How rife is taunting in football?

By Richard Hookham

Whatever Marco Materazzi said to warrant Zinedine Zidane's head-butt and dismissal in the World Cup final, his deliberate incitement certainly had the desired result.

While the Italian defender was laying splayed out following Zidane's shocking assault, he knew his wind-up tactics had worked a treat.

Disciples of the black art of provocation could have only sat back and saluted the way Materazzi set the trap for Zidane with a diatribe of allegedly inflammatory taunts and a less-than-subtle squeeze of the Frenchman's left nipple.

Disastrously, Zidane took the bait and became another high-profile victim of the ancient art of sledging - a tactic which, when carefully deployed in football, can be as effective as any clever tweak of team formation.

But how common are the wind-up tactics deployed by Materazzi which sparked such a devastating reaction from Zidane?

According to former England and AC Milan striker Mark Hateley, they are seen as a fundamental and legitimate way of gaining an advantage.

"In Italy, it's part and parcel of the game and a basic way of trying to get one over on your opposite number," Hateley told BBC Sport.

"That sort of things goes on all the time. It's non-stop with the defenders, especially. They pinch you, try to annoy you by telling you you are playing really badly. I've even known spitting.

"They try and get a reaction from you, it's always been like that and it always will be."
Italians refer to this sort of behaviour on the football field as "furbo", which means cunning or savvy.

The mentality of the Italian player is to do almost anything in order to gain an advantage - pulling shirts, diving, trying to get a player sent off or winding an opponent up is all part and parcel of the game.

Hateley, who made 66 appearances for AC Milan between 1984-1987, insists that provocation is common at all levels of football, regardless of the country.

"It starts in the tunnel as soon as you come out of the changing rooms - balls might start to get kicked around and a 'stray' one might 'accidently' hit an opponent," added Hateley.

"Already, you've got someone fuming before they're even out on the pitch!

"Most teams target their opponents' weaknesses. For example, if one particular defender is slow, you put your fastest man up against him to try and break him down. If he has a temperament problem, you work on that too.

"Players can lose focus and concentration because they are being distracted with their marker always on their case.

"Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but I'm really disappointed that in this case it worked on Zidane, regardless of what was said to him."

Former England star Chris Waddle agrees that winding up opponents was common in the game when he played.

But he says, in his experience, it always stopped short of personal insults.

Waddle said: "It was never an issue when I played, either here in England, playing abroad for England or playing in France for Marseille.

"Every team in England has its wind-up merchants, some teams have three or four.

"The stuff dished out was mainly mickey-taking stuff, a bit of banter which you shrugged off and accepted as part and parcel of the game.

"It was mostly along the lines of 'I've won this or that, what have you won?'

"I've also heard some really funny stuff which had you in stitches."

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But I don't think I never heard anything really nasty or personal in all my years of playing, and I can only think that the episode with Zidane and Materazzi was a one-off."

Hateley believes that Italy's tactics in the World Cup final may also have led to Zidane's frustrations boiling over.

The 45-year-old ex-Rangers hitman, who also plied his trade in France with Monaco between 1987 and 1990, felt Zidane and his team-mates were becoming increasingly frustrated at failing to create a winning goal.

"Because Italy don't play that far up the field it's difficult to get behind them," Hateley said.

"You are looking for the killer pass but they just sit in there. They are masters of just soaking up pressure."

"That, coupled with the verbal taunts and the little kicks and tugs can be a recipe for disaster if the opposition have players who overreact."

"I'm sure we'll eventually hear what Materazzi said to make Zidane snap, but in reality the Italian defence did their job."

Hateley insists, however, that whatever role Materazzi played in tainting Zidane's reputation in his swansong match, the World Cup winners deserved to be crowned champions.

"The way they conducted themselves off the field was a great credit to them," said Hateley.

"They were one the best teams to mix with the locals in Germany and made a lot of friends. Hopefully, this episode doesn't overshadow that."