

Controversial reputation masked Mino Raiola's affable, loyal personality



- Italian football agent who died Saturday aged 54 often hated by clubs, managers but loved by players he represented

One of football's most colorful and controversial figures died on Saturday aged 54. The passing of Italian super-agent Mino Raiola had wrongly been reported a few days earlier, much to the annoyance of the man himself, severely ill but defiant to the last.



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On April 30, however, the announcement of his death was made by his family on the agent's official Twitter account.

“It is with infinite sadness that we announce the passing of the kindest and coolest player agent who ever lived,” the statement said.

As tributes poured in from former clients and many fans, a more sympathetic image of Raiola, perhaps not one seen by most, emerged.

Throughout my career I had met him several times, often before TV interviews with players he represented. At these meetings, I always found him to be affable, friendly, collaborative, and relaxed, especially in the trademark way he dressed down.

On one occasion, he said: “I dress so badly that when it comes to business everyone underestimates me and I make more money.”

Raiola was a character. Unlike fellow high-profile agent Jorge Mendes, who always presents himself impeccably in his professional meetings, Raiola did not care much about his image.

Chubby and short, he mostly dressed casually — T-shirt, untucked shirt, and sneakers, and sometimes even in tracksuits.

“You’re fat. If they ever make a movie about my life, you’ll be played by (American actor) Danny DeVito,” Zlatan Ibrahimovic told him in 2017, according to the Swedish striker’s autobiography.

Raiola was an easy going and friendly person. He helped me interview one of his most famous representatives, Ibrahimovic, in February last year and we had agreed that I would soon interview another of his stars, Borussia Dortmund’s Norwegian phenomenon Erling Haaland.

Raiola’s story was a strange one. At the age of 15 he was employed at a pizzeria, and at 19 he worked at McDonald’s.

But after becoming a football agent, he would go on to become feared by clubs, disliked by managers, and loved by his players. Above all, what was most important to him, was making a fortune for himself and his clients.

He laughed unabashedly when he recalled (former Manchester United manager) Alex Ferguson once referring to him as, “the fat man with the mafia ways.”

Raiola was tough and relentless in fighting for his players, always striving for the maximum salary and conditions for his representatives and of course the biggest cut for himself.

He was known for asking for stratospheric commissions. He famously became the all-time record commission maker with the reported \$23.1 million (22 million euros) he pocketed in 2016 for taking Paul Pogba from Juventus to Manchester United. In recent years he has averaged between \$68 million and \$73 million per year in commissions, making him one of the richest agents in football after Mendes, and Jonathan Barnett.

He was fiercely loyal to his clients, fostering an almost blood pact with them. A player entering Raiola's circle was almost guaranteed his value would skyrocket.

In a way, Raiola played a crucial role in reshaping the role of football agents. Before him, for decades, the agent type was expected to be elegant in their looks, manners, and communications. The look would invariably include a coat and tie, gold cufflinks, a Rolex, and gold pen for signing contracts.

Raiola dismissed such pageantry. Oversized polo shirts, Bermuda shorts, and flip-flops that, at meetings in luxury hotels, to some seemed offensive. In fact, it was a way of marking his territory, of making it clear: I am in charge, I am the boss. His strategy almost always worked.

Following his passing, clubs such as Paris Saint-Germain, Real Madrid, AC Milan, and Napoli, among others, were quick to send out their messages of condolences, a sign of the respect he had gained over the years.

In recent days questions have been raised about how the careers of clients such as Haaland, Ibrahimovic, Pogba, Gianluigi Donnarumma, Matthijs de Ligt, Lorenzo Insigne, Marco Verratti, and Romelu Lukaku will now be managed. Some of them are nearing the end of their contracts and are expecting big moves during the summer transfer window.

Perhaps things will not change too much, as Raiola had a well-assembled business structure, with his agency — Raiola Sport Business Strategy — now expected to be run by his cousin Vincenzo Raiola, and Brazilian lawyer Rafaela Pimienta.

Hours after Raiola's death, Mendes said that his rival was one of the best football agents in the world and that he would never be forgotten. Few will argue with those words.
