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Italy's Bergomi grows younger with age

By Gideon Long

SENLIS, France, June 8 (Reuters) - Look at photographs of Giuseppe Bergomi from the 1982 World Cup finals and you could be forgiven for thinking he has grown younger as the years have passed.

The 18-year-old Bergomi who won the tournament in Madrid was a serious young man with a furrowed brow and a bushy black moustache.

The version who comes to France with Cesare Maldini's Italy squad is a relaxed 34-year-old with a boyish crew-cut, a ready smile and piercing slate-blue eyes which conceal a wealth of World Cup experience.

"I was trying to make myself look older than I was," Bergomi says when teased about his Spanish moustache. "You have to remember I was only 18. It's not easy playing on the world stage at that age."

It might not be easy but Bergomi made it seem so.

The Inter Milan fullback was called up by coach Enzo Bearzot as a late replacement for the injured Gabriele Oriali, marched into the cavernous Bernabeu stadium for only his fourth Italian cap and marked West Germany's brilliant striker Karl-Heinz Rummenigge out of the match.

Rummenigge was substituted 20 minutes from time, Italy won 3-1 and Bergomi's fascinating World Cup career was up and running.

"It was a wonderful thing to play in the final in Spain at that age. Of all my World Cups, that's the one from which I have the most and the best memories," he said while relaxing at Italy's training camp north of Paris.

"Dino Zoff was the leader of the squad without a doubt. By 1982 he had so much experience and was a great presence in the changing room.

"Bearzot prepared us for the matches but Zoff was always by his side. He was a real leader even though he's not the kind of guy who talks a lot."

After the euphoria of 1982, the 1986 finals in Mexico were a disaster for the Italians.

"We got through the first round but then lost 2-0 to France," recalled Bergomi, one of only 11 players at this year's finals with a winners' medal to his name.

"1990 was better for me because of the atmosphere in Italy and because I was captain.

"We should have beaten Argentina in the semifinals but one lapse of concentration cost us a place in the final. I've always thought we played the best football of that tournament and it was a great disappointment not to win it."

Bergomi's international career went into tailspin after Italy 1990.

Within eight months he had lost his first team place to Juventus sweeper Ciriaco Ferrara and in June 1991 he played what appeared to be his last match for Italy - a friendly against Denmark in a minor tournament in Sweden.

When the 1994 World Cup came round he was left out of Arrigo Sacchi's plans, something Bergomi says was only to be expected.

"I didn't deserve to play in the United States," he said. "I wasn't playing well at Inter. I played much better last season than I did four years ago and that's why I'm here."

These days, Bergomi knows he no longer commands a place in Italy's first team although he did make his first appearance for the Azzurri in seven years last week when the Italians played Sweden in a friendly.

"When Maldini called me to tell me I was in the squad he told me: 'You might play one minute, you might play in every match, you might never get a game'. I accept that. My responsibilities are different this time round."

And although he accepts the role of elder statesman in Italy's class of 98, he says the real heart of the side lies elsewhere.

"In my opinion the three AC Milan players are the real soul of this squad. Paolo Maldini, Demetrio Albertini and Alessandro Costacurta - they are the point of reference for the younger players.

"They have the experience and the caps like me but they're also in the first team. They are the ones who, more than anyone else, brought us through to France 98."

Now that Italy are here, Bergomi is in his element. The only thing that appears to annoy him is his nickname - "Lo Zio" or "The Uncle".

"It's a name the Inter players gave me when I still had my moustache," he recalls. "I don't like it very much. It suggests I'm an old man."

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