
FOOTBALL
REBELS
LIBERAZIONE
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REBELS
Rebels

FOOTBALL



REBELS



The history of football is also a history of dissent. Beyond the game's commercialized spectacle, football pitches and stands have long been places where power is challenged, identities are defended, and collective resistance is formed.

Football Rebels brings together eleven stories of resistance. From the fight against fascism in Europe and dictatorships in South America to struggles for independence, women's liberation, and anti-racism in the stands, these stories reveal a long tradition of rebellion that spans continents and generations.

At the heart of this exhibition is Bruno Neri (1910–1944), the Italian footballer who, in 1931, refused to perform the mandatory Roman salute in front of Fascist authorities. He later joined the partisans and was killed by the Nazis. In his honor, tonight we launch the Curva Bruno Neri: not a supporters' group for any one team, but a place for everyone who sees football as a force for liberation who want to stand against authoritarianism in all its forms.

Because football never belonged solely to those who hold power over it.

LIBERAZIONE F.C.



1. Bruno Neri and other Italian footballers turned partisans [Italy]

Bruno Neri was an Italian footballer and partisan fighter. Born in Faenza in 1910, he started his career playing for his hometown club before moving on to Fiorentina (1929–36), Lucchese (1936-37), and Torino (1937-40), earning 219 appearances and 2 goals in Serie A as well as 3 caps for Italy. Unusually for a footballer, he completed his studies, collected art, and befriended intellectuals.

On September 13, 1931, at the inauguration of Florence's new stadium, **Neri was the only player who did not raise his arm in the then-mandatory fascist salute**. It was an all the more audacious gesture because the stadium was named after Giovanni Berta, a young fascist killed in 1921 and subsequently made into a regime martyr. Neri joined underground antifascist activity in 1940 and, after the 1943 armistice split Italy in two (with the North under Nazi occupation), he **took up arms with the Resistance**. He was killed on July 10, 1944, by German troops near Marradi. Since 1946, Faenza's football stadium has borne his name, and on Liberation Day, April 25, 2021, the nonprofit Figurine Forever commemorated him with a special sticker dedicated to his role as a footballer who gave his life fighting in the Resistance.

Neri was not the only player-turned-partisan. Michele Moretti, who played for Como, went on to join the partisans' 52nd Garibaldi Brigade, and in April 1945 was part of the detachment that captured and executed Mussolini. Armando Frigo, who had played for Vicenza and Fiorentina, was an army officer who, after the Armistice, joined the partisans and was shot by the Germans at Crkvice (in occupied Yugoslavia) in 1943, with his Fiorentina player ID card still in his jacket. Vittorio Staccione, who played for Torino and Fiorentina, among other clubs, was arrested for being a socialist in March 1944, and died in the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in 1945. Giuseppe Peruchetti, who played for Brescia and Ambrosiana-Inter, fought with the partisan unit Brigata Belbo in the Langhe region. Raf Vallone played for Torino and also fought in the Langhe before going on to become a film star after the war. Finally, Giacomo Losi, who went on to play for Roma, was a child courier during the war, carrying bombs and machine-gun belts to the partisans during firefights.



2. Rino Della Negra and Red Star FC [France]

Rino Della Negra was born on August 18, 1923, in the north of France to a working-class family from Italy (Udine), and grew up in Argenteuil, outside Paris, in an environment characterized by factory work, union organizing, and antifascist activism.

A fast right-winger, in 1942, while an amateur footballer who worked in a factory to make ends meet, he was scouted and signed by the Red Star Football Club, the club founded in 1897 by inaugural FIFA president Jules Rimet, rooted in working-class Saint-Ouen. When the Vichy regime called him up for forced labor in Germany, **Rino Della Negra refused and instead joined the FTP-MOI** (*Francs-tireurs et partisans – main-d'œuvre immigrée*), the component of the French Resistance led by Missak Manouchian, composed mostly of foreigners, taking up arms to fight the German occupation.

He took part in many resistance operations: on June 10, 1943, he attacked the Parisian offices of the Italian Fascist Party, while on November 12, he was arrested after an attack on a German convoy. After being put on trial, **he was executed at Mont-Valérien on February 21, 1944**, with other comrades of the Manouchian group, all of whom were subsequently proclaimed foreign terrorists in Nazi propaganda. In his last letter to his little brother, he wrote: "Send my regards and farewells to everyone at Red Star".

Decades later, **Red Star's fans made him their figurehead**. The club unveiled a plaque on February 21, 2004, the 60th anniversary of his death, and named a stand at the Stade Bauer after him. When Manouchian was granted the honor to be laid in the Panthéon in February 2024, Red Star youth players traveled to Mont-Valérien to pay respects to his group of fighters, and the club also staged a theatrical production about his life with its youth players. For French football *populaire*, Della Negra is one of their own: the son of immigrants who fought for a country that was not yet fully his.



3. Rachid Mekhloufi and the FLN team [Algeria]

In April 1958, weeks before the World Cup was due to be played, **France's rising star Rachid Mekhloufi vanished from Saint-Étienne**. Born in Sétif in 1936 in what was then French Algeria, he had joined the club in 1954, going on to score 59 goals in four seasons, win the French title in 1957, and earn four caps for the French national team.

He had been called up to the provisional French squad for that summer's World Cup in Sweden, but soon made the choice to go down a different path. The bloody Algerian war of independence had been raging since 1954, and Mekhloufi chose not to remain indifferent to the struggle. On April 13, 1958, **Mekhloufi and nine other professionals of Algerian origin based in France secretly left their clubs** and reached Tunis, where the leadership of Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN) was based. There, they formed the team that would represent the independence movement: the Équipe du FLN de football (FLN Football Team), known as *Le onze de l'indépendance* (The Eleven of Independence).

At France's request, FIFA refused to recognize the team, but they took to the field anyway and played some 80 matches between 1958 and 1962 across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, and winning most of them. **Every game was a statement in favor of independence**, and Mekhloufi became the team's star.

After Algeria became independent on July 5, 1962, Mekhloufi went back to Saint-Étienne, where he won three more league titles. After he scored both of the team's goals in the 1968 Coupe de France final against Bordeaux, French president Charles de Gaulle handed him the trophy and said: **"La France, c'est vous!" ("You are France!")**. He later coached the Algerian national team and died in Algiers on November 8, 2024.



4. Carlos Caszely [Chile]

On September 11, 1973, the democratically elected government of Chilean president Salvador Allende was overthrown by a military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet. Within days, **Santiago's Estadio Nacional was converted into a detention camp**, coming to hold about 7,000 political prisoners. The situation was so dramatic that, in November, the Soviet Union asked FIFA to move the upcoming World Cup qualifying match they were due to play to a neutral venue, accusing the stadium of being stained with blood. When FIFA sent inspectors, the police hid the prisoners, and FIFA decreed the game was to be played as scheduled. The Soviet national team refused to play anyway, and **the Chilean players walked the ball into an empty net**, against no opponent, and qualified.

One of the stars of the Chilean national team was Carlos Caszely, the Colo-Colo striker nicknamed "*el rey del metro cuadrado*" ("king of the square meter"). Besides being a goalscorer, he was one of the very few leading Chilean footballers to display his opposition to the regime: when Pinochet came to see the squad off for the 1974 World Cup, **Caszely refused to shake the dictator's hand**. The consequences were immediate for his family: **his mother was subsequently detained and tortured**. At that World Cup in West Germany, Caszely also made history as the first player ever shown a red card (introduced at the 1970 tournament, but which had never been used until then).

In 1988, when Chileans voted on whether to extend Pinochet's rule, **Caszely and his mother, Olga Garrido, appeared on TV** to speak to the physical and mental torture she had suffered, hoping that "*El día de mañana todos juntos vivamos nuestra democracia libre*" ("Tomorrow we may all live our democracy together, freely"). **The "No" campaign won**, and a year later, Chile held its first democratic presidential election since the coup.



5. Sócrates, Democracia Corinthiana and Gaviões da Fiel [Brazil]

In the early 1980s, when Brazil was still ruled by the military regime installed after the 1964 coup, in São Paulo the players and president of Sport Club Corinthians chose to contribute to their country's history through a revolutionary decision. The team's leading footballers (Sócrates, Wladimir, Walter Casagrande and Zenon), together with the club's president Waldemar Pires, implemented what the advertising executive Washington Olivetto labeled ***Democracia Corinthiana***. **The squad made a point to decide everything collectively**: training, travel, new signings, even where and how to hold the *concentração* (pre-match training camp). Everyone's vote counted the same, from the players on the field to the support staff.

The experiment quickly spilled over into politics. In 1982, the backs of the players' shirts read "*Dia 15 vote*" ("Vote on the 15th"), urging fans to turn out for the first multiparty elections since the coup. And before the 1983 Paulista final, where they would successfully defend the previous year's title, the players walked out behind a banner reading "*Ganhar ou perder, mas sempre com democracia*" ("Win or lose, but always with democracy"). In 1984, the team joined *Diretas Já*, the mass movement advocating for direct presidential elections, and Sócrates promised to turn down an offer to play in Italy and stay in Brazil if Congress passed the pivotal Dante de Oliveira amendment. When the amendment didn't pass, Sócrates left for Fiorentina, Bruno Neri's former club.

The spirit of Democracia Corinthiana lives on in the Gaviões da Fiel, the Corinthians fan group founded in 1969, at the height of the dictatorship, to both support the club and hold it accountable. On the night of November 1, 2022, after Lula won the presidential run-off, some Gaviões da Fiel members broke up a blockade set by Bolsonaro supporters who refused to accept the result, hanging a banner reading **"We are for democracy"** and chanting Lula's name.



6. FC St. Pauli supporters [Germany]

In the 1980s, residents and activists illegally occupied buildings along Hamburg's Hafenstraße, fighting to save them from demolition and redevelopment. Many occupiers came from working-class families and held radical-left politics, while also facing youth unemployment and a housing shortage. A few hundred meters away from the Hafenstraße sat the Millerntor stadium, home of FC St. Pauli.

After saving their homes, the Hafenstraße squatters started attending St. Pauli's matches. **They carried Jolly Roger flags** with them, and the symbol was soon adopted as the club's unofficial emblem. As they filled the *Gegengerade* stand, the small neo-Nazi minority was pushed out, and thanks to their pressure in the early 1990s **St. Pauli became the first German club to explicitly ban racist chanting and neo-Nazi symbolism** from its matches. The Millerntor now bears the slogan "*Kein Fußball den Faschisten*" ("No football for fascists"), which St. Pauli players have also worn on their shirts for Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Today, the club continues to be member-owned. In 2014, in keeping with their "Refugees Welcome" banners around the stadium, **St. Pauli supporters helped found FC Lampedusa**, a team for refugees who came to Hamburg via the Italian island of Lampedusa. They have also organized fan displays of LGBTQ+ allyship, free football camps for local kids, and fundraising for homeless shelters.

On the genocide in Gaza, however, St. Pauli's stance has been controversial. While club management openly took a pro-Israel position, the organized supporters (Ultras) chose a more ambiguous stance, presenting themselves neither as openly pro-Israel nor as openly pro-Palestine, limiting themselves to "against antisemitism" banners, while displays of Palestine solidarity were performed by fans outside of the Ultras groups. The controversy had repercussions abroad, as the historic friendship between Ultrà Sankt Pauli and Celtic Glasgow's Green Brigade (one of the most vocal supporter groups in openly supporting Palestine) was ended following the incident.



7. Ultras Ahlawy [Egypt]

The Ultras Ahlawy supporters group was founded in 2007 to support the Cairo-based club Al Ahly. At the time, Egypt had been ruled by Hosni Mubarak since 1981. His government was repressive, ruling under what were introduced as emergency laws for the entirety of his 30 years in power, stifling political opposition with a brutal police state.

In this suffocating atmosphere, **the stadium was one of the few places where young Egyptians could gather, sing against authorities, and defy the police**. Through the practice of organized support, the Ultras honed their ability to be a disciplined organization. When the Revolution of Tahrir Square broke out in January of 2011, the Ultras Ahlawy organization did not officially join in, but many of its individual members did alongside Zamalek's Ultras White Knights, their fiercest rivals. The Ultras members were among the most experienced in **confronting the police during the mass protests, providing pivotal guidance** that contributed to Mubarak's resignation. After Mubarak fell, they kept protesting against the military council that replaced him.

On February 1, 2012, after a match in Port Said, Al Ahly fans were attacked by supporters of the home side, Al-Masry. Inexplicably, the exit gates were locked, and the police did not intervene. **Seventy-two Al Ahly fans were killed** in what the ultras, and many Egyptians, believe was revenge for their role in the revolution. In 2015, **a Cairo court banned Ultras groups altogether, labeling them terrorist organizations**. On May 16, 2018, Ultras Ahlawy announced it was suspending its activity indefinitely, as many of its members had been arrested.



8. Lily Parr and the Dick, Kerr Ladies [United Kingdom]

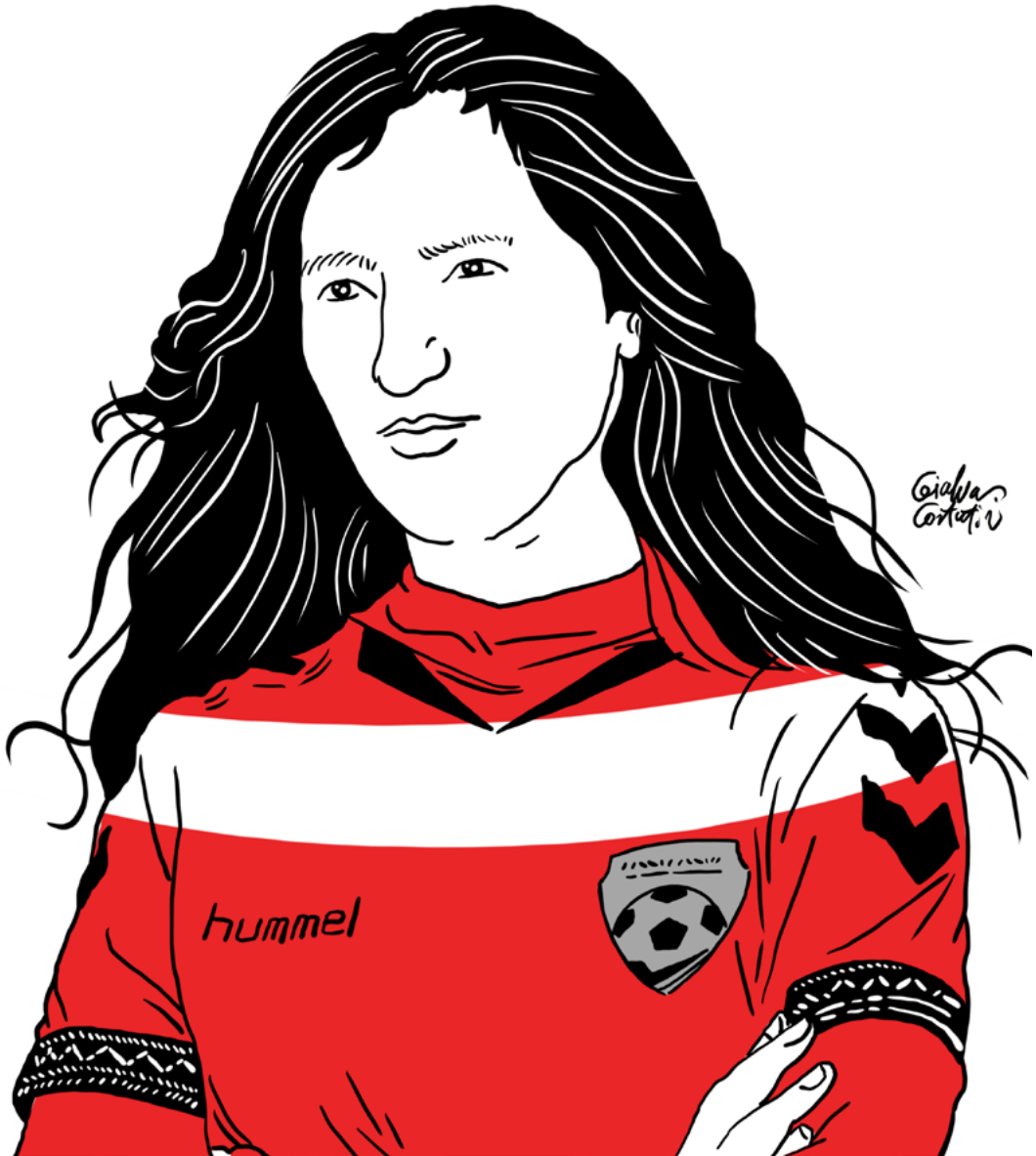
In October 1917, a group of women working at the Dick, Kerr & Co. munitions factory in Preston, who had replaced male workers fighting in the First World War, started playing football during their work breaks. What began as a pastime quickly developed into something more serious: they formed the Dick, Kerr Ladies Football Club, one of England's earliest women's teams that went on to keep playing until 1965.

The team played its first game on Christmas Day 1917 in front of about 10,000 people. **They chose to play their games for charity**, first collecting money for wounded soldiers, and later for the unemployed as well as for the families of striking miners. In 1920, they beat a French side 2-0 in front of 25,000 fans in what can be considered the first women's international match, while on Boxing Day (December 26) 1920 they played St. Helens Ladies at Goodison Park, Everton's ground, **in front of 53,000 fans**, a record for a women's club match that would stand unbroken for 98 years.

Their success would also become the source of their biggest problem: on December 5, 1921, **the Football Association banned women's football from its members' grounds**, claiming that the sport was unsuitable for women on top of accusations that charitable donations from the proceeds were being misappropriated. As a result, women's football was marginalized until the ban was lifted in 1971.

The star of the team was **Lily Parr**, a left winger who scored nearly 1,000 goals in a career that lasted until 1951. She was an iconic figure who lived openly with her same-sex partner, Mary, at a time when that was very rare. Since her death in 1978, **she has become an LGBT icon**. In 2002 she was the only woman inducted to the English Football Hall of Fame, and in 2019 the first female footballer commemorated with a statue at the National Football Museum in Manchester.

Khalida Popal and the Afghan women's national team



9. Khalida Popal and the Afghan women's team [Afghanistan]

Khalida Popal was born in 1987 in Afghanistan, where her mother taught her to play football. Under the repressive Taliban regime, her family fled the country and settled in Pakistan. After the regime fell in 2001 they returned to Afghanistan, but women playing sports was still not normalized, so to safely play the sport Khalida Popal and her friends found an isolated yard to play in and slowly attracted more and more female players for their games.

In 2007, she obtained a mandate from the Afghanistan Football Federation to **set up the country's first women's national team** and, in their first match, beat a women's team from the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Even as the number of girls playing football steadily grew, Popal continued to face prejudice and abuse, with disapproving onlookers throwing stones at practice, and **players and their families receiving death threats**.

In 2011, when the threats extended to her wider family, Popal had to leave for Denmark, where she lived in a refugee camp for a year. There, she founded Girl Power, an organization which uses sport as a channel for inclusion of women from migrant backgrounds. In August 2021, the Taliban returned to power and banned women from playing sports altogether. As national team players became targets of Taliban retaliation, Popal, working from Denmark, **helped evacuate them** to Australia, the UK, and Portugal.

Even with most of the Afghan national team players displaced, Popal pressed FIFA to let Afghan women to continue representing their country in football matches through the #StandWithAfghanWomen petition and the Hope Cup in Melbourne: "**My power is my voice, and my voice is strong**", she declared. In April 2026, **FIFA finally allowed Afghan women in exile to represent their country in official matches** through a landmark governance reform.



10. Megan Rapinoe and the USWNT [United States]

Even in one of the world's richest countries, female footballers have long been paid less than men. In 2016, five players of the US Women's National Team (Hope Solo, Carli Lloyd, Alex Morgan, Megan Rapinoe and Becky Sauerbrunn) **filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission**. Although they were World Champions, the US Soccer Federation paid them less than the less successful US Men's National Team.

When the complaint process stalled, on March 8, 2019, International Women's Day, the players sued US Soccer for gender discrimination under the Equal Pay Act and Title VII. The numbers cited in the lawsuit were stark: the men earned $5.375 million for reaching the 2014 World Cup round of 16, while the women got $1.725 million for winning the 2015 World Cup. That summer, the crowd at the Stade de Lyon chanted "Equal pay!" as they defeated the Netherlands 2–0 to win their fourth (and second consecutive) FIFA Women's World Cup title. Finally, on February 22, 2022, the federation settled for $24 million and **committed to equal pay for the men's and women's teams** in all competitions. A new collective agreement in May 2022 made the decision binding, even stipulating equal World Cup prize money.

In addition to this protest, Megan Rapinoe (one of the most famous and talented players of the US Women's National Team) proved her commitment to fighting many different forms of discrimination present in American society. In September 2016, before a game of her club team, Seattle Reign, against the Chicago Red Stars, **she knelt during the national anthem in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick**. "Being a gay American, I know what it means to look at the flag and not have it protect all of your liberties," she explained. She knelt again when wearing the national team shirt, leading US Soccer to adopt a rule requiring players to stand for the anthem, which was subsequently repealed in June 2020.



11. *Mondiali Antirazzisti* (Anti-Racist World Cup) and *Calcio Popolare* (Popular Football) [Italy]

During the 1990s, **many Italian *curve*** (the terraces where ultras gather) **were gradually co-opted by the far right**, increasingly displaying symbols like Celtic crosses and pictures of Mussolini, while also chanting racist slogans. Ultras groups made far-right connections explicit in their very names. In tandem with hate and racism, violence in the stands also grew, with authorities responding with repressive measures that included heavy policing and stadium bans.

Progetto Ultrà, launched by the sport nonprofit UISP in Emilia-Romagna (a founding member of FARE, the Football Against Racism in Europe network) decided to reverse the trend by **working with the ultras, not against them**. In 1997, it launched the Anti-Racist World Cup, a non-competitive tournament where ultras groups, migrant communities, anti-racist associations, and local teams all face each other in football matches, while also lodging and camping together, as well as attending concerts and debates organized around the tournament.

The *Calcio Popolare* movement grew from a similar initiative, posturing that **football belongs to its fans**, not to multinational corporations. The movement is embodied by amateur clubs like Paco Rigore, which, by eschewing external funding in favor of grassroots organizing, reclaimed an abandoned public facility in Turin, transforming it into a space where local youth can play sports, connect, and build community. Other clubs have translated this ethos into openness to migrants and refugees, like Milan's St. Ambroeus, a team composed of refugees that has incorporated anti-fascist and anti-racist values explicitly in its statutes.

Both the Anti-Racist World Cup and Calcio Popolare prove that Ultras and their sacred meeting place, the curva, need not just be a section of the stadium from which to follow the game, but can be a community that shapes its own identity. This is also the idea behind the Curva Bruno Neri, named after the footballer and partisan whose story opens this exhibition: **Ultras culture can be a force for liberation, something that can only happen when people organize and resist**.



Liberazione is an independent collective of Italian immigrants in New York who believe that people united can shape the world against authoritarianism. It began with a festival in Brooklyn on April 25th, the day Italy celebrates its liberation from Fascism and Nazi occupation, connecting the history of the Italian Resistance to the struggles of today. Through exhibitions, talks, parties, and liberazione.day, our online platform, Liberazione uses culture to confront the questions shaping our society and to keep the spirit of resistance alive all year round.

Secret Futebol Club started in 2011 as a group of Brooklyn creatives organizing pickup games around the city. It has since grown into a creative studio and community hub where football, design, and culture meet: a network of players, artists, and superfans, as well as a studio in East Williamsburg that works with some of the biggest names in the sport. Their space is open to the football community, which makes it the natural home for Football Rebels.

Gianluca Costantini is an Italian comics journalist and activist. In the United States, he collaborates with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), NYC Anarchist Black Cross, Crucial Comix, World War 3 Illustrated, and DAWN (Democracy for the Arab World Now). He is the author of the graphic memoir Zodiac, created with Ai Weiwei and published by Penguin Random House. In 2019, he received the Human Rights and Art Award from Amnesty International Italy. His most recent books include Xi Jinping: The Silent Emperor and Volodymyr Zelensky – The Voice of the People, both published in France by Éditions Delcourt. All his work is available at www.channeldraw.org

FOOTBALL REBELS

A project by Liberazione

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To all who never played only for themselves.

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