

A collage of football-related images. At the top, a large portrait of a man with long, dark, curly hair and a determined expression. To his right, a smaller portrait of a man with curly hair and a serious expression. Below these, a white football jersey with a crest and a blue and white jersey. In the foreground, a player in a white and black striped jersey with the number 14 is seen from behind, holding a football. To the left, a player in a blue and white jersey is running with a football. At the bottom, a line of football players in red jerseys and white shorts stands in a row.

NEIL
FREDRIK
JENSEN

THE GREAT
UNCROWNED

FOOTBALL'S MOST
CELEBRATED LOSERS

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No disgrace in almost being champions

IN 1974, I predicted the Netherlands would win the World Cup in Germany. It wasn't a brave forecast in my opinion; I had watched Ajax Amsterdam win three consecutive European Cups, delighted in the way they played and even persuaded my mother to doctor a white football shirt with a red band to create an improvised Ajax top. I wanted the Dutch to win the competition because I felt they represented the future of football, a game I had lived and breathed for most of my life. When Johan Cruyff and his pals were beaten 2-1 by West Germany in the final in Munich, I was devastated and felt the football-watching public had been deprived. I wasn't Dutch, but I was an adopted son of the Netherlands for many years. If countries were clubs, I was a fan.

The Dutch were unlucky – unlucky to come up against the host nation, unlucky to have run out of steam after charming the world in the World Cup, unlucky to have scored early in that final, unlucky to have had the burden of history on their orange-clad shoulders. In any other World Cup, with the possible exception of 1970 in Mexico, they would surely have been worthy winners. This was an exceptional team, a golden generation of players marshalled by one of the most influential

figures in 20th-century football, but ultimately, a side that failed when it truly mattered. Four years on the Dutch still had the makings of a great team, but once more they were beaten by the host nation. Although their margin of defeat in the final was two goals in Buenos Aires, they were actually closer to victory than many might recall. If Robbie Rensenbrink's tame prod in the dying seconds of normal time had been an inch or two to the right, Argentina would have been beaten and the Netherlands would have had to work out how to get home in one piece.

Sadly the Dutch dream went unfulfilled across two World Cups; they really were nearly men. Their best was not quite good enough, but nobody would have minded if they had won at least one World Cup, Germans and Argentinians excepted of course. That they managed to reach two consecutive finals – four years apart – says a lot about their underlying quality.

More recently, when Liverpool went through the 2018/19 season losing just one game and finishing just one point behind Manchester City, you could sympathise with Jürgen Klopp and his team for producing a spectacular campaign but still being denied the title by an even more proficient side.

The battle for top spot had produced two teams at the height of their game; City won 32 of their 38 games, Liverpool 30. The Reds were 25 points clear of third-placed Chelsea and their only defeat was on New Year's Day at City's Etihad Stadium. Furthermore, both teams scored goals proficiently and swept up the major trophies. City won all three domestic prizes in England while Liverpool were European champions for the sixth time. It is difficult to call Liverpool unlucky, but it was their misfortune that they came up against an all-conquering Manchester City team.

However, it has to be remembered that Liverpool, themselves, were in that exact position in the late 1970s and

1980s and their machine-like run of success denied some very good teams their moment of triumph, such as Queens Park Rangers in 1976, arguably the most 'continental' of English sides in the 1970s. Although Rangers entertained with their flowing, thoughtful style, there was a sense of the inevitable about Liverpool's eventual victory in 1975/76. They had, after all, been there before, while QPR had a 'team for the moment' that had a limited life span. Three years later, Rangers were relegated to the old Second Division.

Similarly, Ipswich Town under Bobby Robson were frequently in the mix when it came to major silverware, but found that their small-club status prevented a level of sustainability that would guarantee success. Quite simply, a lack of resources, be it squad size or financial clout, has prevented some very good line-ups from become winners rather than unfortunate losers.

Not that this has always consigned smaller clubs to a life in the shadows; Ipswich won the league in 1962, but this was largely attributable to the methods of Alf (later Sir Alf) Ramsey, who took a journeyman team to unprecedented success, overcoming the challenge of the great Tottenham double-winners of 1960/61. The only comparable situation could well be Brian Clough and Nottingham Forest in 1977/78, although Forest did sustain their golden period for a few seasons, while Ipswich were soon back in the second tier of the English game. In both cases, the genius of their respective managers was the catalyst for a period of high achievement. In Ipswich's case, in 1962 they benefitted from being an unknown quantity in what was their first season in the First Division, while Forest's title, while well deserved, also took advantage of changes at Liverpool, notably the transition from Kevin Keegan to Kenny Dalglish. They were soon back in the saddle and more rampant than ever, although for a few years, Forest chased them hard.

In some ways, the tale of Leeds United also owes itself to a lack of strength in depth. Anyone who witnessed the period between 1969 and 1973 will be only too aware of how the Yorkshire club failed at the final hurdle all too frequently. Between 1967/68 and 1973/74 Leeds won six major prizes, but in the period from 1964/65 to 1974/75 they were runners-up or finalists eight times. On three occasions, they finished second in the Football League by the narrowest of margins. There was little doubt that Leeds were the best team unit around at that time, but their trophy haul doesn't necessarily bear that out. Why did they lose out so often?

A psychologist would make a good living out of analysing Leeds, but their high level of intensity and rather insular outlook of us against the world made for a lot of drama. They were a wonderful team, but beyond the first-choice 11 or 12 their resources were certainly stretched. They were also Don Revie's team, so when he went the impetus gradually faded. In truth, Leeds should have been champions half a dozen times in the 1970s, but they created the frenetic cup-tie mentality that seemed to accompany every game and when they lost, their critics rejoiced. They also tried to fight battles on many fronts, exhausting their team physically and mentally. It was no coincidence that when they were champions, in 1969 and 1974, their focus was purely on finishing top rather than winning everything in sight.

Intensity and focus has its place and can certainly be exercised over the course of a World Cup or European Championship campaign, which usually comprises half a dozen or so matches. Even the most limited teams can conjure up the concentration and purpose required to be successful. Likewise, a team can lose its momentum just as easily and become underachievers. In some ways, the Netherlands of 1974 did just that, allowing themselves to forget that possession has to be coupled with goalscoring in a World Cup Final.

The case of the Dutch, along with the Hungarians of 1954 and Brazil in 1982, confirms that losers are not always forgotten. Indeed, there has been a certain amount of romanticisation about teams that have played wonderful football but end up tragic losers. We have learnt that while the best teams will invariably win long-haul league titles, they do not always emerge on top in knockout competitions or high-pressured tournaments. Hence, the Netherlands, Hungary and Brazil have exited World Cups with little reward other than the glowing praise of the public.

In each example, these teams all fell short of expectations because of capitulation in a vital game: the Dutch, as mentioned, took the lead against the West Germans but lost in the 1974 final; Hungary were beaten 3-2 by the Germans after leading 2-0 in Berne 20 years previously; and Brazil's instinct to attack after equalising against Italy saw them surprisingly lose 3-2 in 1982 when they were expected to go on to win the World Cup. All three games are etched in the psyche of football in their respective countries as defining moments when paradise got lost. Human error, concentration and the unpredictable nature of the game made them all into nearly men.

We should not be too surprised that this can happen in football, given the minuscule margins between success and failure. One goal changes the entire outcome of a game; indeed it can alter the end result of an entire season. The FA Cup Final provides a great example of how the fortunes of a team can switch completely by a single goal. Since 1946/47, 48 of the 75 finals have been decided by a margin of one goal, while 24 of these have been 1-0 victories (or defeats). Little wonder that many finals have been tense and often tactically sterile, decided in a split second.

And then there's luck, an element that many coaches have tried to drive out of professional football. 'You make your own luck'; 'the harder I work, the luckier I become'; 'there's

no such thing as luck'; these are just some of the ways good old-fashioned 'Lady Luck' has been described. Bad luck in football often manifests itself in the form of an incident that can change a match. Steven Gerrard's notorious fall that let in Demba Ba is still being sung about today, but it was a defining moment in the 2014 season in England and almost certainly deprived Liverpool of the Premier League title. That was certainly bad luck. John Terry's penalty in Moscow, the result of an ill-timed slip, unluckily deprived Chelsea of the Champions League in 2008.

Go back further and the notorious offside decision that never was in 1971 arguably cost Leeds United the championship in a game against West Bromwich Albion, while countless injuries in major games have altered the course of football history. Luck may play a part, but so does cheating and gamesmanship. How else can you describe the famous 'Hand of God' incident in Mexico City in 1986? It was England's misfortune that Diego Maradona got away with blatantly scoring with his hand. That was bad luck for England, but it owed its origins to what many today would call 'shithousery'.

Success can be measured in different ways and is forever relative. Today, it is very difficult to imagine a tiny country being world champions, such as Uruguay in 1930 and 1950, or a small club like Wimbledon winning a major honour. For most, lower-level victories such as promotion would represent the peak of their achievements. In England, 50 per cent of the 92 English Premier League and Football League clubs have won major silverware in some shape or form. Many do not even get close to 'nearly men' status.

Some believe football has become a game of 'winner takes all' and that there are too few moments when clubs can celebrate. Therefore, they argue, we need a system that creates more winners than we currently have. The victors and their spoils are well-televised, garlanded with golden ticker-tape and

jets of flame unnecessarily heating the stadium. The scenes are very much a cliché and a statement about the way we see success in the modern age of celebrity.

Today, we almost expect football's top players to be consistently successful because they play for the leading clubs. Consider that Lionel Messi has won 11 league titles and more than 160 caps for Argentina, while his rival, Cristiano Ronaldo, has won seven and almost 200 respectively. Both have played in World Cups but neither have won the competition, yet this has not dulled the lustre of their reputations. George Best, considered one of the all-time greats, won very few honours in his career and played for Northern Ireland on the international stage. He never appeared in the World Cup, like the great Alfredo Di Stéfano, but their place in football's pantheon is secure. You do not have to be a world champion to be remembered.

Thankfully, the game has always acknowledged that it takes two to tango, that we cannot all be winners and there are losers. Glorious losers, unlucky losers, outfought losers and quite simply, second-best losers – football has them all. There are a host of factors why there are achievers and why there are teams that couldn't quite get there. But being number two should not be considered failure, far from it. Why else would we hold teams like Hungary in 1954, QPR of 1976, Brazil in 1982 and Newcastle United's 1996 Premier League challengers in such high esteem? We remember them because they gave us moments to savour and that makes them winners by so many different criteria. If we celebrate those who contributed to making the season so interesting and competitive, we can remove some of the 'win or bust' aspect to football, and that might just make people feel better about not being champions but being very good nearly men.