became anglicised and on one occasion, when he was 14 years old, his newly acquired identity enraged his father, a patriotic Italian. The date was 24 May 1961. England had just beaten Italy 3–2 in a friendly in Rome. Gerry Hitchens scored twice and Jimmy Greaves hit the winner four minutes from time. Chinaglia admitted to his father that he had been cheering for England. ‘*Traditore*!’ –

you traitor! – screamed his father. '*Sei Italiano, non Inglese*!' – You are Italian, not English! – and chased after his son to give him a hiding. The teenager fled to the lavatory and locked himself inside. His father banged on the door shouting '*Sei Italiano o Inglese*?' – Are you Italian or English? – while his mother cried, '*No, no, non picchiarlo*!' – No, no, don't hit him! After four hours, when his father had calmed down, the teenager finally unlocked the lavatory door.

At St Peter's he was introduced to Wales's national game, rugby. 'I played rugby because there was no football. I didn't play football until secondary school,' says Chinaglia. 'Rugby was OK. It helped me a lot in my career. I used to go home aching on a Saturday' The sport was alien to him since rugby was unheard of in Italy, but he was in Wales now and the young Italian – tall and well-built for his age – was seen as an ideal second-row forward by his rugby-obsessed sports teachers.

'I remember playing against Giorgio in the Cardiff Under-11s League,' recalls Kevin Lyons, a former pupil of Herbert Thompson Primary School. 'He wore a scrum cap, I'll never forget that. He was the only boy wearing one. We all wondered where he got it from because only a couple of players wore them at senior level. He obviously felt he needed it for protection.

'He was tall, big and had this cap on. You couldn't really miss him,' adds Lyons. 'He didn't seem to fancy rugby too much. When they threw the ball to him in the lineout he got rid of it straight away. I don't think he liked the physical side of it, the buffeting, the rough and tumble. But he always tried his best, even though he didn't enjoy it.'

After St Peter's, Chinaglia went to Lady Mary, a Catholic secondary school in Cyncoed, an affluent suburb in the north of the city. At that time Lady Mary, made up of two separate buildings, was split in half – the boys' school and the girls'. Both schools had their own headteachers. Jack Sharkey was in charge of the male half and Sister Mary

Christopher the female half. They also had their own playgrounds and interaction between male and female pupils was strictly forbidden, punishable by the cane.

‘Giorgio arrived just before me. I joined Lady Mary in year two and he was in year three,’ says Salvatore Amodeo, another Italian immigrant in Cardiff. Like Chinaglia, Amodeo was a Tuscan, from Grosseto. And like Chinaglia, his family emigrated to Britain to find work. Two of his brothers were in the steelworks while his father was employed at a textiles factory. ‘Even though I was younger than him there was an affinity between us because we were both Italian,’ says Amodeo. ‘When I first started school there were a few lads picking on me. Giorgio came along with two of his friends and sorted them out, nothing nasty. It was like being initiated into the school Mafia! Everyone left me alone after that. Giorgio was looking after me because I was Italian. It was his two friends who really did it. They were seen as “hard” boys.’

Pupils at Lady Mary were streamed into four classes – A, B, C and R – depending on ability. The A class contained the brightest boys, those tipped as potential 0-level candidates. Chinaglia was put into the B class. ‘He was not a star pupil in the academic sense,’ recalls Amodeo. ‘He wasn’t thick. I just don’t think he was interested in the academic side of school. He didn’t like school work. His only love was football.’

Lady Mary attracted Catholic children from across the city. It was a strict school. Male pupils were caned *en masse* if nobody owned up to any wrongdoing. Boys were also slapped across the side of the head if they were guilty of any insolent behaviour. ‘Giorgio wasn’t naughty, he was just mischievous,’ says Amodeo. ‘He tended to mix with who I would call the semi-troublemakers. They used to smoke in the toilets, shout at girls, do a bit of mitching now and again, things like that.’

Not only were male pupils barred from any contact with the girls during school hours, they were also prohibited from talking to them in the school drive, as they entered and left the buildings. One of the nuns used to hide behind the bike shed, which was situated on a blind bend along the drive, to catch any pupil disobeying this rule. Another former pupil of Lady Mary, Tommy Broad, who became good friends with Chinaglia, says, ‘Giorgio was in our group. There were eight or ten of us and we all sat at the back, right the way through school. We were OK at our studies but we never knuckled down. There was the studious half of the class and the rebellious half, and we were part of the rebellious half. Giorgio was bright, he had it all upstairs. You couldn’t fiddle him for a penny, but I think his attitude was “I’m going to play football so I don’t have to pass my exams”.’

Chinaglia admits he did not enjoy his days at Lady Mary. ‘Treatment at school wasn’t so good. I came from an ethnic background and it was very difficult. There were two sections, one was the ethnics, the other was the Welsh, and there used to be fights. That was normal. The teachers were useless. They went through the job they had to do, those six hours, and that was it. To be honest, I can’t remember the name of one teacher. That tells you the whole story.’

As with many youngsters who aspire to become footballers, Chinaglia showed little interest in studying. As Broad recalls, ‘He would give any excuse to get out of lessons. For instance, one of the teachers bought this old Vanguard car and he was looking for boys to rub it down to the bare metal. It was a project for this teacher and it was going to take three months. Giorgio was one of the volunteers. While he was rubbing it down one of the staff caught him smoking. Giorgio was lying on the back seat rubbing down the back door so he didn’t see him coming.’

Chinaglia watched enviously as his friends in metalwork escaped doing any academic work. ‘In the metalwork room there was this storage area used to keep tools,’ adds Broad.

‘We used to say we were going inside to get something and not come back out. Giorgio was in woodwork and they didn’t have a place where they could hide. Giorgio used to come over to the metalwork area so he could go into this room as well but he used to get caught. “You’re not in here, Chinaglia, get out!” the teacher used to shout at him.’

The Italian schoolboy proved a useful member of the class when it came to English. The teacher was Tom Keeley, who had been an RAF pilot during the Second World War. When asked about his favourite subject, namely aviation, Keeley would spend the entire lesson talking about it. ‘We’d say to Giorgio, “Ask him a question about the war” because if he did we wouldn’t have to do any work,’ says Joe Smart, one of Chinaglia’s closest friends during his Lady Mary days. ‘Keeley would start going, “When I was flying over France . . .” If we asked him a question he would think we were up to something so we got Giorgio to ask. Keeley had a soft spot for Giorgio because he couldn’t speak English very well.’ Broad also recalls those English lessons. ‘Giorgio would ask him something like “What’s the difference between an aerodrome and an airfield?” That was it, lesson over. We could spend the next half hour looking out of the window.’

Some teachers had a nickname for most pupils. Chinaglia was known as ‘the wop’, an epithet that would be unacceptable today. ‘Giorgio was one of the daredevils, always sat at the back throwing bits of paper about,’ says Selwyn Parsons, another of Chinaglia’s former classmates. ‘He was always winding this one boy up. This lad was a bit deaf and he always sat in front of Giorgio in class. One day Giorgio threw some paper at one of the teachers when he had his back turned. The teacher thought it was this boy in front of Giorgio. This lad never used to do anything wrong but he was told to leave the class. “I’m not going,” he told the teacher. The two of them ended up fighting on the floor and we all doubled-up laughing.’

Salvatore Amodeo also found himself in trouble while following Chinaglia on one of his escapades. ‘Giorgio and some of his friends had found this underground tunnel which connected the boys’ school with the girls’ school but we got caught. We were called in to see Mr Sharkey and I remember him telling me, “Amodeo, I never thought you’d be involved with these boys!”’

Chinaglia was regularly late for school, arriving 10 or 15 minutes after the morning bell. ‘We caught the bus to school,’ says Tommy Broad. ‘Giorgio got on a couple of stops after me. We had to be in at 9.15 a.m. and if we caught the 8.55 a.m. bus we got in right on time. But if we got the 9.05 a.m. bus we were obviously going to be late. If you were late, you needed an excuse. What we used to do was send this one boy in ahead of us – his name was Richard Thompson – and while he was giving the teacher his excuse, me and Giorgio would try and sneak in. It wasn’t easy because Giorgio was so big.’

According to Broad, they usually arrived late four days out of five. ‘Giorgio used to blame the bus and say it was late. If the teacher said other boys caught the same bus but managed to get in on time, Giorgio would say he caught the wrong bus, had to get off and then wait for the right one. When we were late I used to ask him what excuse he was going to give and he’d say, “What did I give yesterday?”

Poor punctuality was not Chinaglia’s only shortcoming. He also used to fall asleep during lessons. While he was at Lady Mary his father switched restaurants, moving from The Gourmet to the Cellar Bar, another city-centre establishment. At nights Chinaglia could be found working there with his father, to earn some extra pocket money. ‘He always had plenty of money. Never short of a few bob was Giorgio,’ says Selwyn Parsons. ‘He always had a fiver in his pocket and five pounds in those days was a lot of money.’ In the restaurant Chinaglia washed dishes, made coffees and occasionally waited on tables. But the late finishes –

sometimes he did not get to bed until 2 a.m. – inevitably took their toll on the youngster.

‘He would come into school half asleep,’ recalls Broad. ‘I remember him in the science class. There were these big wooden benches screwed to the floor and Giorgio would put his feet up on them, lean back on his stool and say, “Tell me when someone’s coming.” Then he’d fall asleep. The teacher used to wake him by kicking his stool. Giorgio used to bring girlie magazines into school and we’d look at them at the back of the class,’ adds Broad. ‘One time, in the science lesson, the teacher was coming towards us so he stuffed them inside this cupboard. I said to him, “You’d better get them at break otherwise someone is going to have a nasty surprise if they open a cupboard to get a Bunsen burner.” He went back at break and told the teacher he’d lost his comb and could he look for it. He got the mags, shoved them up his jumper and left.’

During his five years at Lady Mary, Chinaglia was part of an inseparable trio which included Joe Smart and Lawrence Howes. ‘Giorgio used to get us into a lot of trouble,’ remembers Smart. ‘He’d clown around in class and because he didn’t speak that much English, me and Lawrence got the blame. We had a few canings because of Giorgio.’ Smart recalls one incident during a science lesson. ‘He threw something at the teacher, I can’t remember what it was. The teacher was writing on the blackboard when he did it and he turned round and threw the chalk at us. “You three out here!” He caned me and Lawrence even though we hadn’t done anything. “It’s always one of you three and if I cane all of you I’ll get the right one,” said the teacher.’

According to Smart, if Chinaglia was caught up in any trouble he would simply say, ‘I don’t understand’ with a strong Italian accent. ‘He liked to go for the sympathy vote and he turned the accent on when he wanted to, especially when there was something wrong!’ says Smart. ‘He didn’t get up to anything malicious, just tomfoolery He was