

## Still the Greatest Show On Earth



The World Cup remains the most coveted sporting prize on the planet.

I had no idea who Paolo Rossi was. None whatsoever. But his name provided me with one of my first real memories, when, aged three, Rossi's six goal haul propelled Italy to World Cup glory in 1982.

Skipping out into the front yard to see what my seven-year-old brother was up to, time and time again, he reached for the 'Rossi refrain' as he shot the ball into an imaginary net, all to his own commentary.

Rossi and his counterparts, the 40-year-old Dino Zoff, the teenage Giuseppe Bergomi, the hard as nails Claudio Gentile and the majestic Marco Tardelli - he of the greatest goal celebration of them all - captured the world's imagination.

This was mainly due to their stunning elimination of Tele Santana's Brazil, even more glorious in failure than Holland in 1974 and 78, and the fact that the Azzurri stopped the dour West Germans from lifting soccer's most famous prize.

The Germans were never more unpopular across the football world that summer for two reasons: their shameful kickabout with Austria which prevented Algeria from progressing from Round One, and Harald Schumacher's knocking France's Patrick Battiston out cold in an otherwise classic semi-final.

And as my love of both reading and soccer developed in my childhood, so too did my fascination with a tournament which, despite the cackhandedness of the be-suited bureaucrats that run FIFA, still fascinates me.

Where to begin? How about Josimar ('Josie Maher' to the uninitiated) and his spectacular lob over the retiring Pat Jennings and

what a shame it is that Northern Ireland have not qualified for any major tournament since.

Of course, one cannot mention Mexico '86 without referencing the Machiavellian deeds of Diego Armando Maradona, whose stunning semi-final goal against Belgium remains an afterthought due to his historic couplet against England in the previous round.

Gary Lineker, playing with a broken arm, won the Golden Boot, while the West Germans, in green come the Final against Argentina, lost a second successive decider.

Four years later, while we had a party during which the Celtic Tiger was apparently conceived, Italia '90 provided us with the worst tournament yet and the Final it deserved, a turgid affair settled by an Andreas Brehme penalty and featuring two Argentinean red cards.

But we had Sheedy's goal in Cagliari, Niall Quinn's leveller in Palermo, penalties in Genoa, an audience with the Pope and a run-out in Rome to remember. And while the football was anything but easy on the eye, the memories remain sprinkled in stardust.

As for USA '94, which Ireland entered in such upbeat mood after defeating Holland and Germany, well things got even better thanks to our greatest ever competitive result: defeating Italy before a 'home' crowd in New Jersey. But what a pity it all went so flat after that, particularly in the wet heat of Orlando.

Oh and Roberto Baggio, 'The Divine Ponytail' skied a penalty in the Final and the least stylish of successful Brazilian teams ended their 24-year famine on spot kicks.

Eight years on, we had Saipan, Robbie Keane's heroics against the Germans, penalty woe against the Spanish and, sadly, we've not been back there since.

And while it would have proven all the more intriguing had Ireland qualified for Brazil, the World Cup remains a month-long spectacle to savour - and still makes me reminisce over half-time kickabouts in the garden. Let the games begin!