

## Alfredo Di Stéfano, football player

By John Kennedy



Alfredo Di Stéfano (b.1926), 'a god of the stadium, a magician of the ball, a perfect football master' (Michel Platini, 2008)  
(*Archivo El Gráfico*)

**Di Stéfano, Alfredo** (1926-), considered to be one of the greatest centre-forwards in the history of football, was born in the Barracas neighbourhood of the city of Buenos Aires on 4 July 1926. He is descended from Italian, French and Irish immigrants, with the Irish connection being through his maternal grandmother. In a recent interview he said of his Irish links that “the Irish blood means there is something of Great Britain in me, for that I am very grateful, as England has done much for football and continues to do so” (Galliard 2008). [1]

At the age of seven he joined his first team, ‘Unidos y Venceremos’, and when the family moved to the Flores neighbourhood, he joined another junior team, Imán. In 1940 the Di Stéfano family moved to a farm in Los Cardales, in the Northwest of the province of Buenos Aires, where his father started an agricultural business as a potato grower and distributor and honey producer (Segovia 2003). The young Di Stéfano continued to play football, joining the Unión Progresista club and competing in the Campanense regional football

league, which was a league for the district of Campana.

Following a recommendation from his mother to a River Plate scout (Torres 2008), he was signed by River Plate in 1944, initially making the ranks of the lower teams. Incidentally, his father had played for the club between 1910 and 1912. The following year he was promoted to the first team, making his debut against Huracán. However, he was kept mainly on the bench, as Adolfo Pedernera was the preferred centre-forward. In 1946 he was loaned to Huracán, at the insistence of his father, so that he would have the chance to properly display his talent.

Di Stéfano returned to River Plate in 1947 where he won the League title, as part of a team whose forwards had become known as *la Máquina* (the machine). He won the top-scorer trophy, with twenty-seven goals. He soon acquired the moniker *la Saeta Rubia* (the blond arrow) because of his speed and precision, which was first coined by the journalist Roberto Neuberger. He primarily played as a forward, but was known for his versatility, also playing in defence and even in goals in a *Superclásico* against Boca Juniors. That same year, Di Stéfano made his debut with Argentina, and helped them to win the Guayaquil Championship in Ecuador, scoring six goals.

A players strike in Argentina in 1948 led Di Stéfano to move to Colombia to play for Los Millonarios of Bogotá, which was the most successful and richest team in the country. He played over 294 games, netting 267 goals. Following his debut in a tournament in Madrid’s Chamartín Stadium in 1952 to celebrate Real Madrid's fiftieth anniversary, he was approached for his services initially by FC Barcelona and later by Real Madrid. After a protracted dispute between the two clubs, he was eventually signed by Real Madrid, a club he would go on to be synonymous with. This was

a turning point in the history of the two teams (Burns 1998:155).

Di Stéfano's debut was against the French team Nancy on 23 September 1953. He went on to play 510 matches for Real Madrid, scoring 418 times. The honours included eight Spanish league titles, five consecutive European Cups between 1956 and 1960 and an Intercontinental Cup. Di Stéfano scored in all five European Cup finals, the most memorable being his three-goal hat-trick against Eintracht Frankfurt in May 1960, which Real won 7-3. This has gone down in the annals of sporting history as one of the best European finals of all time. He was also five times winner of the Pichichi Trophy, which is awarded to the top goal scorer each season in the Spanish League. Other honours included the *Ballon d'Or* in 1957 and 1959, awarded by the magazine *France Football* and considered the most prestigious individual award in football.

At an international level, Di Stéfano played four times for Argentina, six times for Colombia and, following his acquisition of Spanish nationality in 1956, he played thirty-one times for the Spanish team, though he never got the opportunity to play in the World Cup. He captained the 'Rest of the World' squad against England to commemorate the Centenary of the Football Association in 1963.

Di Stéfano retired from international football in 1964 and in the same year played his last match for Real Madrid against Inter Milan in the European Cup final. The following season he signed for Espanyol of Barcelona and after one season retired. Di Stéfano said his final farewell to football in a testimonial match

between Real Madrid and Glasgow Celtic in 1967.

After his retirement, Di Stéfano embarked on a career as a coach. His first foray into management was with Elech in the Alicante region in the 1967/68 season, which he left midway through the season to return to Argentina and coach Boca Juniors. Under his management, Boca won the National Championship in 1969, only losing one game. The following year he returned to Spain to take over the management of Valencia. He spent stints at Sporting Lisbon and Rayo Vallecano el Castellón, before returning to Valencia for the 1979-80 season, leading the team to victory in the European Cup Winners' Cup (now the UEFA Cup) against Arsenal of London.

In 1981, Di Stéfano returned to Argentina to manage River Plate and guided them to a National Championship. The following season, 1982-83, he was appointed coach of Real Madrid, where he remained for two years, however they were only runners-up in *la Liga* in both years. Another stint at Boca Juniors, albeit brief, followed, before returning to Valencia for the 1986-87 season, with the team being promoted to the premier division. Di Stéfano came back to coach Real Madrid in 1990/91 before retiring. In 2001 he was named Honourary President of Real Madrid. Other honours include the Golden Players award from UEFA in 2004, UEFA President's Medal awarded in February 2008 and inductee into the International Football Hall of Fame in 1997.

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## **Notes**

[1] Many of the earliest Irish immigrants in Argentina were perceived to be part of the British community, and this may be the reason for the comment.

## **References**

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