



NAPLES: A tourist takes a photo of a mural painting of late Argentinian football legend Diego Maradona at the so-called "Maradona square" in the Quartieri Spagnoli district of Naples yesterday. — AFP photos

The cult of Maradona runs strong in Naples, a year after his death

NAPLES: It is almost 30 years since Diego Maradona ended his remarkable playing spell at Napoli but a year on from his death at the age of 60 the Argentine great is as present as ever in the Neapolitan world. His name is stitched onto shirts, daubed on the walls of the southern Italian city and etched into the hearts of the people, many of whom are too young to have ever seen him play.

And today, on the first anniversary of his death, a bronze statue will be unveiled in front of the stadium which now bears his name — Stadio Diego Armando Maradona — to celebrate the "eternal" link with the "Pibe de Oro", the golden boy.

Diego is everywhere, from the central station all the way to the official Napoli store where his face stares out from the stylized fingerprint on the jersey in the window.

The shirt, worn by the Napoli players in November, is probably one of the last to be found in the city. Produced in limited numbers and sold for charity, these collector's edition jerseys have long sold out on the club's website.

For those who set sail for Naples in memory of Maradona, the first stop is often Mario Filardi's famous fresco in the Spanish Quarter painted in 1990 and restored in 2016.

It is a meandering walk from the ferry

terminal and the wandering pilgrim is sure to pass other images painted on the walls as well as posters for the film "The Hand of God", Paolo Sorrentino's homage to the Naples of the 1980s which was released yesterday in cinemas in Italy.

But the stroll to the Spanish Quarter is worth it. "It was important to come", says Aicha, 17, who braved heavy rain to come to meditate in front of the famous mural which shows a shaggy-haired Maradona in Napoli's powder blue shirt running earnestly towards goal.

It is in a humble surrounding, set back from the road, often found with a couple of cars parked in front. But this yard is dedicated to the worship of Maradona, and adorned with photos, flags, jerseys and other relics left by the football faithful.

Aisha came all the way across Italy from Bari on the east coast, around 260 kilometers, with her family to "see the way the city remembers him". "You can see that it's not just Napoli shirts, but most of the teams he's played with, and pictures of him as a player and also as a man," she told AFP. "It's interesting how normal people, not just supporters, bonded with him."

Facundo Perez, 26, an Argentinian living in Europe, also came specially to Naples to "greet" Maradona, a year after his death. "For me, Diego is a god. To see the flags,

and the fact that he conquered the heart of Naples, it's crazy. I came here to try and understand how much people love him."

Frescoes keep blooming on the walls in Naples and the region beyond. Street artist Mario Casti, who has already produced ten in the last year, was still at work this week finishing off another one for the anniversary. Maradona also inspired the sculptor Domenico Sepe who has created the work that will stand in front of Napoli's stadium.

'Eternity'

"The work was born from a personal need," Sepe told AFP, gazing at the barely-finished sculpture in a foundry in the Pianura district. "On the announcement of his death, something was missing from my daily life. And as a Neapolitan and also as a Napoli supporter and as a sculptor, I decided to pay homage to him with a work that offers him eternity."

A sculptor in the classical tradition, Sepe wanted his majestic bronze to present Maradona almost as a "Greek God". What he has produced is a Maradona with focused gaze, the number 10 on his back, stocky legs bursting, ball at his feet, charging upfield on a pitch the shape of Argentina.

It is a pose reminiscent of the muscular Maradona who inspired Argentina to victory in the 1986 World Cup — although he is



Italian sculptor Domenico Sepe shows a life-size bronze statue of the late Argentine soccer legend Diego Armando Maradona, on Monday at his studio in Naples.

obviously wearing a Napoli shirt. Another statue will be installed in the stadium on Sunday ahead of Napoli's Serie A match against Lazio, when the home side will again be wearing the famous 'Diego shirt'.

Napoli are currently top of Serie A and

there is no doubt that the most fitting tribute would be to win the title. They have only done it twice before, in 1987 and 1990 when Maradona was truly in his pomp. Little wonder the Neapolitans worship him still. — AFP

Knicks hold off Lakers, Mavs edge Clippers in overtime

LOS ANGELES: Evan Fournier scored 26 points and Immanuel Quickley put up 12 of his 14 in the fourth quarter Tuesday as the New York Knicks thwarted the short-handed Los Angeles Lakers' comeback bid in a 106-100 NBA victory.

The Lakers, playing without suspended superstar LeBron James, trailed by 25 in the second quarter. They rallied to tie the score twice in the third period, but never managed to get in front despite a triple-double of 31 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists from Russell Westbrook.

The Knicks scored 36 points in the first quarter, but the Lakers closed the first half on a 16-4 scoring run and opened the third period with a 9-0 run to make it close. They tied it at 79-79 on Carmelo Anthony's dunk, and Westbrook tied it again at 81-81 with a driving layup.

But with Knicks star Julius Randle — who scored 20 points with 16 rebounds — in late foul trouble, Quickley stepped up for New York, hitting four

three-pointers in the final quarter as the hosts held on for the win. "Big shotmaker," Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau said of Quickley. "It's interesting, in the beginning of the year he started off and wasn't making it and it didn't faze him one bit."

"If they're in and out, he's always thinking the next one is going in. Great shooters have short memories. He does," Thibodeau added. Fournier said plays down the stretch kept the Knicks in it, but he added that losing the big lead before hanging on for the win was a "perfect example" of the inconsistency that has hindered the Knicks. "We are very capable of playing really, really good basketball, getting big leads and all of a sudden not so well," he said. "Then they get confident, we lose rhythm and we let them back into the game."

James was serving a one-game suspension after a bloody clash with Detroit's Isaiah Stewart on Sunday. James was ejected after "recklessly" lashing out at Stewart, leaving him with blood pouring from a facial injury. Stewart was suspended for two games for repeatedly going after James in the wake of the clash.

Lakers star Anthony Davis, playing through illness, scored 20 points and pulled down six rebounds. Avery Bradley delivered 15 points for the Lakers and former Knick Carmelo Anthony added 12 as the Lakers lost for the fourth time in five games.

As the Lakers continued their road trip, there was drama back in Los Angeles, where the Dallas Mavericks emerged from a back-and-forth battle with a 112-104 overtime victory over the Clippers. Kristaps Porzingis scored 30 points and Luka Doncic — back in action after missing three games with knee and ankle injuries — added 26 for the Mavericks, who led by 10 with less than four minutes left in regulation.

Clippers forward Paul George fired a three-pointer from the corner over the outstretched arms of Terance Mann to tie the score at time expired in regulation. But the Mavericks dominated overtime, outscoring the Clippers 9-1 with the aid of six points from Porzingis to seal the victory.

Herro ball

In Detroit, Tyler Herro scored 31 points and pulled down eight rebounds off the bench as the Miami Heat rallied for a 100-92 victory over the Pistons to launch a four-game road trip. Jimmy Butler and Bam Adebayo added 15 points apiece for the Heat, who trailed by nine going into the fourth quarter. Herro's jump shot with 8:09 to play gave the Heat their first lead since the first quarter, and they pulled away from there.

Jerami Grant had 21 points and seven rebounds for the Pistons, who had led the Lakers by 15 after



NEW YORK: Julius Randle #30 of the New York Knicks passes around DeAndre Jordan #10 of the Los Angeles Lakers in the second half at Madison Square Garden on Tuesday in New York City. — AFP

three quarters on Sunday only to come up empty. In Portland, CJ McCollum scored 32 points and Damian Lillard added 25 as the Trail Blazers beat Denver 119-100, dealing the Nuggets their fifth straight defeat. — AFP