

AGAINST THE ELEMENTS

THE ERUPTION OF ICELANDIC FOOTBALL

MATT McGINN



Features exclusive photography by award-winning
documentary photographer Joseph Fox

AGAINST THE ELEMENTS

THE ERUPTION OF ICELANDIC FOOTBALL

MATT MCGINN



Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction.	11
Iceland v Argentina.	17
From gravel to grass.	27
Facilities	44
Grit and sawdust	63
Iceland v Nigeria	84
Joining the network.	103
Size matters.	123
The coaches.	140
Lars and Heimir	161
Golden boys.	182
Euro 2016, narrated by Birkir Már Sævarsson	202
Our girls	217
Iceland v Croatia	234
Afterword.	251

Chapter One

Iceland v Argentina

IT IS the early hours of the morning in Kópavogur. Once a town in its own right, it is now a dangling suburb of Reykjavík. Iceland will make their World Cup debut against Argentina in 12 hours.

I sit, well fed, in Haffi and Anna's catalogue-cool apartment. The empty cocktail glasses on the table reveal the stage of the evening. The residue from espresso martini turns from brown to bronze in the lingering light. Leftovers from dinner are wrapped in foil in the fridge – pork, lamb and Icelandic horse. Haffi cooked them on the barbecue round the back. Every home has a barbecue. Icelanders seem to light them as soon as the temperature rises to double figures and the rain holds off for long enough for the charcoal to glow. Across the room, a record spins on the turntable. Is it Tame Impala, or was that the last one?

I met Haffi and Anna two days ago. We were at a match between Breiðablik and Fylkir in the *Úrvalsdeild karla*, the top division in Iceland. Haffi asked in Icelandic if he could leave his coat on the seat next to mine. I stared blankly

for three seconds, feeling pangs of inadequacy, before he switched to English with a trace of Glaswegian. He studied in Glasgow in the late 2000s. A sound engineering course. Anna moved to Glasgow too. She left without the sharp accent, but with a fondness for gently mocking the ‘posh’ folk of Edinburgh.

Haffi and Anna embraced Glaswegian pub culture. Partly to integrate, partly to stay warm. The *kreppa* – the Icelandic word for the 2008 financial crash – had struck at home. They could not access their student loans. If they were in the pub, they could be more frugal with the heating in their flat. When he was on his own, Haffi developed a tactic to get in with the locals. If he saw two people chatting over whisky at the other end of the bar, he would ask the barman what they were drinking and order three more of the same. The barman would slide two glasses to the unsuspecting recipients. They would look along the bar to see Haffi, a glass raised in his hand. Conversation always flowed.

‘It’s the calm before the storm,’ Anna says, as Haffi pours whisky that smells coarse and leathery, like a new equestrian saddle.

‘Weather-wise?’ someone responds.

‘Everything-wise.’

They will go to Anna’s brother-in-law’s house to watch Iceland play Argentina. Haffi has already warned the family that the football will kidnap his emotions. I saw how animated he became during Breiðablik’s routine 2-0 victory the evening we met. I fear for his blood pressure.

He stews in his own thoughts, stroking the strands of a wispy beard. ‘This is the biggest thing ever in Icelandic sport history.’ He reconsiders. ‘No, just history. Ever.’

ICELAND V ARGENTINA

Football has already kidnapped his emotions. He is not the only one.

There was no sunrise on the morning of Iceland's World Cup debut. Daylight never faded beyond dusk. The colours on the horizon ran from yellow, through orange to a deep red, and back again.

One by one, tourists step off the coach and shiver. The glow of the previous night has reverted to grey. The stalagmite spire of Hallgrímskirkja – the brutalist church that dominates the Reykjavík skyline – blends with the cloud. A flag on the coach reveals the visitors are from Japan. They wait for their guide. Rain falls. It is a silky drizzle, finer than the bloated drops that Icelanders call 'foreign rain'.

The guide leads his mobile audience to the front of the church and the towering statue of Leif Erikson. According to the Icelandic Sagas, Erikson was the first European to discover North America, beating Christopher Columbus across the Atlantic after wind blew him east of Greenland. Now he poses for photographs, his left foot forward and chest puffed out, an axe in one hand and a sword hanging from his belt.

I leave the church behind me and wander idly down the slope towards the centre of the town. I came into the city early for two reasons. First, to test my stubborn hangover against the Atlantic breeze. Second, to feel the atmosphere of anticipation, to feel the clamour build. But everyone is somewhere else. I should have known that Icelanders are not prone to venture outside in wet weather unless there is good reason. Their ancestors spent centuries braving the elements by necessity.

Iceland v Argentina is not the first match of the day. France face Australia in the early kick-off. It has just started. I watch for a moment through the latticed window of a royal blue house. Like many houses in the old town, it looks like it has been plucked from a Monopoly board, inflated, and wrapped in corrugated iron. I squint at the score. 0-0.

This match, coupled with the drizzle, is why there are no Icelanders on the streets. There is football to watch. During the 2010 World Cup, a larger share of Icelanders watched the football than the inhabitants of any other European country. Germany and the Netherlands, two footballing thoroughbreds, completed the podium. Iceland did not even have a horse in the race, yet still outwatched the rest.

A chain mail-clad busker occupies his usual spot on the corner of Laugavegur, the commercial artery that runs through the capital. Cafes, restaurants and souvenir shops await customers. They have acknowledged the World Cup by swapping puffin tat for football tat in window displays. I turn left towards a cluster of English, Irish and American bars. Cardboard cut-outs of Harry Kane and Cristiano Ronaldo keep Uncle Sam company in the tinted window of a bar that promises the best chicken wings in town.

A poncho-clad American couple walk in the opposite direction, sucked along by the words in their guidebook. The woman recites: 'A perfect metaphor for how everyday life in Iceland ...' She walks out of earshot. I allow myself the luxury of snobbery. I am different to them, I tell myself. I am barely a tourist at all. I walk with hands-in-pockets purpose. I can hold a conversation about the absence

of a natural successor to Birkir Már Sævarsson in the Iceland team.

France v Australia is on the giant screen in the old square. It has drawn an audience of six empty picnic benches. Teenage skateboarders and leatherback bikers usually congregate in the square. It is a curious coexistence. The skaters are perpetually on the brink of completing the trick they have been attempting for hours. The bikers park their Harleys in a row and study their reflections in the unblemished chrome. Even the skaters and the bikers stay at home today.

I feel vaguely disappointed at the lack of pre-match frenzy, but suspect that it peaked several hours earlier in downtown Reykjavík, when the clip-clop of stilettos marked chucking-out time from the nightclubs. I make my way to the fan park, located at the foot of the shallow lake that stretches south from the town hall.

When I get there, I find stoic early arrivers have settled on camping chairs and are taking shelter under umbrellas. Metal barriers separate an area to the right of the giant screen. This is where Tólfan – a vocal fan group that translates literally as ‘twelve’ – will set up their percussion. A man wearing a thick-shag jumper saunters through the barriers. A woolly Tólfan emblem is stitched across his chest. He holds his son in one hand and a carrier bag bulging with cans of lager in the other. Valuable cargo. While he greets his friends with thumping hugs, the screen cuts to Moscow.

On a hillside outside the Spartak Stadium, thousands of Icelanders bask in the sun. They hold their hands aloft. The first Viking clap of the day, the first of many. The sodden

crowd in Reykjavík watch with a conflicting cocktail of pride and envy.

With 15 minutes until kick-off, the fanzone, tucked in a wooded hollow, is busy. A steady flow of people squelch through a gap in the trees and search for pockets of space in the crowd.

I stand beside the gazebo that shelters Tólfan's drums. Sandra and Rökkvi, her nine-year-old son, are to my right. They made a last-minute decision to drive through the lava fields from Keflavík to watch the match in the capital. Jon Faerber has come with them. At 6ft 4in and with dreadlocks down to his waist, he stands out. A ginger beard completes the image. An American approaches him.

'Man, you are the most Viking dude I've ever seen! Can I have a picture?'

Jon obliges, but disappoints his admirer when he opens his mouth to speak with an Australian drawl. He is a goalkeeper for Keflavík. A nomadic career has already taken Jon to Wales, Scotland, Germany, the USA and Chile. It is his second year in Iceland and his grasp of the language is improving. He is going native.

Four 20-something guys in front of us flash ankle beneath rolled-up jeans. One in a beige trench coat blows a plume of vape smoke into the air. It obscures the screen. His friend delivers the team news. 'Emil, Aron Einar, Gylfi ...' He refers to the players by first name, as is the custom in Iceland. The names betray Heimir Hallgrímsson's tactics. 'I don't have a magic formula,' he told the press when asked how he planned to stop Lionel Messi. He did, however, have a practical solution: to crowd the midfield and starve Messi of space, to suffocate him.

The camera switches to the tunnel in Moscow. The teams wait and fidget. They crick their necks. They clack their studs on the floor. They clear nasal passages with a finger over one nostril and a sharp outward snort.

Aron Gunnarsson, the captain, leans on the handles of a mascot's wheelchair. His ginger beard, grown for the tournament to adhere to the Viking stereotype, is striking against the blue of his tracksuit top. His calmness reassures. There is no testosterone or tub-thumping. Not outwardly, at least. Just the smile of a man who knows that the pressure rests on the shoulders of the opposition. The crowd around me are hushed, transfixed by the pixelated ball like children in the front row of a pantomime. The patter of raindrops on umbrellas creates a dignified applause.

Kick-off. The match falls into the pattern that most people anticipated. The battle between collective unit and star individual is a well-trodden trope in football. It is distilled into a pure form on the giant screen. Iceland organise and absorb. The Argentines ponder, pause, and pass to Messi.

Argentina are top-heavy; blessed with enviable attacking talent but a porous defence. Iceland create the better chances. Birkir Bjarnason drifts inside from the left flank, followed by his swishing blonde hair, and scuffs a shot just wide of the post. He winces. Everyone around me does the same.

Sergio Agüero is less profligate. On 19 minutes the squat striker cushions a lively pass and uses his low centre of gravity to pirouette away from Ragnar Sigurðsson. The defender barely has time to raise his leg before Agüero lashes a shot into the top corner. Reykjavík responds with

puffed-out cheeks and eyebrows raised in acknowledgement of a simmering finish. Diego Maradona appears on screen, revelling in a corporate box. He balances a chunky cigar in his grin and ignores the ‘no smoking’ sign to his left.

But Diego only savours half a dozen puffs before Iceland draw level. Ravenous pressing leads to an error by Willy Caballero, the Argentine keeper. Alfreð Finnbogason is presented with a simple chance. From six yards he slots the ball between desperate limbs to become the first Icelander to score at a World Cup. Alfreð makes his way to a camera and screams something unintelligible into the lens. Nobody notices. The crowd around me have formed huddles and bounce to the irregular beat of pure jubilation. A man with creased eyes and greying temples stands separate from the flailing limbs of his companions, his gloved hands clasped behind his head. I watch him blink, as if he experiences the euphoria afresh each time he opens his eyes. His open mouth narrows to a disbelieving smirk. He joins the celebrating throng.

Half-time. A bleary-eyed man stumbles through the crowd, indiscriminately branding faces with red, white and blue paint. A tube of ash from his cigarette threatens to drop on to the sleeve of his knitted jumper. Another man delivers his assessment of the first half to a Netflix camera crew. ‘It’s going well, we just need to keep Messi quiet,’ he says, holding his can of lager by the rim so it is out of shot.

The flecks of rain grow heavier. But it doesn’t wash away the adrenaline. An aeroplane glides overhead on its way into Reykjavík airport. ‘Áfram Ísland’ is daubed on the underbelly. A football match – or any shared experience, for that matter – feels more momentous when you know

that you are not just sharing it with those around you, but an entire country – even those in the sky. I feel as though Reykjavík is the centre of the world.

Argentina break the resistance after 54 minutes. Slippery Sergio Agüero sniffs out space in the penalty area and draws a foul from Hörður Björgvin Magnússon. Penalty. Spectators in Moscow watch through their iPhone screens as Messi places the ball on the spot and exhales, hands on hips. To my right, Sandra gives Rökkvi a piggyback so he can see above the plateau of heads that bob up and down like corks. Hannes Halldórsson fixes his eyes on Messi. He begins a plodding run-up, errs, and shoots meekly to the left. Hannes guesses the right way and swipes the ball clear.

Jon, the dreadlocked keeper, has lifted me up. Pandemonium. You experience a special type of joy when your team saves a penalty. A saved penalty is better than a goal because it comes moments after you have convinced yourself that your team has already conceded. And who better than Hannes to emerge as the hero? Rejected by a Third Division club when he was 22, semi-professional until he was 28. No matter what he does in the rest of his career, he will always have this moment.

The next 30 minutes crawl as the rain turns grass to mud. The saturated masses greet every tackle, save and clearance with baying defiance. Diego Maradona regains the attention of a cameraman to give light relief from the torture. He rubs his nose and his eyes widen. Nobody suspects hay fever.

Argentina's No. 10 scrambles desperately to atone for his penalty miss. The commentator repeats his name as he jinks into the Iceland box, each time with heightened

panic. ‘Messi, Messi, MESSI.’ But even Messi, the best in the world, the man who blends football and ballet, cannot weave through the Icelandic stodge. The final minute of the match is a microcosm of the previous 89. Messi stands over a free kick on the edge of the box. Seconds remain. He shoots. The ball bounces back off the wall. The referee blows the full-time whistle. Messi thrashes the ball into the Moscow sky. Iceland sighs with relief.

People linger after the final whistle, as if the reality of what we have just watched only exists here and leaving will make it go away. People stay for the post-match interviews, aware that this moment will form a memory that lasts forever. Five years earlier, this moment was but a flicker in the eye of Iceland’s most whimsical optimist.

Haffi leans back and catches my eye through the crowd. The match ended several hours ago but nobody wants the day to end. We had agreed to meet at Grandi Mathöll, a trendy food hall in an old harbourside warehouse. He and Anna have dressed up for the evening but the crowd contains a healthy smattering of blue nylon.

‘Well, not bad,’ he says through a wide grin. Anna shakes her head disbelievingly.

The evening passes quickly. Haffi delights in the Snapchat videos he took of himself during the match. They seem to consist of hyperventilation, nervous vaping and occasional dashes into the garden to release emotion. Now, after the excitement, it feels like Reykjavík has inhaled a substance that makes the body lighter and is a solvent for worry. Bleary-eyed revellers repeat ‘Argentina’ with a hard ‘g’.

This has been a long time in the making.