

A close-up portrait of Olivier Giroud, a man with short brown hair, light blue eyes, and a full dark beard. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a solid, muted blue-grey color.

OLIVIER
GIROUD

Always Believe

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Contents

Preface	9
1. World Champion	13
2. Childhood	50
3. Religion	63
4. The Baby of the Family	78
5. Adolescence	85
6. The Love of my Life	95
7. Footballer	125
8. The National Team	234
9. Afterwards	268
Career highlights	282
Acknowledgements	285

World Champion

The day of the final

Sunday, 15 July 2018. The World Cup Final. Moscow's Olympic venue, the Luzhniki Stadium, is absolutely packed. The Croats outnumber us three or four to one, but our supporters are out there, noisily making their presence felt. They sing, they cheer us on, they get out of their seats and roar whenever we get anywhere near the opposing goal. It's 28 degrees, the heat is stifling. The sky darkens as the minutes tick by. There's a storm on its way. A heavy atmosphere hangs in the air. Faces are strained and bodies exhausted. What does it matter, though?

We're leading 4-1 against Croatia. If all goes well, in a little over 20 minutes we will be world champions.

The 69th minute. Hugo Lloris shows too much of the ball to Croatian forward Mario Mandžukić, who steals it from him; 4-2! The tension steps up a notch. This goal feeds the hunger to win on both sides. Galvanised by this mistake on our part, our opponents become more threatening. We resist, desperate to win this second victory for the nation, and my first.

The 81st minute. The manager takes me off and brings on the young attacking midfielder, Nabil Fekir. The crowd applauds me, and chants my name, even though I haven't scored a single goal in this tournament. But this is not the time for regrets or reflection. I come off the pitch. As usual, I think of Jesus and look up at the sky for a few moments. This evening in particular, I say a short prayer to ask him to help. At the same time, I'm focused on the match unfolding before me. There are ten minutes of normal time left. I know everything can change from one moment to the next, that no team

WORLD CHAMPION

is safe from a sudden reversal of fortune, but I really am starting to believe we can do it. How can the Croats come back and score with so little time left?

I head to the bench to join my team-mates. I sit down beside them – Adil Rami, Djibril Sidibé, Steve Mandanda and Florian Thauvin. We're jittery as anything. All eyes are on the clock. The minutes drag on. As if to ward off bad luck, I keep repeating the same words over and over again to Florian, who isn't even listening, 'We're going to do it! We're going to do it!' There are just five minutes left to play. My childhood dream is about to come true. My family are just a few metres away in the stands: my wife Jennifer, my daughter Jade, five years old at the time, my parents, my brother Romain, my brother-in-law and the friends I've had since I was a kid. They're counting the seconds. It makes me happy to bring them so much joy. They've always believed in me.

Still 4-2. No change to the score. We go into stoppage time. None of us can sit still a minute longer

and we move to the edge of the pitch, standing ready to leap in the air at the sound of the final whistle. I catch sight of the manager. He's calm and focused, but the smile on his face speaks for itself. He's pulled it off and is proud of his team. Tonight he is pushing them onwards to the ultimate prize, just like he had been pushed himself, 20 years ago almost to the day.

The referee blows his whistle. I stop thinking about anything. My mind is a blur and there are no words to describe what I'm feeling. I race on to the pitch, whooping with joy. I throw myself face down inside the opponents' goal. The sky cracks and the first drops of rain begin to fall. Adil Rami rushes at me like a tornado, and we embrace. I barely remember anything of the next few minutes. I'm on another planet, the emotion overwhelming me. I fall into the arms of Thierry Marszalek, a stalwart of the French staff for two decades: his job is to analyse opposing teams. I cry on his shoulder, like a little kid. 'Oli, I'm happy for you, you deserve this cup,' he whispers in my ear.

WORLD CHAMPION

My tears keep falling. I'm hugging everyone I see. Guy Stéphan, Didier Deschamps' assistant, says to me, 'So, then? We can't be champions with Giroud on the team?' He's talking about the doubts the press have expressed about whether I deserve my place on the team and the criticism I've been on the receiving end of ever since the manager first picked me for the squad. I try not to attach any importance to what journalists write about me. I know that only hard work pays off, so I slog away, I graft, I give it my all. Even if sometimes that isn't enough.

Making the squad

The two seasons leading up to the World Cup are tough. After a good Euro 2016 – despite losing to Portugal in the final – I return to Arsenal, feeling pumped up and strong from my best season for France and my best club season too: 38 goals scored in all competitions. I barely have time to enjoy the moment before I get a shock that hits me like

a cold shower. My manager at the time, Arsène Wenger, decides to change his tactics at the start of the season and puts Alexis Sánchez up front. Then, within a year and a half, he signs two forwards, first Alexandre Lacazette, then a little later Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. I'm upset by this decision, but competition is part of the job and I accept it. I'm ready to fight to earn my place. It's futile. Lacazette scores goals; I stay on the bench.

Every time the French team is called up for international duty, manager Didier Deschamps gives me a warning, 'Oli, you're not getting enough game time. You have to play more, you have to train more so you're in good shape and can get back on the pitch, because nothing can replace the intensity of real matches. If you don't do that, you're unlikely to be on the squad for the World Cup.'

Deschamps trusts me and has always supported me, despite attacks from the media who constantly question my role and how useful I really am to the team. This time, the reality of the situation sinks in. It's a fact that

WORLD CHAMPION

I don't play enough at Arsenal. To get called up for the national team, we need to play a minimum number of matches. The manager is only doing his duty by giving me this warning. Most of our conversations take place in private. He calls me in to see him and we talk. 'I know how much you've brought to the team, and you still do, but that doesn't give you a free pass.' How could he justify his decision to select me when some of my teammates are first-choice players for their clubs?

He's right. The pressure is on. I'm quite clear-headed about my situation and, besides, I don't feel ready to compete in an important tournament like this with so little match time under my belt. In January 2018, five months before the World Cup, I decide to leave Arsenal to sign for Chelsea. Finally, I start playing and scoring goals again. Russia is ready and waiting to welcome me.

On 17 May 2018, at 8pm, the names of the 23 players selected for the World Cup squad will be announced on TF1, one of the main TV channels. I'm at home, sitting quietly in front of the telly waiting for

Didier to make his announcement. I'm feeling perfectly relaxed. In fact, I have to admit that I'm not actually dreading this moment at all. I'm in the starting 11 and the head coach chooses 23 players, so it's kind of obvious I'll make the squad.

This might seem strange, but we only learn whether or not we've been selected by watching it on TV. We don't get a heads up from the manager. Ten days or so before the official announcement of which 23 have made the squad, 50 players receive an email at their club informing them they're on the provisional call-up list. For those who aren't certain of being chosen, the suspense is unbearable.

On 23 May, we meet at the Clairefontaine training centre to start our preparations for the World Cup. The squad is already solid and the atmosphere relaxed but focused. The aim is clear: to be ready for the opener against Australia. After a hectic season, I feel physically tired, but the staff have fine-tuned a tailor-made programme so that we're at the top of our game

WORLD CHAMPION

come D-Day. Mentally, I'm fine. I have no idea of the challenges that lie ahead.

Welcome to Russia

A week before the first round of the competition, we're playing a friendly in Lyon against the USA. I come into an aerial challenge with defender Matt Miazga too late and my head clashes hard with his. Blood streaming down my face, I fall to the ground and stay there, completely out of it. I fear the worst, but the medics reassure me that I've taken the hit above my browbone and that's why I'm bleeding so much. In shock, I exit the pitch with a bandage round my head. Six stitches for me, 15 for Matt.

The next day, we fly off for our date with destiny in Russia. I'm still feeling the effects of my head injury, but there's no way it's going to stop me being a part of this World Cup. I can't wait. Only six days until the first match kicks off.

Our training base is located in Istra, about 30 miles outside Moscow. It's in a magnificent setting, but we're surprised to find that the hotel is in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by forest. The French Football Federation (FFF) has made sure the hotel and grounds are available for our exclusive use, both for security reasons and so that we can concentrate and work in optimum conditions. Even the mosquitoes that plague the area seem unable to make it through the heavy gate into the estate. A member of staff assigns us our bedrooms. Everyone has their own room, each one decorated with a specially commissioned portrait of the player who occupies it. I smile when I see the mural that represents me.

A little later, we take a tour of the estate and hope our stay here is a long one. There is a cinema, swimming pool, two tennis courts, a pétanque court and even a small lake. We cover six miles just getting to the training ground. The pitch is immaculate. It all looks amazing. Despite the rain, morale is high. We do our first training

WORLD CHAMPION

session behind closed doors. The next day, the manager will allow one session to be open to the public – just a little gesture of appreciation for the French fans who have made the trip to Russia to support us.

Friday, 15 June. One day to go before France–Australia. In the afternoon we head to training, the last session before our first World Cup game. We still don't know which 11 players will be starting it. The coach usually tells us the day before, so that we can prepare ourselves mentally. On rare occasions it's announced two or three hours before the match, just before the team talk. Maybe the opposite applies here: it's to stop us from having too much time to think.

Didier Deschamps doesn't give us the news personally. We learn who has been selected through who gets to wear a bib. Let me explain: in the 11-a-side match we play in training, only those players who will be in the starting line-up wear bibs. The manager hands these players their bib just before we start our warm-up. We call this the 'legend of the bibs'. This afternoon, my

world falls apart: there's no bib for me. I'm not going to be starting against Australia. Deschamps has made a tactical decision to play Antoine Griezmann, Kylian Mbappé and Ousmane Dembélé in the forward line. I try my best to save face and don't let my feelings show. All the same, I'm pretty fed up.

In this last training match with the team, I receive the ball and run towards goal. N'Golo Kanté comes after me. He's so close behind me that I can feel his breath on the back of my neck. It's such a comical moment that it takes my mind off everything. The pitch is a bit dry. I speed up. Lucas Hernandez appears in front of me, N'Golo catches me and somehow my feet get tangled in each other, I stumble and down I go. My head collides with my team-mate's knee on the exact same spot I was injured before. I stay on the ground. It hurts like hell. I take off my bandage and the blood starts pouring. Two stitches have just come out.

This is unreal. I'm not starting the match and if that wasn't bad enough, I'm thinking this injury might

WORLD CHAMPION

take me out of the World Cup altogether. I leave the pitch and hurry to see the medic who's waiting for me in the dressing room. On the way there, I lose it and vent my rage by giving a billboard a massive kick. If the media had been around, as they sometimes are, I'd never have let myself express my anger like that. There are no journalists anywhere to be seen. Impulsive, yes. Out of control, never.

I'm gutted. The manager, who misses nothing, notices how distressed I am. He waits until after dinner that evening to speak to me face to face about his decision.

I try and predict how he's going to explain it. Since I'm still wearing my bandage and I have fresh stitches in my head wound, I believe for a split second that he's decided to leave me on the bench to protect me, and ask him, 'Is it because of my injury? You want to spare me, is that it?'

'No. You're not going to play because I've made a tactical decision.'

The decision is final. He ends our conversation by saying, ‘I’m asking you not to show your disappointment before the match.’

I’m really taken aback. Questions are racing through my mind. Why is the manager not starting me? Why did he change the game plan for this first match? I don’t necessarily share his point of view, but it’s not the first time that I’ve found myself dealing with this kind of situation. I give up. It’s hard and it hurts a lot, but I accept it.

All I can do is get on with things and maintain a positive mindset for my team. Put the squad before myself. The mind plays a crucial role when you’re trying to pick yourself up from a setback. I’m going to draw strength from deep within me to overcome my disappointment. And then there is my faith. I pray and ask Jesus to help me turn the situation to my advantage. I have to perform to the best of my ability.

After dinner I call Jen, my wife, who’s there for me in good times and bad. She’s the only person who

WORLD CHAMPION

can calm me down. She's detached enough from the situation and can find the right words, 'Be patient, keep the faith and stay focused. Your time will come and you have to be ready for it.' My brother Romain, my biggest fan, also lends me his support.

The night feels like it's never going to end. I'm restless and I can't get to sleep. My situation is emotionally hard to deal with. There are intrusive thoughts swirling round my head that I can't seem to shake off. But I have to stay focused on one goal: victory for the French team, with or without me.

I deserve my place

It's time for the first match. Sitting on the bench, I swallow my pride and get behind my team-mates. France are struggling to score. The threesome up front are not showing much sign of igniting. I've been warming up since the start of the second half and in the 70th minute the manager sends me on. This is my chance. I have

to bring something to the team and my performance has to make a difference. Deschamps often tells us that substitutes play an important role. I want to be that player who changes the course of the match. Now it's time to prove that I deserve my place on the team. The adrenaline rises. I put my emotions aside and step out on to the pitch.

The teams are tied 1-1. We're getting mauled by the Australians, so we have to respond and score a second goal. Ten minutes from time, entering the penalty area, Paul Pogba plays a one-two with me and shoots. His shot is deflected by the opposing defender Aziz Behich, hits the crossbar, then bounces over the Australian goal line by a couple of inches; 2-1! But FIFA later rules it to be an own goal by Behich. If the governing body hadn't robbed Paul of that goal, it would have been my assist. But that doesn't matter. Thanks to us, France have just won their first group match. Mission accomplished. I've got my starting slot back. From that day on, I don't take my bib off.

'We can't win with Giroud on the team'

I've come to terms with the media. It's part of my job to shield myself from the anti-Giroud flak I regularly get bombarded with. I hardly ever use social media and I don't read the papers very often either, but that doesn't stop certain news reports reaching me. This time the comments are positive. I'm not under any illusions: if I'd messed up my opening World Cup game, the journalists wouldn't have thought twice before starting to question my credentials again. But after that first match, I read, 'It would be good to see players other than Giroud on form, but when he isn't on the team, it's clear something's missing.' And, 'The team miss Olivier when he's not playing.'

I'm not the only striker on this team, of course. No one is irreplaceable. But these words make me feel good all the same.

After my performance against Australia, the manager starts me against Peru. This is another match that we have to win if we're going to get into the knockout stage without a struggle. It's more than a match. It's a

duel that's played out in front of a hostile crowd. Peru, who haven't qualified for the World Cup since 1982, have managed to get 35,000 of their supporters into the 40,000 seats in the stadium. While their national anthem plays, the noise of the crowd creates such a white-hot atmosphere that I get a shiver down my spine. It feels like we're actually in South America. The air is tense. During the warm-up, listening to the crowd booing, I say to Paul Pogba, 'We didn't become footballers to end up playing a match like this, did we?'

'We need to take this hostility and use it to our advantage,' he replies.

He's right. Adversity gets us riled up. It turbocharges us. I start the match with the mindset of a warrior and get involved in the action every time; lay-off passes, flicking headers, shadowing the Peruvian defender to create space for my team-mates. I badly want to score. In the 34th minute, Paul finds me with a pass. I shoot, but it's blocked. Kylian, on the prowl in front of the goal, nabs the ball and taps it into the net. He didn't have to

WORLD CHAMPION

touch it – the ball was headed straight for the goal. I didn't want to pass – it was a shot on goal I was after. I should have scored but Kylian was there on the line and, like any self-respecting striker would, he stepped in and took the shot. Later, I'm asked if I'm mad at him for 'stealing' that goal from me. Absolutely not, is my answer. In his place, I'd have done exactly the same. The striker is the most selfish player on a team, and he has to be. In the penalty area he thinks of himself – and, by extension, the team. Kylian has done what is expected of him. We talk about it after the match, and the incident (which is not even an incident) is resolved right away.

This is not me just being nice. I understand what he did and how happy he was to score his first World Cup goal. The way I responded is also in keeping with the kind of person I am deep down: altruistic and generous, on and off the pitch. This may sound a little boastful, but it's just the way I was brought up. There are still matches left to play, there will be plenty more opportunities to score.

A gang of mates

Away from the tournament and off the pitch, the French team has become a tight-knit bunch over the years, thanks to Didier Deschamps. Despite the age gap between the youngest (19 years old) and the oldest (33), and the differences in our tastes and lifestyles, we respect each other. We're a gang of mates.

During the day, we're focused and we take our work seriously, then in the evenings we relax. After dinner, some of us sit putting the world to rights, and others listen to music in their room or play cards. The atmosphere is calm and relaxed. Well, with the exception of a few evenings.

After the match against Peru, we need to decompress, to forget about football for a few hours. We've already qualified for the knockout stage so the game against Denmark is academic. We want to celebrate this first achievement and get away from our base camp. A summit is held: how can we persuade the manager to give us a bit of freedom? Adil Rami comes to

WORLD CHAMPION

our rescue and speaks up, 'I'm going to ask him. Guys, we've nothing to lose. If he says no, well too bad, at least we've tried.'

Deschamps is sitting a few metres away. He's talking to his staff and looks relaxed. This seems as good a time as any. We go up to him timidly, like kids facing their teacher. The manager smiles knowingly when he sees us.

'If Rami's here, something's going on. It's not a good sign,' he laughs, and then continues, 'Go on, then, what is it?'

'We need to take a breather and clear our heads a bit. We'd like to leave the camp and go and have dinner somewhere.'

Without any hesitation, the manager agrees to our request. We're amazed that we didn't need to argue our case and yet at the same time, we're not that surprised we got our own way. Deschamps is fair and humane, and one of his main qualities is empathy. He has the ability to put himself in our shoes. This evening, he

understands that for the good of the squad he needs to relax the pressure and give us a bit of freedom. The next match isn't for another five days.

Several Mercedes people-carriers belonging to the FFF are chartered for the occasion. Destination Moscow, over an hour's drive away. We're surrounded by members of our security staff who watch over us discreetly but effectively. The restaurant where we have dinner has not been closed to the public, but orders are given that we are not to be disturbed. The other diners are discreet and respectful, with the exception of three young people who ask us for selfies, which we readily agree to. We're over the moon to get a taste of real life. We allow ourselves a few drinks, we have a laugh, we talk about everything and nothing – but hardly at all about football – then we go back to Istra, revived and refreshed, and ready to continue the fight.

Our second jaunt to the outside world doesn't go quite the same way as the first. It takes place a few hours after our stunning victory against Argentina. We've made it through to the quarter-finals and we're as high

WORLD CHAMPION

as kites, so much so that a little overindulgence is the only thing that might calm us down.

The evening begins quietly enough. We're on a private barge. It's in a magnificent setting, the food is delicious and the wines have been carefully chosen. We're drinking a bit more than last time. As the evening goes on, the atmosphere becomes more celebratory and reaches a peak on our way back to base camp.

When we get back to the hotel, the group splits up and I find myself with Hugo Lloris and Lucas Hernandez, both of them pretty merry. It's pitch black outside. Lucas is singing. He wanders closer to the pool and all of a sudden jumps right in, fully clothed. Helped along by the booze, he narrowly avoids swallowing half the pool and only just manages to grab hold of the side. The three of us are cracking up. It's a night I'll certainly not forget for a long time and one of my fondest memories of that World Cup.

As though things weren't already hysterically funny, that same evening Adil Rami earns notoriety through his

brilliant handling of a fire extinguisher. I'm not going to dwell on this episode, which has been recounted more than enough times in minute detail. Suffice to say it was a unique and quite unforgettable experience.

On top of the world

Life goes on in Istra. We get back to work in earnest and gradually find our focus again for our quarter-final against Uruguay, which we win 2-0. I'm happy with my performance, especially in the head-to-head battles against some of the best defenders at this World Cup. The tournament continues. We're winning matches, but I've yet to find the back of the net. I make no secret of the fact that for a striker, this is hard to take. I've got enough strength of character, however, that I don't lose confidence in myself or in my abilities. Oddly enough, the media stays off my back and actually praises what I bring to the team. There is still criticism from some quarters, but I just keep chugging along.

WORLD CHAMPION

And I do it pretty well, actually. I don't score, but I supply assists and I'm effective on the pitch – except, that is, in the semi-final against Belgium. I take unrealistic shots and I don't react quickly enough during one passage of play in particular. I don't anticipate the ball coming, so when it reaches me I'm not ready. I miss my shot. I could have and should have scored. I talk about it a bit later with Guy Stéphan, the assistant manager, 'I'm saving the goal for the final.'

The goal never comes.

We beat Belgium 1-0. The manager lets us have dinner with our friends and families. Jennifer, my dad and my father-in-law join me, as do Didier, Momo, Baptiste and Mat – 'my bros', as I call them. They wouldn't have missed an opportunity to see me play for anything in the world. We've been friends for many years. Outside my family, the four of them are my rocks and I can always count on them for support. We are joined together like the five fingers of a hand. In fact, I sometimes dedicate goals to them by holding up my

five fingers. I did this after my goal against Switzerland in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Sunday, 15 July. The final. Victory. I'll never forget what we experienced that night. Apart from the exhilaration that comes from actually winning the title, it's having my daughter Jade by my side that gets me most emotional. After the excitement has subsided, I go and get her from the stands and lead her on to the pitch. She's only five, but I can sense that she gets how important this moment is. I lift her up and we have a photo taken together with the trophy in our arms. Jen arrives a few minutes later. We embrace and she whispers in my ear that she's proud of me.

I became a footballer out of passion and every day I'm thankful I can make a living from it. I play to win, to build a successful career and to create a secure future, but I also play for those I love. They're starry-eyed tonight, and it's down to me. They deserve this so much. They support me, whatever I do, whatever decisions I make, whatever happens to me. They suffer the blows directed

WORLD CHAMPION

at me just as much as I do; they're nervous when I play, they rejoice when I score. This World Cup belongs to them as much as it belongs to me. We won it together and we will celebrate it together.

After a party in the dressing room, an even bigger party awaits us in Istra. The journey from the stadium back to our base camp gives us an opportunity to finally be together, just us. We are on a total high. It's getting noisier and noisier down at the front of the bus where the staff sit. Even the manager, normally so composed, really lets himself go, making the driver jump as he hammers out a rhythm on the bus windows to acknowledge the supporters. Presnel Kimpembe, the squad's part-time DJ, takes his mission very seriously and plays rap hits, with Thomas Lemar, Kylian Mbappé, Paul Pogba and Blaise Matuidi all rapping along with the music. Benjamin Mendy, shirtless, stands in the aisle of the bus, swaying his hips and singing at the top of his lungs. The champagne flows freely. We are ecstatic.

We get to the hotel around 1am, where we're greeted for the final time by the staff who, as usual, have formed a guard of honour. This ritual was established right at the start of the tournament. Every time we returned from a match, the hotel staff did this to celebrate our victory.

We push through the crowd, holding the trophy aloft, passing it from player to player. Our families and loved ones, just as hyper as us, are already waiting for us in the hotel restaurant. The FFF has made sure they've been well looked after. Jennifer and Jade are there. I hadn't managed to see my parents at the stadium, but I find them now.

'I'm proud of you, son. Well done!' my father says, with tears in his eyes. I've never seen him so emotional. My mother too is proud of her 'little chick' – the nickname she's had for me since the day I was born. I'll always be their 'little Olivier'. Tonight, little Olivier is a world champion and he is going to celebrate his title as he should.

WORLD CHAMPION

As footballers, our diet largely consists of pasta and white meat. We stuck to this throughout the tournament, but now it makes way for barbecue and all kinds of sweet treats. We're standing on the tables, draining our champagne glasses in time with the songs we're improvising. We sing our own version of Joe Dassin's hit 'Les Champs-Élysées', changing the lyrics in honour of our midfielder N'Golo Kanté. Benjamin Pavard also gets his moment of musical glory with a rendition of a song that fans came up with after his stunning goal against Argentina. Then it's Paul Pogba's turn to set the dance floor on fire with his brothers, Mathias and Florentin. Watched with amusement by DJ Snake, who came over for the occasion, the three siblings perform a series of dance routines, shaking their hips wildly to the music.

The party goes on until 3am. As the room gradually empties, the sun is already rising in this corner of Russia. Our families, tiredness now showing on their faces, go up to bed. We can't join them yet. We still haven't come

back down to earth from the euphoria that started as soon as the referee blew the final whistle. For us, the party has only just begun.

A few of us make our way towards a mud-filled lake. Florence Hardouin, the FFF's general manager, our head waiter Raphaël, Bach, our kit man, and other FFF employees are there too. We hesitate for a moment before, one by one, we get into the thick brown water. Some of us are in our underwear. Others, like Florence, go in fully dressed. Our shouting and singing ring out louder than ever. We're immune to the cold and fatigue.

In the craziness of the moment, Lucas Hernandez comes to find Raphaël and shaves his head in front of everyone. At around 5, we round off the night with a game of pétanque near our training centre.

Everything has to come to an end. A few hours later, this incredible adventure draws to a close. After more than two months together, the time has come to go our separate ways. We're so tired that we keep our goodbyes

WORLD CHAMPION

short. Our families by our sides, each of us leaves for a well-deserved holiday.

Back down to earth

Jen, the kids and I are off to the south of France. A completely different kind of celebration awaits us: the christening of Aaron, just six months old. All our family and friends who didn't have the chance to travel to Russia join us in Èze, at the Hotel Cap-Estel, a timelessly idyllic spot. Another opportunity to pursue the dream. After the baptism, it's time for me to honour a bet I made a few weeks earlier with journalists from TF1. One of them had asked me what I'd be prepared to do if I won the World Cup. As I get a lot of stick from my team-mates about my hair, I replied without thinking, 'I'd shave my head for a laugh.'

True to my word, on the evening after my son's christening, I end up with my head like a billiard ball. Needless to say, my new look did nothing to

shut my friends up and they carried right on taking the mickey.

Next, we spend a few days in Monaco, then Jen and I leave our three children in Grenoble with their grandparents and jet off for a romantic trip to Ibiza.

Now the pressure's easing, I feel tired. I need to get away from it all – to escape from all the rejoicing, cut myself off from the outside world for a while and enjoy some peace and quiet with my wife, just the two of us. The destination we've chosen isn't the most relaxing one, but we do what we can to avoid the crowds. We visit amazing places, we take a boat trip, we walk along the beach and we talk a lot. Gradually, I come back down to earth. It isn't easy. How do you reach these heights and then start all over again without being mentally affected by it all? This is what top-level athletes have to go through.

At times like these, I appreciate just how important my close friends and family are, especially my wife and kids. They help me get through this bad patch. When I

WORLD CHAMPION

look at Jade, Evan and Aaron, I tell myself that I'm not allowed to flag. And so I don't flag. They give me the strength and the will to battle on, and when I'm with them I don't have enough time to indulge my moods. Having three young children keeps you busy. They have this amazing ability to put things into perspective for me. I stop focusing on my own needs and they become my priority. They come before football, before myself, before everything.

My wife goes through – endures, you might say – these difficult times with a mixture of strength, intelligence and compassion. I'm not doing so great in the weeks following our World Cup victory. Other players have spoken about going through 'a tough time' or 'a mild depression'. I can confirm that. By the time I go back to Chelsea, things have reached quite a critical point. I'm lethargic. I have no energy at all. It's like a kind of natural decompression that comes in the form of mental fatigue, but along with that there's a weird sensation that I haven't made the most of this unique

moment in my life, that I haven't celebrated it enough. I'm getting the suspicion that the feeling of winning the World Cup will just fade away with time and will slip from my grasp.

My friend Antonio Rüdiger, who plays for Chelsea, keeps calling me 'Olivier, 2018 World Cup winner!' As if to say, 'No one can ever take that title away from you.' Which is true. Even today, people I meet on the street thank me for what we did. I'm a world champion for life, but I'm going to need a hell of a lot of strength of character to re-motivate myself, lace up my football boots and get out there for another season.

Getting a star on your national jersey is without a doubt the highest point of a career in football. It's hard to go bigger, better or further than a World Cup victory for your country. I'm not downplaying the other titles. The Champions League is prestigious, but when it comes to playing for a city versus playing for your country, for 67 million French people there is no comparison. I am a patriot. I love my country, I'm

WORLD CHAMPION

proud to represent it and to have worn our national colours at the highest level. But there's no way I'm going to stop there.

I will bounce back.

During a conversation in the Chelsea dressing room, my team-mates ask me why I'm not calling time on my international career. 'You're a world champion, you should quit while you're ahead. It'll be very hard to go one better than that. Or even to consolidate it by winning the Euros.'

I hear their arguments, but the thought of leaving the squad has never crossed my mind. I'm too attached to the French team, I'm hungry for more victories. I don't want to quit too soon and then regret it. I still have goals to score and matches to win. Football is about starting all over again, time and time again.

Winning a World Cup doesn't make me a different person. I'm delighted I have done that, but I don't get too carried away. I never will. I remember everything I've gone through to get to this point.

ALWAYS BELIEVE

During tough times, I've always managed to stay positive while I wait for better days to arrive. I remain true to my motto: work, respect and humility. I have my parents to thank for this mindset. They've never changed either, and nor has the way they see me. I'm surrounded by family, in-laws and friends who look after my wellbeing no matter what. Always calm and collected, never going overboard. I can't take any credit for this. I'm just out of the same mould, that's all.

If there is a before and after, it comes from the outside world. The manager warned us about this, right after our victory when we were all together in the dressing room. 'There is nothing more beautiful, nothing greater than lifting the World Cup. From today, your lives are going to change. You'll never be the same again. You know why?' He held up the cup and yelled, 'World champions!'

He was right. Our popularity is off the scale. We're known and recognised around the world. Publicists and PR people are getting in touch, all kinds of requests

WORLD CHAMPION

are piling up. We are awarded the Legion of Honour, France's highest distinction, and welcomed into a very select circle of people who have contributed to the nation's global renown. Mind you, it's worth mentioning that there is an important distinction to be made between athletes like us who inspire others, and people who actually fight for our country. We have to keep things in perspective.

This new-found fame, it makes life good, I don't deny it. It gives me a confidence boost. But deep down, I don't change. I'm still my parents' son, Jen's husband and my kids' dad. I might be a world champion, but I'll never forget where I come from.