

**UNFORGETTABLE FRIENDS FROM AROUND THE WORLD
ROBERTO BAGGIO—ITALIAN SOCCER SUPERSTAR
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA**

In this series, SGI President Ikeda has recorded his impressions of the many friends he has made in his travels for peace. In his New Year's poem in the January issue, he states: "I will continue to knock on the doors / Of diverse cultures and civilizations, / Seeking out the humanity that is vibrantly alive / At the heart of each, / Believing that sincere dialogue/In search of our shared humanity / Will build a rainbow bridge linking the world."

SGI President Ikeda praises Italian soccer star Roberto Baggio and his wife, Andreina, at the 50th Headquarters Leaders Meeting, held at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji, October 5, 2000.

I remember my reaction when I heard about the intense struggle that had taken place in the 1994 World Cup soccer finals, which had fans all over the world on the edge of their seats: "Baggio has done a wonderful job! What a pro! He kept his promise to continue fighting to the very end."

I first met Roberto Baggio, the Italian soccer superstar, in the front courtyard of the Soka Gakkai Headquarters in Tokyo in June 1993. He had the intrepid gaze of a person used to taking on momentous challenges and winning, along with the humility of one who could not be swayed by fame or popularity. His wife, Andreina, was also pleasant, refined, and had a beautiful smile.

When I met the young soccer star again in Milan the following year, it was just before he was to play in the World Cup. I encouraged him: "You've got to fight to the last moment, fight to the very end." He nodded, smiled, and left for the United States.

But qualifying to play in the World Cup series had been a tough struggle. The Italian team just barely made it, incurring harsh criticism at home, where hopes for their victory ran high. Still, Baggio was unshaken. In an interview on Italian television, he said, "No matter how I am criticized, I am what I am. People call me a superstar, but I'm just a human being. Whether I am praised or blamed, I play the game the way I play it."

And play the game superbly he did. Through his almost superhuman effort, he led the Italian team to victories in the preliminary finals over Nigeria, Spain and Bulgaria. The world cheered his long series of incredible, often seemingly miraculous, plays.

But the cost of those triumphs was very high. He was in the worst possible physical condition as he faced the final with Brazil. He had pulled a muscle in his thigh, while injuries to his knees and Achilles tendons were causing him intense pain. He was faint with exhaustion. He couldn't decide whether he would play in the final match until the morning of the game. But then he did: "I'll play, even if it means losing a leg." He forced himself to rise to the occasion, though he could barely stand.

He played the entire game in that condition. The match went into overtime. But, astonishingly, even that did not decide victory, and a penalty-kick playoff (when five players from each team kick in an elimination round) would decide the winner. It was his iron determination that had got them this far.

When Baggio's kick missed the goal, the long battle was over. Under normal circumstances, it would have been impossible for him to miss such a shot. But his legs no longer had the

strength to control the angle of the ball.

He had given all he had to give, and he showed it. Fans around the world were deeply moved. His team had won many victories through his brave efforts, and now, when he had lost, he took full responsibility. The spectators showered him with more applause and cheers than they did the victors.

I sent him a message, too: “Your brilliant fight to the very last moment, your unbending and invincible spirit, is a great victory of faith.”

Roberto Baggio was born in a small northern Italian town in 1967. “I learned to walk and kick a ball at the same time,” he says. It was a plastic ball, and he kept it nestled at his feet even when he was eating. But even for a natural, things do not always go smoothly or easily.

He suffered from knee injuries, and for his first two years in professional soccer, couldn’t play up to his abilities. He had major surgery three times. Before really beginning his career as a professional player, he was forced to face the prospect that he would have to quit. It was then that he learned of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism from Mr. Maurizio Boldrini, who ran a shop that sold CDs and souvenirs. “Buddhism teaches that we are responsible for our own happiness or unhappiness,” Mr. Boldrini told him. Roberto Baggio was drawn to such a philosophy. When he chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, he felt strength welling up inside. He was so earnest that he felt the power of faith in his entire being. The more he suffered, the stronger he became. His whole being and outlook were revitalized.

In an interview after winning the Golden Ball award as Europe’s top player in 1993, he said, “When a person triumphs over adversity that becomes their personal treasure. When I was ill, I told myself, ‘You can do it. You have a strong will. Every minute you spend in this bed is making you stronger, so that you can face bigger difficulties in the future.’”

He discussed his philosophy of winning: “When two teams are equally matched, what is it that decides victory? When the crucial moment arrives, it is the team united in the belief they will win that is going to triumph. ... After reaching a certain level, there is little difference between the strength and skills of the opposing players. That’s when mental strength becomes so important — how much the team can concentrate, how strong their will is to give their absolute best. The team that is most determined to win will do so.”

How true that is! One must win in all challenges. There are times when you will be in poor physical condition. The more famous you are, the harder your opponents will be on you. You may have to contend with jealousy and malice. Lies may be written about you. You may be dissatisfied with your coaches or teammates. But once you have decided to win, you must do so; you must give your very best and score a personal victory, triumphing over any disadvantages and all obstacles. If you fail to do so, if you give less than your all, then whatever justification you try to give will just be an excuse. This is as true in life as it is in the realm of sports.

We, the members of the SGI, too, must be dedicated players in the arena of kosen-rufu — experts in helping people become happy.

Roberto Baggio says, “A pro must win. It is his mission to keep on winning and inspire courage in others. That is why I take pride in what I do.”