



Andy Bargh

# A LONG TIME COMING

The Inside Story of Scotland's  
Journey Through the 2026  
World Cup Qualifiers

# Contents

Acknowledgements.....	6
1. Euros Exit.....	9
2. Poland and Portugal.....	18
3. Croatia and Portugal.....	38
4. Croatia and Poland.....	59
5. World Cup Draw.....	76
6. Nations League Play-Off First Leg.....	81
7. Nations League Play-Off Second Leg.....	95
8. Summer Games.....	104
9. Denmark (Away).....	119
10. Belarus (Away).....	136
11. Greece (Home).....	146
12. Belarus (Home).....	165
13. Greece (Away).....	179
14. Denmark (Home).....	199

# Chapter 1

## Euros Exit

SOME SCOTLAND players sunk to their knees with enough desolation to forge a crater. Their pulsating pursuit of progress to the Euro 2024 knockout stages was over. Relentless for 90 minutes, a Scottish siege in Stuttgart should have brought an opening goal for Steve Clarke and the side to savour, but saves here, a post there, Hungarian deflections and their bodies on the line thereafter was a survival mission to admire as they begged Scotland to cease and desist. Hungary's winner in the 100th minute allowed them to live with hope on three points for another few days, but Scotland were out on one. Among the deflation, some solace could be found in the lack of regret. Granted, regret in the factual conclusion of the group, but with the performance in this must-win game? How could one possibly wallow when it was God Damn Rotten Luck's fault that we didn't find the back of Hungary's net before they found ours with the game's final kick? On any other sunny, summer's day in Stuttgart, that would have been three or four to Scotland. History would have been written by the first Scotland team to reach the knockout stage of a major tournament. Defeat snatched from victory's jaws, again!

Ultimately, only the first sentence of that paragraph can stand up in court.

Must-win, it was. After being mauled 5-1 by the Germans in the tournament's opener, Scotland refused to flatline against the Swiss and drew 1-1 in the north-west. Winner takes all in game three,

and faith had been kept. Supporters crammed into trams to proceed to the MHP Arena and for hours before the game we queued for bratwursts and beers. *Murdered down in Munich, one point in Cologne, three points here in Stuttgart, and we're never going home!* The pint cup with the host stadiums printed on it was sought and kept as a souvenir. The atmosphere was genuinely joyous, as it usually is; like the start of a spring-break horror film, with teens leaping off the boardwalk without the faintest idea of what lurked beneath and the devastation that would soon unfold. This was a Film4 repeat.

Must-win, it was. Anybody unfamiliar with the evening's context would have leapt to the conclusion this was the group's dead rubber or perhaps even a pre-tournament friendly accidentally arranged three weeks behind schedule. Victory imperative, Scotland's first shot on target came in the seventh minute of a chaotic second-half stoppage time. Kevin Csoboth hit the post, that aforementioned shot from Grant Hanley was saved, Callum McGregor was prevented from pulling a point-blank trigger with a last-ditch tackle and Csoboth scored from the subsequent counter-attack; the latest goal ever scored at a European Championship. A point would have kept Scotland interested in the tournament for a couple of days, but two would ultimately have sent them home with how other results developed. Three points and a goal difference of minus three wasn't even enough for Hungary to get through in the end.

Must-win, it was. Reflecting on the Euros in 2021, captain Andy Robertson advised there would be 'no regrets' this time. Hanley's rather tame shot from 16 yards was only Scotland's fourth goal-bound shot across the three games. There were two instances at the tournament of a team failing to have a crack during the first half of a game. Yes, you don't need me to write it. Their total of 17 efforts is the joint-fewest by a nation since the group stage was introduced at the Euros in 1980. Alongside them, Northern Ireland, who had the smug satisfaction of a means to an end by reaching the last 16 eight years previously.

Must-win, it was.

Lack of effort would be an unfair stick with which to beat the boys. A dearth of invention among these clever, forward-thinking players was apparent. Ingenuity and incision were as scarce as the efforts on goal – probably the primary reason for it – as Clarke’s side pondered on the Hungarian shade of the halfway line. Scotland didn’t expect Hungary to operate with the handbrake off, but they certainly didn’t anticipate it being pulled on the edge of their box with a bus that could accelerate from zero to 60 on the counter. The opposition had done their homework. All they needed to do was watch the lifeless friendly against Northern Ireland at Hampden in that year’s spring; asking Scotland to break down a low block is often like asking primary school children to solve the Pythagoras equation. In the first ten minutes of the game, Scotland had 80 per cent possession across the park. At full time they could shrug shoulders at a share of 75 per cent across our own and the middle thirds of the park and 62 per cent across the field, our second-highest in major tournament history. Big whoop.

David Moyes was on punditry duty for BBC. Scotland’s possession gave a ‘false sense of security’ in the game, he said. Identifying McGregor and Gilmour, he urged Scotland to play forward with more intensity through the thirds. Ryan Christie came on in the 83rd minute and ended up playing almost 20. His admission echoes the observations of Moyes and the vast majority of those watching it unfold on screens or live in Stuttgart:

It was a strange game with what was on the line, and I felt this against Switzerland as well – neither team really wanted to open themselves out to try and win the match. I suppose you can get that at tournaments in international football. You don’t want to find yourself 2-0 down at half-time. We got into the changing room at 0-0 thinking it was there for us but we hadn’t really created anything. A sticky game, we fell on the wrong side in the last minute.

‘Don’t play with the fear of failure. Play with the expectation of success,’ is Clarke’s motto for his approach with his Scotland squad. He prophesied his boys would play with *swagger* and before the tournament criticised the ‘Negative Normans’ who ‘talk ourselves down’. Like Christie, Grant Hanley is another who struggles to explain this 85-minute exception to these rules.

Teams can cancel each other out in those games. With the nerves and pressure they aren’t the best to watch from a fans’ point of view, but from a players’ one it is about staying alive and in the game to get something at the very end. I just remember it being tight and tense.

In a sense, I get it. There are few things in my life I’d rather have than a Scotland cap. Given the chance, would I have the balls to actually do it? To be brave? To be bold? To have the courage to play the pass that might be intercepted and incite the wrath of those I am desperate not to disappoint? To take the shot from 20 yards instead of letting someone else fire high or wide?

I will never proffer the Scotland squad let *us* down in Germany. Anyone who walks out a tunnel in a blue jersey and plays until their face is the same colour has my support. There can be no denying their efforts, hopes and dreams. Perhaps the nerves referenced by Hanley and Christie relate to a fear of letting *us* down as a by-product of losing, but I do believe – because they have shown what they are capable of – they didn’t do *themselves* justice when it mattered. They didn’t play with the belief that they could beat Switzerland and Hungary aside from the first 20 minutes against the Swiss. This is no dissertation, but I can’t help but feel drawn towards the inferiority complex associated with *us* as a country.

Austria topped a group containing France, the Netherlands and Poland. Georgia beat Portugal to reach the knockouts. Unbeaten Slovenia were knocked out on penalties by the Portuguese in the

last 16. Slovakia overcame Belgium and were two seconds from sending England home at the last 16 stage before Jude Bellingham scored an overhead kick. Albania threw punches at and connected with Italy and Croatia before a narrow loss to Spain ended their hopes of progression. There go the population arguments. We scored one more goal at this Euros compared to the previous one. An own goal. That was Clarke's threshold for humorously – but really demeaningly – pointing at progress for us. Asked about our bluntness and lack of creation going forward, he responded, 'It's probably not the night to speak about that, because I'm sad.' His tones were as confusing as they were insulting.

Kenny McLean came on for Scotland in all three games. In Stuttgart, he entered the fray in centre midfield with seven minutes to play before Andy Robertson was taken off on the edge of stoppage time, meaning he also filled the left-back hole after Hungary rampaged down that side a couple of times – hitting the post on one occasion – because Scotland had so many bodies forward.

It was desperate in the end. The Swiss are very good, but we went and took them on and saw we could be at this level. Knowing we could do that and then only show it in stages – ten minutes here and there – isn't consistent enough. Against Hungary, maybe there was something in the back of our minds that a win would take us there, so maybe we wanted to stay in the game. It was like Hungary dared us to break them down. We'd planned to go toe-to-toe with them but when they set up deeply we didn't adapt well enough. That was totally on us and we need to take responsibility. There's only so much info and tactics the manager can give us on the pitch, but the impetus has to come from us. We hoped they'd come out more but they sat in and we didn't show enough to break them down. Maybe the Germany result impacted that and we left

it a bit late to have a right go. We should have taken the game to them more.

Among the fury a narrative developed that *had* Scotland subjected Hungary to an onslaught and lost, fans would have ticked the *slightly disappointed* box rather than *extremely* on their feedback form. It's all hypothetical and each to their own opinion but if it simply had not been our night in front of goal in Stuttgart – much like the picture painted in this chapter's opening paragraph – I think the acidity of the defeat would have slightly diluted. Hearts would have shattered all the same but heads would have remained more balanced. It would have been in the 'Typical Scotland' bracket. This loss didn't quite feel like it belonged there among similar sorrowful stories of the 21st century and beyond.

It would be erroneous not to circle the simply unfathomable decision not to award Scotland a penalty in the 78th minute. Watching it back now is not easier to digest. The VAR not advising referee Facundo Tello to take a second look at Willi Orbán thundering into Stuart Armstrong as he set himself for a shot – with nobody between him and the goalkeeper – is worthy of head scratching to scar the scalp. Hungarian manager Marco Rossi even admitted his team were lucky in that particular incident. A distinctly and understandably rattled Steve Clarke led the barrage at full time, rightfully questioning the decision but strangely portioning some of the blame on the referee's Argentine nationality.

He demanded an explanation from the authorities while each fan wished for a queue to personally depose him. In mitigation he had to plan without the possibility of selecting Aaron Hickey, Lewis Ferguson, Lyndon Dykes, Ben Doak or Kieran Tierney. The first couple were out with long-term injuries, Dyksey and Doaky were ruled out just before the squad travelled to Germany, and KT had torn his hammy against the Swiss. However, with the match moving turgidly and with no distinct signs of improvement, he seemed reluctant to roll the dice. James Forrest hit a fruitful stride in the

final few months of the season at Celtic, but even with the absence of Ben Doak didn't get further than a warm-up on the sideline.

Lawrence Shankland played 47 games for Hearts that season, scoring 31 goals and winning PFA Player of the Year. He'd scored in the tournament warm-up game against Finland at Hampden and in Georgia to rescue a draw at the end of 2023. He played half an hour, give or take, across the group stage, coming on in the 76th minute against Hungary.

I can see the tactical side from the manager when we discuss the opposition. We expected them to be different to how they played on the night so it sprung a bit of a surprise for the full team. I want to play as big a part as I can on the pitch and give something to the team, but I've been in the national team long enough and understood my role going into the tournament and that there was a high chance that would be the part I'd play with the way things were going.

There is no right or wrong way to support Scotland while following the team, whether you are a moaner, cheerleader, shouter or nail-biter. Support the team how you feel comfortable in doing so. Everyone has views on what is appropriate, helpful or understandable – including the players, which is expanded on later in the book – but the rulebook is as short as the Tartan Army's songbook these days. If one follows Scotland to see the team play well and win, continue as you see fit. If one prioritises going to games for the social aspect, to visit new cities or to learn about different fans and cultures, the prerogative is theirs to do so. Both reasons can exist strongly together, but one will always matter slightly more than the other to each individual.

The importance you place on each side of that fence should dictate the pride or condescension felt when opposing fans whose countries vaulted the group stage shower us with compliments in defeat.

It's nice but, in my opinion, contributes to the inferiority complex that has troubled Scotland for some time. We laugh, we sing, we drink. We joke that we'll win it because we're scared to say what we really think. Rivals might run scared in a drinking contest but largely, we are not seen as a serious football nation. Enter German World Cup-winning captain and Euro 2024 tournament director Philipp Lahm, who mused in *The Guardian*: 'The Scots did everything right. Even in cities where they weren't playing, they infected everyone with their good humour. They used this tournament to celebrate with others. It's not just the caterers who will miss them. I've been asked what bothers me most about this Euros. I said that the Scots have already gone home.'

Thanks, Phil, but we were absolutely dreadful. This well-meaning patronage – which pretty much made headline news – came with a hair ruffle and pat on the backside while we shuffled to airports and train stations. Does it matter how the football went? 'At least they liked us while they pumped us,' a close friend of mine said dryly and insincerely after a chat with some Germans following the first game, while social media was flooded with pictures of Scots drinking Munich dry in the Marienplatz or roaring the anthem in the Allianz.

Performance schools, meaningful minutes for youngsters, the priority of PlayStations after school; there will be no laborious post-mortem of Scotland's Euro 2024 endeavours across the following pages, but the mise-en-scene is important before them. A voyage into Nations League 'A' was imminent and Scotland's almost winless run would reach just more than a year. Not completely as a collective, but pundits and fans wondered if – some ascertained that – Steve Clarke had taken this Scotland squad to their limit under his leadership. How sufficiently could he and the players give themselves a shake in the top bracket of the Nations League and be ready for the World Cup qualifiers, which would start in March if Scotland were directly relegated from our division. With one win in 12 games – 2-0 against Gibraltar before the Euros –

## EUROS EXIT

matches against Portugal, Croatia and Poland were around the corner. Forgive the conclusion jumping, but those clashes hardly felt like fertile ground for confidence. This Scotland squad would have to rediscover it one way or another.