



The twelfth man on the field: the Balotelli case and racism in the football

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On January 5, 2020, Mario Balotelli¹, a well-known black Italian football player, scored at 18' the goal of Brescia's lead, in the match then lost 2-1 against Lazio. A few minutes later, the match was interrupted (at the request of the striker himself) by the referee, who asked the Rigamonti stadium's speaker to invite the public (specifically, some Lazio² fans) to stop the racist choruses against Balotelli. Just after the beginning of the game, it was heard some "buuuu" against the player, and then offensive choirs were spoken against his mother. The first goal in 2020, therefore, is tainted by racism, just as it was ten years earlier. A strange coincidence, this one, for Mario. On January 6, 2010, in fact, Balotelli (at the time, in force at Inter and just nineteen years old) scored Chievo's first goal of the new year and followed the classic racist "buu" against him by the Chievo Verona fans. But ten years ago, it was Balotelli who was fined for saying that the public in Verona was "increasingly disgusting". A generic and unjust phrase for which he then apologised.

Mario, throughout his football career, in Italy and abroad, as well as wearing the Italian national team's blue jersey, has been the target of numerous racist insults. However, there have been some particularly serious ones, such as that of 3 November 2019³. "Super Mario", as his fans affectionately call him, finds himself, this time against Hellas Verona, with the usual and repeated script. In the eleventh minute of the second half, the Serie A match Verona-Brescia is suspended for "racial discrimination".

¹ The striker was born in Palermo from Ghanaian parents, Thomas and Rose Baruwah. At the age of two, the player underwent an operation. Balotelli's biological parents were pushed by the social services to entrust the child to a family that had an economic stability adequate for his medical care. Mario thus became part of the Balotelli family, living in the province of Brescia, in Concesio, where Paolo and Silvia raised him as their own son.

² The sports judge ordered Lazio to pay a fine of 20,000 euros, and then asked the FIGC Public Prosecutor's Office for an additional investigation into the choirs, in order to investigate the sector from which they came and Lazio's active collaboration in identifying the individuals involved with a view to the possible adoption of further measures and in relation to the assessment of any recidivism.

³ We discussed it here: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/verona-razzismo-curve-balotelli-neofascists/>.



Mario Balotelli, at the umpteenth howls and racist insults against him from the home fans, takes the ball and kicks it with force towards the curve of the Hellas Verona's supporters. The "buuuu" and insults are filmed by the cameras and even the federal inspectors hear them: certainly, Balotelli did not invent them.

The ball arrives in the stands at the height of a long series of manifestations of intolerance and aggression against him and produces an international echo that shakes the top of the major league.

The main football clubs, urged by the situation that threatens to get out of hand, meet by signing a commitment to step up the fight against racism⁴. The FIGC also intervenes by urging the Lega Serie A to make a greater contribution to the fight against racism. The Lega Serie A promptly announces a campaign to fight racism, but it has a limp beginning⁵.

But the real question is: would it have been the same if he hadn't stopped, threatening to leave the field, and thrown that ball into the curve of supporters of the other team? This was nothing more than the umpteenth shame of the Hellas Verona fans, not by chance captured by local representatives of extreme right-wing parties such as Forza Nuova. But what happened in the stadium is only a prelude to what would have happened in the following hours.

"Today there was no racist howling, just big whistles, mocking a great player and nothing else," says Ivan Juric, coach of Hellas, after the match. "All of us at the Bentegodi today have heard nothing. I can only say that the Verona fans are particular. They have a way of mocking their opponents full of irony, but racism doesn't exist here", chuckles Maurizio Setti, president of the club. The Arena, the main city newspaper, writes that "racist choirs were not there when Balotelli had the angry reaction". The centre-right mayor Federico Sboarina states that "I was there at the stadium and I did not hear any racist insults. What

⁴ See: https://www.corrieredellosport.it/news/calcio/serie-a/2019/11/2963951879/letter_opened_of_the_series_club_to_contro_racism_and_a_problem_series_of_29 November2019.

⁵ The Ad of the Lega Calcio was forced to apologise twice for Balotelli's 'case'. Firstly, for having declared to silence the racist choruses by simply turning off the microphones oriented towards the curves, and secondly, for having chosen the symbolic image of the campaign against racism: a painting depicting three monkeys.



Balotelli did is inexplicable because without any reason he started a media pillory about a fan base and a city”.

Three Northern League municipal councillors speak of a “folkloric scene” and even announce a municipal motion to “ask for image damage to those who seek to advertise themselves to the detriment of a city”. In short, the city denies everything. The madman on duty is Mario Balotelli. Yet Forza Nuova's coordinator for Northern Italy, as well as one of the Verona "ultràs chiefs" of the Curva Sud, Luca Castellini⁶, claims those racist choirs against Balotelli and he is denounced. The football club banned him from entering the Veneto stadium with a Daspo until 2030.

What happened, from yet another case of racism in the stadiums, turns into a great city shame. Because, if one usually tends to distance oneself from those who commit these gestures, in the case of Verona a compact block has been created between society, politics and the media to belittle what is not only a city problem, but a national one: racism in the world of football. But the story does not end here.

A few days after the event, a banner was posted outside the Allianz Stadium in Turin: “Mario you are right, you are an African”, claimed on the Forza Nuova⁷ Facebook profile and with a press release. Three people belonging to the extreme right group are denounced for “propaganda of ideas based on racial hatred”. The three were identified by Digos thanks to the video footage from the stadium’s surveillance cameras, and the Daspo is also placed on them. In fact, Verona and its fans already have an “illustrious” precedent. It was April

⁶ "Balotelli is Italian because he has Italian citizenship, but he can never be completely Italian" says Luca Castellini interviewed by Radio Cafè. When asked if the Verona’s fans are racist, Castellini recalls that "we also have a nigger in the team, who scored yesterday and all Verona applauded him". "Are there any problems saying the word nigger? - he pushes- Is the Segre Commission picking me up because I call someone 'nigger'? They come to play me the doorbell?"

⁷ In June 2018, Forza Nuova again offended the attacker with a banner that appeared in Brescia: "Balotelli you are more stupid than black", a phrase translated from the Brescia dialect. What provoked Forza Nuova's harsh reaction, it was the statements made by Balotelli on the subject of immigration. "It's time for Italy to be more open like so many countries and to start integrating people coming from outside," Balotelli said at a press conference on the eve of Italy's friendly match with the Netherlands. "Being captain of the National Team - he added - could be a good sign, especially for African immigrants living in Italy".



26, 1996. During the derby, the Hellas⁸ fans hang a black puppet with a noose around his neck and dangle it down from the stands, accompanied by a couple of fans wearing white Ku Klux Klan-style hoods, and a banner saying: "The nigger gave it to you, let him clean the stadium", and another one, in English: "Negro go away". The protest of the neo-Nazi Verona's fringe is against the Verona's club, "guilty" of being about to buy the Dutch Maickel Ferrier, the first black player in the team's history. The hanging puppet, banners and choirs last at least 38 minutes, while on the pitch the match continues quietly. Everyone sees that shame: the spectators, the players, the coaches, the referee, the managers of the two teams, but nobody does anything⁹. From this moment on, the Verona curve becomes the symbol of an unhealthy fan base with clear neo-Nazi connotations. But the problem is not only limited to the Verona curve. In the history of recent football, the "Balotelli" have unfortunately been many. We remember some of them.

On 27th May 2001, the ultras of Treviso left the stadium when the Nigerian Akeem Omolade joined their team. The rival Ternana fans whistled at them, and the following Sunday all the Treviso players took to the pitch showing solidarity with their team-mate, painting their faces black.

On November 27th 2005, during a home match against Inter, the Ivorian player from Messina, Marco André Zoro, tired of the choruses and racist insults of the opposing fans, takes the ball in his hand and starts heading off the pitch. He is stopped by the intervention of his teammates and opponents who try to calm him down and convince him to resume the game. Zoro returns to the pitch and the game begins again. The next day, all the newspapers talk about his protest: in Italy, it had never happened before that a black player reacted like that to racist choruses and insults.

⁸ These were the years of the Gialloblu Brigades, a hegemonic group of the Hellas supporters who were disbanded following investigations by the judiciary "for discrimination and racial hatred".

⁹ In addition to this, there are many other episodes: the racist insults to Ferdinand Coly during a 2005 Perugia-Verona; the cars parked in the shape of a swastika; the choirs "We are a fantastic team... made in the shape of a swastika... how nice it is... Rudolf Hess trains" during the promotion party in June 2019.



On 17 October 2010, immediately after the start of the match between Cagliari and Inter, a part of the Sardinian fans targeted the Cameroonian striker Samuel Eto'o¹⁰ with racist "buu". The referee stops the game for a few minutes, inviting the stadium speaker to spread the message against racism. The match then ends regularly, Eto'o scores and cheers, imitating a monkey under the opponent's curve.

During the Pro Patria-Milan friendly match, on 3rd January 2013, at the 27th minute of the first half, Kevin Prince Boateng, a naturalized Ghanaian German footballer, repeatedly insulted from the stands, angrily kicks the ball towards the curve (like Balotelli), takes off his shirt and leaves the field together with the rest of his team mates.

On 30th April 2017, at the 44th minute of the match played between Cagliari and Pescara, the Ghanaian Sulley Muntari¹¹ complained to the referee about some racist choirs coming from the home curve. The match director does not intervene and then admonishes the midfielder for the hard protests. At that point Muntari, in the recovery minutes, leaves the pitch alone.

In December 2018, Kalidou Koulibaly, a Senegalese footballer with French citizenship, gives an ironic applause to the referee who ignores the racist chants against him and he is expelled. In April 2019, Moise Kean, a black Italian son of Ivorian immigrants, reacts by extending his arms to the Cagliari fans who howl at every touch of the ball, and is first publicly reprimanded by his captain, then verbally attacked by the president of Cagliari "for disrespecting his opponents".

And finally, during the Cagliari-Inter match on 1 September 2019¹², the Inter footballer Romelu Lukaku, Belgian son of Congolese immigrants, is also the victim of racist choruses.

¹⁰ On 25 May 2011, the footballer himself was the victim of racist insults from fans outside the stadium, in Milan, in an area not far from his home. A group of *ultra* milanists, who celebrated a birthday in the same club where Eto'o had a drink with friends, met the interist on his way to home. The choir was also clearly heard on the evening of the derby, the authentic soundtrack of the milanist celebrations for the victory of the Scudetto: "Eto'o eto'o saw him with roses in the metro, Mariga mariga saw him on the beach who said *vu cumpra*, Biabiany biabiany saw him with the CD bag", officially transcribed among the Milan choirs at the link: <https://www.coridastadio.com/6348/Milan>.

¹¹ We also discussed it here: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/calcio-razzismo-canceled-qualification-muntari/>.

¹² We also discussed it here: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/lukakufa-Well-to-protest/>.



The images and the audio of the choirs immediately make the web, having wide acclaim especially in the English press (Lukaku was previously a Manchester United player). According to the sports judge, “choirs, shouts and whistles” against Lukaku were indeed there (some verses were also heard), but only by “individual spectators”, and were not “understood as discriminatory because of the whistles and shouts mentioned above”.

While a press release “in defence” of Lukaku by the Inter curve clumsily tries to explain to the footballer that “that” is not racism, but only “sports cheer”.

This small and non-exhaustive list tells us one clear thing: over the years, the situation has worsened, despite the proclamations. There is no point in going around it. If there was a weak reaction about 20 years ago, it is no longer there today. The sick relationship of Italian football with racism is based on a continuous and stubborn self-absolution. Whistles, choruses and howls are there, but nobody hears them; and if anyone hears them, they call them “minority”, minimizing them. And what makes the picture truly disturbing is not so much the increase in cases (which is real)¹³ but rather the decrease in reactions.

Almost as if to confirm the lack of sensitivity on the subject and the tendency of Italian institutions to minimize it, there have been some “exemplary” statements, such as that of the CONI president, Giovanni Malagò, who told Radio24, that “the fan who makes racist buu noises to a black player is wrong, but it is even more wrong when someone who earns

¹³ The fifth edition of "Footballers under fire", published in March 2019 (available here: <https://www.assocalcatori.it/sites/default/files/attachment/news/Calciatori%20sotto%20tiro%20-%20Associazione%20Italiana%20Calciatori%20ABSTRACT%20STAMPA.pdf>), edited by the Italian Footballers' Association, in the 2017/18 season, highlights 478 documented cases of violence and intimidation, of which 41% are racist (they were 21% in the 2015/2016 season and 36% in the 2016/2017 season). Episodes on youth team camps peaked in 2018, and as the number of incidents of racism increases, the area of the country where the number of incidents occurs changes. The type of aggression/insult also changes. 2018 is the record year for choirs and is the year in which episodes in the North clearly exceed those in the South and the Centre. The following report, "Footballers at gunpoint: racism focus season 2018/19", published in December 2019 (available here: <https://www.assocalcatori.it/sites/default/files/attachment/news/Calciatori%20sotto%20tiro%2020182019.pdf>), dedicated exclusively to the analysis of episodes of racism against players in each category, shows us how racist episodes in amateur football have been increasing steadily for six years now and professional and at all levels, inside and outside the sports facilities.



3 million euros lets himself fall in the area and is perhaps even happy to take a penalty kick”¹⁴.

Or the one issued by the President of Lazio, Claudio Lotito, who wanted to explain that: “not always the ‘buu’vocation actually corresponds to a discriminatory or racist act, but it should be interpreted. I remember that when I was a child, often those who were not black, who had normal white skin, would be booed to discourage them from scoring the goal in front of the goalkeeper”¹⁵.

The situation, in essence, is this: some fans insult, clubs tend to deny the incriminated episodes and do nothing to oppose them (with a few praiseworthy exceptions, such as that of AS Roma, which expelled for life from the Olimpico, with a Daspo, a fan who had addressed racist insults to Juan Jesus¹⁶), the sports judges acquit.

The denial of the fact, even in the presence of unequivocal videos, is now the basis of the dialectic of the racist at the stadium, and often even outside. At the limit, if necessary, it is reduced to “countermeasures” (completely ineffective) such as postponement of matches or matches behind closed doors, which only increase the blackmailing power of the fans towards the clubs.

To sum up, it seems as if we have been irreparably stuck in the same place for years now. We have not moved an inch, compared to when the vice-president of Milan, Paolo Berlusconi, called Mario Balotelli “the family little nigger”¹⁷; or when Arrigo Sacchi said that there were “too many blacks” in the Italian youth¹⁸, while the then candidate for the

¹⁴ See: <https://www.calcionews24.com/malago-choc-peggio-uno-che-simula-che-uno-chefa-buu-a-un-giocatore-di-colore/> del 25 settembre 2019.

¹⁵ See: https://www.repubblica.it/sport/calcio/2019/10/01/news/lotito_razzismo_consiglio_federale-237440348/, of 1 October 2019.

¹⁶ See: https://www.adnkronos.com/sport/2019/09/26/insulti-razzisti-juan-jesus-luipubblica-screenshot-sui-social_G307F8c9ERoDpFLL5ueOgL.html, dated 26 September 2019.

¹⁷ The episode comes a month after the one of January 8th 2013, when Silvio Berlusconi in person denied Milan's interest in Balotelli, defined as “a rotten apple that would infect our locker room, a person that I would never accept as part of it”.

¹⁸ “I am ashamed to be Italian. To succeed we are willing to sell our souls to the devil. We have no dignity, we have no Italian pride. There are teams with 15 foreigners, this is because you put business first: and when you put business first, football cannot succeed [...] Today I was watching the Viareggio tournament: I am not a racist - I had Rijkaard - but to see so many black players, to see so many foreigners, is an offence for Italian football”, February 2015.



presidency of the FIGC, Carlo Tavecchio, talked about a phantom Opti Pobà “who came here, who used to eat bananas and now plays first in Lazio and that's fine”¹⁹.

With a methodical work of blaming the victim, the roles are reversed: now the racism of the fan is not his fault, but It's the black player's fault. We have gone from condemnation to justification, through denial, to undisturbed legitimacy.

There is a lot of racism in Italian football. We certainly don't find that out today: the problem is that too often we forget about it. What about our Mario? “Balotelli brings out the worst aspects of Italy”, Mauro Valeri said in 2014²⁰.

And Balotelli, in his exceptional career, has been charged with a double "responsibility": that of being a black footballer in the championship and that of being a black footballer in the Italian national team²¹. The banner "There are no Italian Negroes" displayed during a series of football matches in which he was present, represents the synthesis of what has been told so far and explicitly recalls that idea of “Italianness” which, fully constructed during Fascism, represents Italians as "Mediterraneans" (but not as "blacks"), rejecting a fact: Balotelli is an Italian citizen even if he is “black”.

¹⁹ We also discussed this here: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/banane-calcioallitaliana/>.

²⁰ M. Valeri, *Mario Balotelli winner in the ball*, Fazi Editore, Roma 2014. Mauro Valeri, who died prematurely in 2019, was a sociologist, former director of the National Observatory on Xenophobia and since 2005 head of the Observatory on Racism and Antiracism in Football.

²¹ There has never been a shortage of controversy about the summoning of the so-called "oriundi" (black and not) to the national team. In 2011, Osvaldo was summoned to the national team and the deputy of the Lega Nord Davide Cavallotto attacked: "Our national team has become a "pension of oriundi" and our football is now a "branch of emerging countries". In 2014, Salvini instead hurls himself against Thiago Motta: "What does this have to do with Italy? A fig tree", and protests against the presence of "too many oriundi" on the national team. In 2015, it was Roberto Mancini who rejected the opening to gold medals: "Only Italians in blue. Those who are not born in Italy, even if they have relatives, do not play for the national team". Statements supported by Salvini on Twitter. On the occasion of the 2016 European Championships, then, the secretary of the League reiterated: "I would like players with a little more roots to play", responding to those who asked him about the summons of Eder and the Argentinean naturalized Italian Franco Vazquez by Ct Antonio Conte.