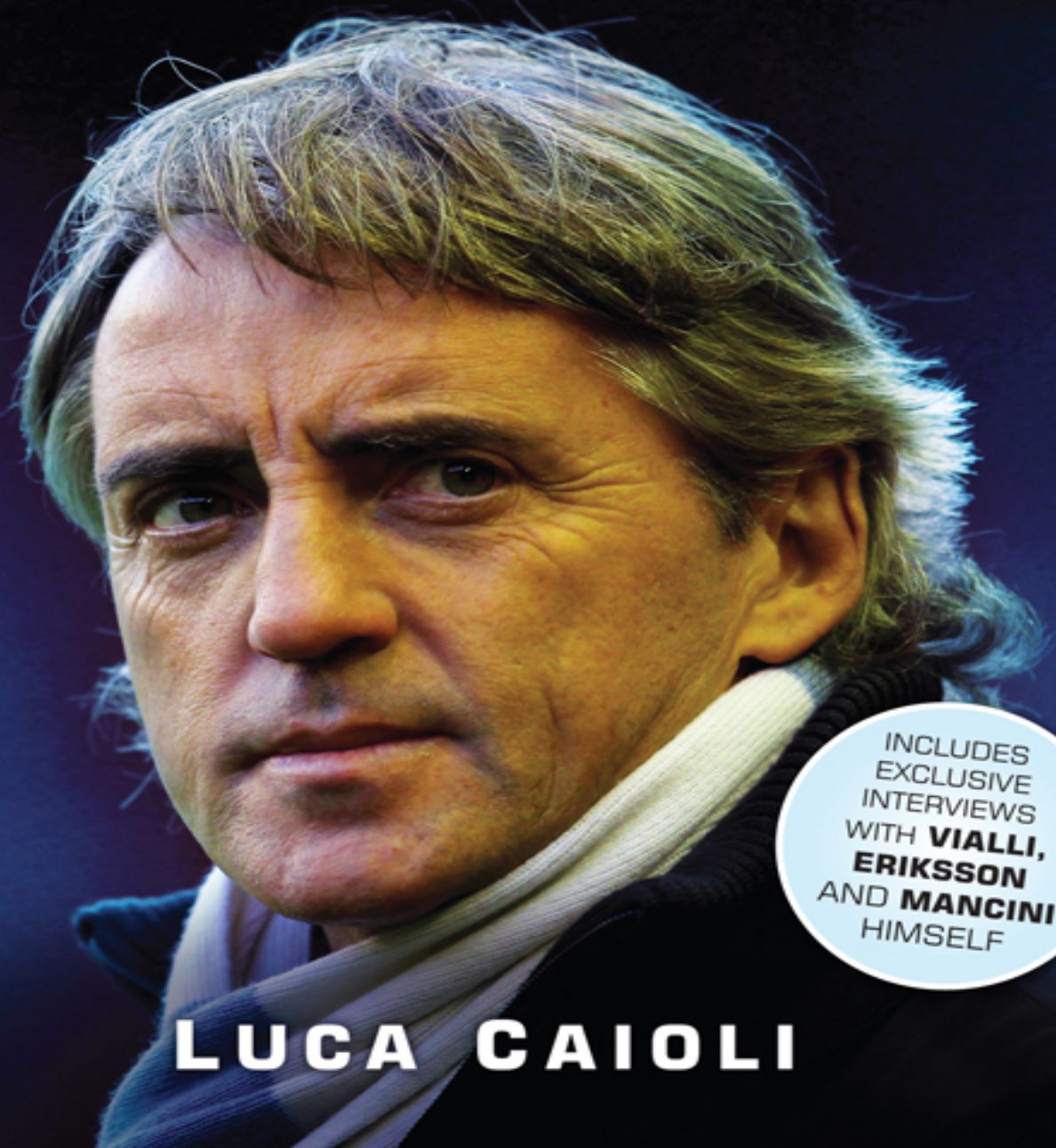


FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING
TORRES, MESSI AND RONALDO

ROBERTO MANCINI

**A FOOTBALLING LIFE:
THE FULL STORY**



INCLUDES
EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEWS
WITH **VIALI**,
ERIKSSON
AND **MANCINI**
HIMSELF

LUCA CAIOLI

ROBERTO MANCINI

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‘In the Blue, Painted Blue’

Lesson five: Introduce yourself to your classmates.

‘Hi. My name’s Roberto. I’m 17. I live in Bologna, but I was born in Jesi. I’ve got one younger sister. I like football. I play for Bologna FC first team. I hope to play very well and score many goals. Besides football, I like watching basketball games. I love listening to music. My favourite singer is Renato Zero. I enjoy going to the movies with my teammates. My favourite actor is Sean Connery. I have seen all the James Bond films. My favourite dish is lasagne, cooked by my mother. My favourite drink is Coca-Cola. Thank you. Glad to meet you.’

Who knows, maybe this is how it all began – that is, Roberto Mancini’s long flirtation with England: with an English course. *Il Bimbo* – ‘The Boy’ – as he is known in Casteldebole, Bologna’s training headquarters, has given up school and is studying English at his club’s request. If he passes his final exam, Bologna will pay for the course. This involves books, audio cassettes and taught classes. In his bedroom, Mancini listens and repeats sentences, idioms and phrasal verbs, a real pain for a 17-year-old boy whose only interest is football.

However, this will be his life one day. Two big names will describe to him what such a life might be like: Graeme Souness and Trevor Francis, both of whom will be teammates of Mancini in his early years at Sampdoria. The former won three European Cups with Liverpool; the latter two, with Nottingham Forest. Two legends of the ‘beautiful game’. With Trevor, Roberto will make feathers fly, and it

will end in classic Old West style; still, his experience with such a high-profile player will prove invaluable.

Then later will come David Platt, who will be a close friend of Mancini and eventually his trusted first-team coach at Manchester City. Roberto having managed to persuade the Sampdoria president to sign Platt, the England midfielder will try to reciprocate the favour at a later date, arranging his transfer to Arsenal, where the pair will be reunited.

It is the beginning of November, 1995. Mancini, after a bad spell with referees and a harsh disqualification, is having dark thoughts. He believes that Sampdoria, his club for the past 13 years, have lost their ability to challenge for the Italian championship. The Gunners seem ready to do anything to bring him to Highbury. It is very tempting for Roberto, who had already entertained thoughts of a move earlier in the year. This time, Mancio is ready to go. Living in London is a very appealing thought. He reckons he can find new challenges and gain new experience: of a different football culture, with less stress; of the faster-paced British game. He believes his family could be more serene, his sons could learn English properly, and so could he. However, in the end he can't pluck up the courage to cut the strings attaching him to Sampdoria. His fascination for England lasts, though, and comes back in waves.

December 1996: Sven-Göran Eriksson, his manager at Samp, signs a preliminary contract with Blackburn Rovers and wants to take his playmaker with him. Again, nothing comes of it. Mancini hears good things about the UK from Gianluca Vialli, too, his former strike partner who moved to Chelsea in 1998. Mancini and Vialli have always shared their experiences in life, and they still do over the phone.

But it will take some time yet for Mancini to follow his 'goal twin' (as the Samp fans would have it) to British shores.

In 2001, thanks to Eriksson's contacts (the Swede is now manager of the England national team), Mancini ends up at Leicester City. He is 36 when he makes his debut in the Premier League, against Arsenal, on 20 January. He starts with a bang, but then fizzles out: he hasn't played a proper match for eight months, since his final game for Lazio the previous May.

He enjoys his spell with the Foxes, but it doesn't last. Coaching, which Mancini is very keen to try, lures him to Florence. His style is already very British. In fact, Serse Cosmi, the Perugia manager – the first opponent Roberto faces – claims that 'some people wanted to picture this as a challenge between the butcher's son – i.e. me – and some newcomer from Buckingham Palace.' The fact is, Mancini has already defined his style. He is choosing the right clothes, custom-made by his Neapolitan tailor, or from the Giorgio Armani collection. His favourite colour is blue. On his wrist, classy watches. Tied around his neck, in a loose knot, those cashmere scarves that will become his trademark. His shoes are strictly made in England. He likes Ferraris and Bentleys – fast as James Bond.

Years go by, and Mancini masterfully perfects his image, while confirming his talent for winning. He looks over to England again. Rumours grow: there are mentions of Tottenham while he is still coaching Lazio, and later, after he departs Inter Milan, they speak of Portsmouth, Notts County, Chelsea, Liverpool, Sunderland.

The option is always there, at the door, because the footballing culture of England – the tradition, the stadiums, the supporters – is intriguing indeed for a manager. Then

comes the right chance: Manchester City. 'I'd rather work to help bring success to those who haven't won anything for a while,' Mancini will say in an interview. That, after all, is what happened with Sampdoria, Lazio, Fiorentina and Inter Milan. And history repeats itself with City. On 14 May 2012, in Manchester's Albert Square, fans are singing out loud, to the tune of '*Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu*' ('In the Blue, Painted Blue'), the famous song (also known as '*Volare*' - 'Flying') by Domenico Modugno:

Mancini oh oh
Mancini oh oh oh oh
He comes from Italy
To manage Man City
Mancini oh oh oh
Mancini came to win over here.

Mancini confesses, 'I love it when they sing that.' The story that has brought him to City has been an eventful one, taking in league-winning euphoria in Italy, cup final heartbreak in Europe, frustration on the international stage, and any number of twists, turns, bust-ups and lasting friendships.

It is a story that begins way back in a little town in the Marche region of Italy.

You can praise God with a football, too

It is five o'clock in the Piazza Federico II. The sun casts its light upon the golden stones of what used to be the old Roman Forum. This is where Frederick II of Hohenstaufen was born, on Boxing Day 1194. His mother, Constance of Hauteville, was travelling to meet her husband Henry VI, Holy Roman Emperor, and gave birth in a tent. The child would later be crowned King of Sicily, King of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor. He was the warrior, philosopher, legislator and architect who restored the Empire and attempted to solve all problems in southern Italy. His royal court in Palermo was a melting pot of three different cultures: Greek, Jewish and Arab. Today, he is remembered with a plaque and a circular inscription.

Two young boys are playing football behind the ornate, lion-adorned fountain, while the tall obelisk towers over them. It is not a market day, and there are only a few people walking about in the historic city centre, which is closed to cars. Suddenly, the ball crashes straight into the main door of the former Church of San Florián, where the Theatre Studio is now located. Paolo is seven years old; Marco is eight, and seems better at controlling the ball. When asked if he knows who Roberto Mancini is, he answers right away, without hesitating: 'Sure. The one who is in England.' But does he know where he is from? 'He's from here, from Jesi,' the boy answers proudly.

Jesi has been identified by Unesco as a World Heritage Site 'for its ability to preserve its artistic, architectural and

cultural history.' According to tourist guides, it was founded by Esio, the King of Pelasgians, who brought the rampant lion as a gift to the city coat of arms. He was a mythological king, often thought to be the progenitor of Etruscans, Sabines and Picenes.

This small city in the Marche region, Ancona province, is home to about 42,000 people. The population has dramatically increased in recent years, due to immigration, particularly from Arab countries. It is going well for them because of Fileni, a company ranked third in Italy for poultry farming; Pieralisi, which produces cheese machines and oil presses; the oil refinery in Falconara Marittima, and a thriving range of small businesses. There are jobs here. The unemployment rate is lower than in other Italian provinces and that is record to be proud of, these days.

Inside and outside the Roman and Medieval walls of Jesi, the standard of living is good. You can get a real grasp of the city's wealth - not only in an economic sense, but also in terms of its culture - by walking leisurely along Corso Matteotti (the 'struscio') during the weekends, when everyone knows one another, everyone is out and about and says hello. Going out to one of the bars looking over Piazza della Repubblica for an aperitif gives a similar sense.

The Giovanni Battista Pergolesi theatre, a gem set deep in red velvet and gilded stuccos, opened in 1798 and has never missed a season in over 200 years of history - not even during the wars or when undergoing renovations. It is always fully booked, just like the Valeria Moriconi theatre studio.

The city art gallery and the Panettiana library are just two of the must-sees for sightseeing tours. Large canvases by Lorenzo Lotto, one of the most famous painters of the

Italian Renaissance, are among the range of antique and contemporary works of art that can be found here.

As the department of tourism proclaims on its webpage, Jesi 'believes in sport as its core value.' The city boasts one of the highest percentages of subscriptions to sports clubs, just as if everyone participated – while, in reality, many are non-playing members. This is a necessary consequence of the fact that the Aurora basketball team plays in A2, the volleyball team in B1, the Jesina football team in Serie D. And let us not forget fencing: there is a long tradition of fencing excellence in Jesi and an academy which has been training champions for the past thirty years.

This heritage is in evidence walking along the main street. In the conference centre, an exhibition is taking place: 'The Fencing Chromosome', photographs taken by Massimo Verdino at the World Championship in Paris's Gran Palais. Beautiful black and white images on spotless white walls hang opposite paintings of medieval duels and of Roman gladiator fights. Stefano Cerioni, who coaches Italy's national fencing team, and foil fencers Elisa di Francisca and Valentina Vezzali are noticeable among the crowd. They have just arrived from Budapest, where they made it to the top of the podium in the team competition during the World Fencing Championship.

Vezzali, 38, was born in Jesi. She won six consecutive Olympic gold medals in Sydney, Athens, Beijing, and London. 'Talking about fencing in Jesi is like talking about Verdicchio dei Castelli [the typical white wine of this region],' she says. 'Its roots go deep. It all started in 1947, when Ezio Triccoli, returning from the Zonderwater prisoner of war camp, South Africa, settled in a basement in the city centre and began teaching the art of fencing,

which he had come to master during his internment. The Jesi Fencing Club was born out of his passion, and today it boasts great athletes, starting with Anna Rita Sparaciari, the winner of the first gold medal in the 1982/83 World Championship.'

We move on to a different football, and another star from Jesi: Roberto Mancini. 'I know him well,' adds Vezzali, 'and we were particularly close when he was coaching Inter Milan, because that's my team. Thanks to his skills, he managed to take the team where we supporters had for years been hoping to get to. My husband Domenico, a footballer who used to play in Serie C, reckons that midfielders, especially playmakers like Roberto, have a vision for football which only a few people possess. Mancini certainly knows his stuff. The fact that he excels at whatever he ends up doing proves it. Winning is in his DNA.'

It seems that in Jesi everyone knows and values Roberto Mancini, because 'everything he has achieved so far has been by virtue of his merits. No one ever gave him anything for free. He got where he is because of his class, and because he made many sacrifices, too.' These are the words of Elvio Cittadini, Roberto's hairdresser. 'He's a really decent person, he's funny, ironic ... he always takes the mickey out of me. He's been coming here for a haircut since he was five or six. He comes in, sits down, reads some magazines ... we'd have a coffee, talk about football and the latest news. Customers come in and say, "Hello Roberto, how are you?" They'll have a few words, then leave. He's at ease here because he is in his own environment; it's where he's from, where his parents and his sister live. As soon as he can, he's back.'

He is back where he belongs, the city where he was born on 27 November 1964, under Sagittarius, with Aquarius rising. His father Aldo was a carpenter and his mother Marianna had just turned 18. They met in Roccadaspide, a little village in the Salerno province, in the Campania region. Aldo had befriended some people from Salerno while working in Germany (it was hard to get by in Jesi after the Second World War), and was visiting them when he met and fell in love with a local girl. So in love was he, in fact, that he decided to move back to Italy, and asked that beautiful southern girl to come with him to Jesi and marry him.

The wedding took place in 1963 and Roberto – their first son – was born a year later, but not without a great scare. He was delivered by caesarian section, and weighed 5 kilos and 100 grams (11lbs 4oz) – but he was not breathing, and was black all over. The doctor, tactless and overbearing, swiftly announced to the proud father that the baby was born but alas, he was dead. Luckily, he was not the only doctor on duty that day: a wiser doctor took the newborn child, immersed him in ice-cold water, slapped him two, three, four times and finally the champion-to-be started screaming.

It was Don Roberto Vico who baptised Roberto in the church of Saint Sebastian, in the Prato district, outside of the Medieval city walls. Today the 87-year-old clergyman resides in the Collegio Pergolesi, a nursing home where two football fields can be seen from the entrance – a little neglected, it must be said. Many years have passed, but the old priest still remembers the ceremony very well. The father and godfather came and asked when the little one could be baptised, and the whole family gathered around

the rosy baby, who, at eight months of age, already weighed 13kg (28lbs).

Don Roberto also remembers with happiness Mancini's first holy communion: 'After the ceremony was over, once the service was finished and the office had been recited, off came the frock with two red stripes, in memory of the old Roman senators' laticlavus. While everyone was eating, drinking and partying, and parents and godparents alike were busy celebrating the occasion, I noticed that the boy was getting restless. He came up to me with a friend of his. The friend, who played football with him, did not hesitate to speak up: "Don Roberto, we're 2-0 down, you couldn't by any chance let Roberto come and play?" So I asked the boy if he was up to something. He said he would check with his daddy and come back. Well, apparently he couldn't get hold of his father, so I gave him permission to go and join his teammates, knowing how much he cared for the team. He already had everything he needed, hidden away in his locker: shirt, shorts and football boots, so that he would be ready to take the field at the right time.

'So after a while, parents and relatives young and old were standing in the square, chatting away and having their picture taken with the communion robes. His father came up to me, looking extremely worried. "I think I lost Roberto," he said, "he's nowhere to be found." "Don't worry," I answered, "he's not lost. Just think of where he could be." He said he didn't really know where he could have ended up. So I told him to look over to the football pitch ... Roberto was wearing the number 9 shirt that day and his team won 6-2, thanks to him - I believe he scored two goals on that occasion. It really caused a stir that a boy would be allowed to kick a ball around on his holy

communion. It just was not done; before receiving the sacrament there were catechism lessons to be attended, preparing for the sacrament of Eucharist, the spiritual retreat to be taken into account. But in the end,' the priest allows, 'that [playing football] was a way to praise the Lord, too.'

Roberto was nine at the time and he celebrated the day with his sister Stefania, a year and a half younger, all dressed up in white, her hair covered by a monastic bonnet.

At this time, Roberto was attending the Mazzini local elementary school, just a few steps away from his house. He was in class B: a nice, mixed-sex class with 27 pupils. Since the first day of class, his teacher is Annamaria Bevilacqua. She remembers him well:

'Roberto was quite lively, possibly among the liveliest boys in the school – and a bit of a rebel, too. At the beginning, I had some problems with him ... Sometimes I was even forced to call his mother in. After a while though, I worked out that he simply didn't like being unjustly told off: because he was so naughty, he would sometimes get the blame, even if he had nothing to do with what had been going on. So I tried to give him responsibilities, and it turned out that that was just what he needed. From then on, I got real gratification from him. During the five years we spent together, I really felt his love for me.'

It was a mutual feeling for the little pupil wearing a light blue smock and a blue ribbon. Ms Bevilacqua was a fairy godmother to Roberto, sometimes even making him a cup of chamomile tea in the morning, just to keep him still – because the Mancini boy simply wouldn't sit quietly at his desk. He used to crack one joke after another.

He was not particularly keen on studying, but he managed to get by in just about every subject. He was just waiting for the bell to ring so that he could be out playing football. Ms Bevilacqua continues:

‘I remember once, it must have been the beginning of the second year of class, in elementary school, I had assigned some reading and I called Roberto up to my desk to see what he had learned. It came out that he hadn’t read anything. So I told him off, and one of his classmates, a girl called Emma, said, “Roberto couldn’t do his homework because he was playing football all day on the Saint Sebastian pitch.” I really went mad then, and I vividly recall saying to him, “What are you going to do with your life, if you don’t study? Are you going to be kicking a ball around all day long?”’

Passing the ball

A Conversation with Aldo Mancini

‘Roberto was just like any other kid. He was bright, lively, smart. But he wasn’t hard work. He’d always have his football nearby. He was always playing: he used to come home from school at noon, he had his lunch and he was gone. At two o’clock he was already in front of Saint Sebastian church, kicking the ball around until dark. I would finish work, then go and get him for dinner. There were no dangers, back then: neither cars nor other hazards. All the boys in the neighbourhood would meet up there.’

Silver mane, rugged face made craggy by time, strong Marche accent, Aldo Mancini is wearing a blue tracksuit emblazoned with the Manchester City crest. He is Roberto’s number one supporter, and he talks lovingly about him. At the Foro Boario football ground, outside Jesi city walls, the City manager’s father is carefully watching the classes of 1999, 2000 and 2001 train. He spends his entire days there. Still, that’s the norm, as he is honorary president of US Junior Jesina Roberto Mancini Football School, based here in Boario.

It is dusk, and the boys are swarming from the changing rooms onto the artificial turf football pitch, and back again. Mothers, fathers and older siblings are coming to pick them up or drop them off for their training session. Aldo is standing by the fence enclosure, shaking hands, smiling and chatting to those who are passing by.

Displayed on the fence is a picture of Roberto in his playing days, wearing a light blue shirt and the captain's armband. His father talks to the coaching staff, listens to various opinions, offers advice. 'I am no coach,' he says, 'but after all these years I certainly know something about it.' He is so into football that, for the last administrative elections for the city of Jesi, he stood with the centre-left as a candidate for the Department of Sports.

'This is the city where world champions were raised,' he declared heartily in his address to the electorate, 'and I am not saying that because my son is from here. We excel in many sports, not only fencing. But in order to keep our name high and let Jesi shine, we need newer facilities, and most of all we must modernise school gyms. Sports survive thanks to volunteers, and sacrifices are made by those who passionately practise them; but we cannot do without public fundings. There is still very much to be done.'

His list lost the second ballot, but Aldo did not give up. He still likes to keep himself busy, although he is now over 77 years old. When he was young he used to run middle-distance races: the 7,000 metres cross-country, the 10,000 metres and the 5,000 metres on track and road. Many would remember him as the tall guy running the streets of Jesi. And, of course, he used to play football: he was a holding midfielder, a good player. And he swears he had a better left foot than Roberto. But then, with his carpentry work and his two children, there was not enough time for training anymore. But he has never forsaken the football stadiums and the city fields. In fact, talking to him, it soon becomes apparent that he is a real aficionado of the 'beautiful game'. He has seen the greatest champions play: from Alfredo Di Stefano and Ferenc Puskas to Lucidio

Sentimenti, Omar Sivori, Pelé and Diego Maradona. To him there are only two players to watch out for right now: Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo: 'But Messi is above them all: he's humble and he never complains.'

Aldo had a role with the Aurora sports club as a tour manager, even before Roberto's birth. The club, started by Don Roberto as a parish recreational centre in 1955, catered for football, athletics and table tennis. Aldo stayed with them for 25 years until, after a few misunderstandings, he decided to leave to found Junior Jesina.

Everyone who has ever played football in Jesi hung out at the Aurora club. It is where the young Roberto Mancini took his first steps into the football universe. 'He started playing in the "Aurora Pulcini" when he was only five and a half ...' begins Aldo.

So is it true what people say, that you lied about his age, because they wouldn't take children under six?

'It is true actually, but it didn't really matter. When he was at nursery, he would already be kicking any object he found lying around, and he spent hours in the church playground. Signing him up for Aurora was just a way for him to let off steam and have fun.'

Where did his passion for football come from?

'Who knows ... maybe it happened because I used to play as well, or maybe it is because I have always found this sport fascinating, or perhaps even because there wasn't that much for those kids to do. There was football, period. I often took Roberto along to Serie A games; I supported Juventus and so did he. His idol was Roberto Bettega, so

my wife had to go and buy him a black-and-white goalscorer's shirt, at all costs. When the Old Lady came to our Communal Stadium, we went to all the games. We wouldn't have missed them for the world. One time, in 1970, Bologna were playing Juventus in the quarter-finals of the Italy Cup. It was the day when Marino Perani scored the winning goal for Bologna, and I lost Roberto. I let him go forwards, but I got stuck behind the crowd control barriers. I was caught in the crowd and I couldn't see him anywhere. The stadium was packed and in the end, when I finally managed to get out, he was standing with a woman who was holding his hand. He was crying, poor thing. He was only little, he wasn't even six at that time.'

What were his skills with the ball, at such a young age?

'He could kick the ball well, both with his left and with his right foot, and even as a child he had a good vision of the game. That is the reason why he was put in a team with older kids almost straight away.'

When did you realise that he really had a talent for football?

'When he was about ten, because he would do things that others couldn't do.'

What sort of things?

'Passing the ball. That, in my opinion, is the most vital thing when playing football. I don't like those great players who carry on regardless, ball glued to their feet, wearing blinkers like horses do, and they cannot see their free or unmarked teammates. Roberto used to play as a deep-lying centre forward. He could initiate an attacking sequence and he could always open up scoring chances for his

teammates. I believe he used to play like Nandor Hidegkuti. I watched Hidegkuti play for Hungary in Rome in 1953, then I followed his career when he was coaching Fiorentina. Yes, Roberto was just like him: he was difficult to mark, as he would take up wide positions, and just like Hidegkuti, he scored goals by the bucketload.'

Your son was doing really well, so when he was 13 you gave him permission to move to Casteldebole, to the Bologna FC training camp.

'His mum, my wife, didn't want him to go because, you know, being away from home at a very young age ... he needed to carry on studying and obtain a high school diploma. Otherwise, what was he going to do in life? Also she feared drugs, it was a big threat in those days. I insisted, because I knew how much of an opportunity it could be for him; you just couldn't let it go. Roberto dreamt of being a footballer. So in the end we decided to give it a go. I remember that we were in Bologna when Roberto was 14, and I met Amedeo Biavati [the right-winger in the Azzurri's 1938 World Cup-winning side and winner of two Scudetti with Bologna in the 1930s and 40s]. After watching a game in San Lazzero di Savena, he asked who was the father of "that guy who moved so well on the field". I introduced myself, and he said to me, "Your son really has an edge over his teammates. He is good, very good." That's when I started believing, as one of the best footballers in Italy had said it.'

Apart from what Biavati said, would you have imagined Roberto's career then as it turned out to be?

‘Not at the beginning, not really ... but I did hope; that’s what I was after all the time. I hoped he could become somebody, and I believed it could happen because of Roberto’s personality. He never gave up. I see kids nowadays, I come across them at Jesina: they play football, but they don’t really care. Roberto was different: it was really important to him. He always wanted to win. We lost a final in Ancona and he burst into tears, out of disappointment and anger. That’s what always carried him forwards, making him stronger and stronger.’

Bologna, then Genoa, Rome, Florence, Milan ...

‘I was ever so happy when from Bologna he moved to Mantovani’s Sampdoria, because in the football universe, I have never met any president like him. Mantovani turned the club into a family, and they won because they were so close. Vujadin Boskov, the manager, was like a father to all those boys, and they all joined in to win the league.’

How strong was your influence, and that of your wife, on Roberto’s choices? After all, he was only 17.

‘He always made his own decisions. I advised him, and of course I had to sign his first contracts because he was under age, but he decided by himself, because he was the one who would be playing for one team or another, not me. The only thing I did was to make sure I never stood in the way of his career.’

And how do you see him today at Manchester City?

‘He is happy, he has always liked English football. He enjoys it; it is not so stressful as it was in Milan, when he coached Inter. He was in a shambles then; things are quieter in Manchester. Once the match is over, it is

“goodnight and good luck”. Everyone shuts up, no one goes on and on about it, the press stays out of it all. Their football debates are not like ours. I’ve been to Manchester a few times; I’ve seen the team train in Carrington and I talked to Roberto many times. He’s happy to be with City, and I really do hope he wins the Premier League. I believe it can happen, because where Roberto goes, success follows.’

Less than two months later, Aldo, excited and happy – ‘over the moon’ as he says – is on the Etihad Stadium pitch with Roberto, Marianna and the Premier League trophy, their thumbs up, celebrating victory. His heart, which has played tricks on him before, this time took the strain of one last, insane game. And it also managed the biggest strain of all: seeing his son win out in England.

Wrong address

It takes just ten minutes to walk from the Foro Boario football ground to Largo Granmercato. Here you can see the parish church of Saint Sebastian, consecrated in 1957, its stern-looking front, the crucifix overlooking the entrance. And, just to the side, the Aurora club badge, standing out against a rusty gate. This is the main entrance to the full-size football pitch where official matches are played on Saturdays and Sundays, and where the little ones train, moving the goalposts so that they can play across the pitch. There are neatly traced white lines, a lot of earth, and not much grass. Dorianio Giuliani is filling the holes in the ground, and explains that this is where Mancini grew up.

‘He lived just over there,’ he says, pointing towards a big yellow building with long balconies, beyond the fence, in Via del Prato. The Mancinis have since built themselves a villa, but when Roberto was young they lived only a few yards from this pitch and he was here every afternoon. Even as a child, recalls Dorianio, you could tell that he had class, and that he was born with a gift. ‘My brother Valentino,’ he says, ‘who is a year older than Roberto, played as a defender in the same team, because Mancini played above his age.’

At the time, Roberto Pazienza was responsible for the youth team at Aurora. ‘When I met Roberto, he was nine years old,’ Pazienza says, ‘and every afternoon, after training, he would then go and play on our other pitch, the concrete one.’ The pitch he refers to is a tiny space, lined with ancient mulberry trees, with a basket at each end.

Aurora basketball was born here. Pazienza continues, 'Roberto wouldn't go out without his football, and when our pitch was closed he used to go and play in front of the main doors of the church. He was different from everyone else - also personality-wise. He had that little extra something: he could dribble, he could run, he had the coordination. He played as an inside forward behind the strikers; he always found the space to move freely. As to what you teach a boy of that age - well, more than the technical skills, we tried to educate them to be team players and to respect their teammates. And, most of all, we wanted them to have fun.'

And Roberto surely had the time of his life. As a boy, he was a bundle of mischief: when he was nine, he smashed a tennis racket on his cousin's head, because they had had an argument. He broke his wrist while playing football; he rode his bike into a brick wall; he scratched his leg under a scooter. And he secretly smoked his first cigarette: it made him sick, so Roberto never grew up to be a smoker. Everyone called him a live wire. Indeed, so lively was he that his parents - who were by then both working to support the family (Marianna was a nurse in the local hospital) - decided to send him to a religious boarding school. But Roberto wouldn't have it and ran away, so in the end he moved back to his beloved old school in the neighbourhood, scuola media Federico Secondo. And of course, even at school, football was everywhere: the class team, with Mauro Bettarelli between the posts and Roberto playing as an inside forward, was going strong.

In June, once school broke up, the whole family headed off on holiday, to Senigallia on the Adriatic coast, 30km from Jesi. Aldo used to park his caravan in the pine forest. Roberto liked the seaside - he loved hanging out on the

rocks, fishing for mussels and whatever else he happened to come across. But then September would come around again, school would restart, and so too would the football matches on the Saint Sebastian pitch.

Aldo Moretti, one of the directors of the Aurora club, remembers the competitions, the matches, the away games for which Aldo Mancini would set off at 6am. He even recalls Roberto's temper: an occasion in Colle Marino for example. After a number of fouls committed by a defender who was twice his size, Mancini couldn't take it anymore: he hit the roof and they ended up fighting. And it was the strapping defender who came off worst. Then came the prizes: the cups and the 'best player' trophies won by the young Mancini while wearing the yellow Aurora shirt. 'He was in love with football. It ran in his blood,' says Moretti.

Pulcini, esordienti, giovanissimi: Mancini, playing on the Saint Sebastian pitch, climbed the ranks of the amateur game one by one, up to the spring of 1978. Then came his first tantalising glimpse of a future in the professional game.

Silvio Cardinali, who used to work for Aurora, recalls: 'It was May, and Gabriele Cardinaletti, a disabled guy, one of the directors of Real Jesi, who gave his life to football and passed away when he was 38, set up a trial for all the best players in the city youth team. Luciano Tessari was there. He was assistant to Niels Liedholm, the Swedish manager of AC Milan.'

At the end of the game, Tessari went to say hello to Don Roberto. The clergyman asked his opinion on the match. The Milan scout whispered, 'Here's a secret for you, I spotted two: one is old, one is young.' 'The young one,' remembers Don Roberto, was Mancini.' The day he made

an impression on Tessari, Roberto played as a left-winger. 'In fact,' adds Don Roberto, 'after the first half of the game, Tessari called him to one side and told him, "Little one, you must kick the ball through the posts more, and not pass it on to your mates so often."'

Together with Mancini, Tessari picked out three other players: Roberto's classmate Bertarelli, Santoni and Ganzetti. The invitation to attend a final trial at Milanello football training camp was meant to arrive in a few days' time. But the letter, sent by registered post and with a return receipt, never came. It was sent to the wrong address: to Real Jesi, the club which had set up the trial. No one bothered forwarding it to Aurora, nor to the players' parents. An oversight perhaps; or, just maybe, a case of the green-eyed monster.

Aldo found out a few months later, when he met the AC Milan directors at the Adriano Spinelli trophy in Terni. 'We did send that letter, you know,' they said. 'But I never received it,' replied Mancini Senior. Unfortunately, by that time, the Red-and-Black academy was closed to applications, and Roberto had missed the boat, to everyone's disappointment - including the Aurora managers. Silvio Cardinali still wonders about that: 'By all means, they would have taken him [if he had attended the final trial]. I wonder what his career would have been like, had he started at a great club such as AC Milan.'

Aldo Mancini, convinced of his boy's talent, did not give up. And in September that same year, when Roberto started high school with a view to becoming an industrial technician, he phoned Alberto Barchiesi, a friend of his from Castenaso, only a few miles from Bologna, and asked him whether he knew anything about trials for the Red-and-