

ENGLAND'S CALAMITY?

A New Interpretation of the
'Match of the Century'



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Postcards From the Era of Perceived Superiority

A MAJOR question of all historical enquiry is where do we start in terms of space and time? Do we start at the beginning of the organised game? The 19th-century codification of several disparate games had brought clear lines of division between association and rugby football. The rise of professionalism in the clubs of the north-west of England and the employment of a new breed of players coming down from Scotland ended forever the domination of the game by the amateurs of The Wanderers and the Royal Engineers. The pattern of English club football was strongly established by the likes of Preston North End, Blackburn Rovers, Everton and Aston Villa. English professional football became innately connected to the world of factories, mills, shipyards and coal mines. A world of rigidity and patterns, where the repetition of clocks, shifts and timetables dominated. So perhaps Scotland v England in Glasgow in 1872 is a start point or Portugal v England in Lisbon in 1947 or three years later at USA v England in the Brazil World Cup of 1950?

An appropriate place to begin seems to be the founding of FIFA in 1904 and the complex relationship and non-relationship between FIFA and the Football Association

from 1904 to 1947. The Fédération International de Football Association was founded in May 1904 with a small group of original members – France, Belgium, Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, Holland and Denmark. Not exactly world-encompassing; more a western European federation. The FA (Football Association), as football's Mother Country, were invited to join from the inception. The original codifier of the game had to receive an invite to this nascent body. At first Frederick Wall, secretary of the FA, concluded, probably in about seven seconds, that there was absolutely nothing to gain from joining this little, French-led grouping. The same year may well have been the year of the *Entente Cordiale* between Britain and France at governmental level, but no one at the FA seemed to be aware of a new, formal relationship. However the year after the FA did relent and no matter how reluctantly joined FIFA.

The spectacular arrogance of the rulers of the English game was confirmed four years later when England embarked on their first international tour around continental Europe. In four games they destroyed the best that *Mitteleuropa* had to offer. Austria were dispatched 6-1 and 11-1 in Vienna, Hungary 7-0 in Budapest and Bohemia 4-0 in Prague. In 1909, there was another tour of central Europe resulting in three more consecutive victories – 4-2 and 8-2 v Hungary, and 8-1 v Austria. In two consecutive summers England played seven matches on tour and scored 48 goals, with a straight run of victories. The belief that England were the paramount masters was hegemonic, and the English never gave anyone a rest from communicating the position that they alone held their omnipresence on Mount Olympus. Britain, in general, was the undisputed home of football and the original masters of the game: the codifiers and initiators who established both the international and professional aspects of

football, who then through cultural imperialism exported it across Europe and Latin America. British engineers, sailors, soldiers and businessmen stashed footballs in their luggage and booted them down the gangplank to found the game across major international cities.

The explosion in the popularity of the England v Scotland and Rangers v Celtic matches only confirmed the pre-eminence of all things British in the microcosm of pre-World War One football. By 1912 Celtic Park and Ibrox were accommodating 74,000 and 65,000 for the Old Firm derbies. Scotland's national football stadium, Hampden Park, was recording colossal crowds of 100,000 in 1906, expanding to 127,000 by 1912. It was this tale of continued expansion of the game that led to Britain's clear view that football in the British Isles between 1870 and 1914 had a position unrivalled anywhere else in the world.

An important force in the expansion of the game was mass media, which had been established in England in the 19th century with the increase in the literacy rate of the working class. New media forms developed and expanded from this period onwards, but newspapers were always a central experience by which football followers absorbed their facts and myths of the game for generations. By the mid-1950s British people read more daily newspapers than any other nation in the world, an astonishing 615 per 1,000 doing so. These forms of blanket coverage were brought about by technological developments that could ensure that every corner of the nation could share in a specific experience. This reach was further enhanced by the introduction and widespread expansion of radio in the interwar period. The radio was the key instrument to domesticate a considerable section of the nation's leisure and entertainment, and football was part of this process. Matches would now be experienced

by different groups interpreting events through different forms – the live crowd and the radio audience, beholden to the voice and skills of the commentator to implant a picture of events. Radio was the vehicle for the redirecting of a great amount of mass entertainment towards the home environment and away from the public arena. Of course radio offered a level of immediacy that the newspapers, even the post-match *Pink Finals* and *Green 'Uns* could not compete with. Radio and later reel films and television crystallised football and other sports into a structure that made the nation real and tangible through events and ceremonies endlessly repeated with imagery and symbolism drenching on to the enclosed scenes and relayed and interpreted by and to audiences both live and remote.

However, though the game and its reporting expanded exponentially, there had been tensions from the beginning of the founding of the Football League in 1887. From this point forward the players who would represent the national team were primarily contracted to individual clubs. The ongoing tetchy, testy and sometimes explosive relationship between the Football League and Football Association saw a core focus in the exhausting club versus country debate. The cycle of xenophobia and sometimes outright detestation of all things foreign continued over time with both football authorities competing to see who could be the most insular and condescending to anyone outside the British Isles who kicked a football.

One of the most eminent British football writers over many decades, Geoffrey Green, described British relations with FIFA between 1904 and 1952 as a halting story. Green is being somewhat generous in his conclusion. Perhaps a more accurate assessment would be to parallel FA and FIFA relations during that period to that of military conflict in the

ancient Greek world, where there were sporadic outbreaks of peace in a near-permanent state of war. The arrogance and aloofness of the Football Association repeated itself in a never-ending echo, the desire for the British to abstain from continental involvement and interference into anything decided on the Sceptred Isle.

On two separate occasions the FA removed itself from membership of FIFA, which meant that for the 42 years of possible interaction between 1904 and 1946 the English association spent far more years outside the international fold than within it. Fundamentally, European international football did not take place during the period of the Great War. In the aftermath of hostilities ending FIFA wanted to bring back a sense of normality and invited the associations of Germany and Austria to rejoin the realm of international competition. The FA objected and promptly withdrew membership. After a hiatus membership was reluctantly re-established until 1926 when a longer breach took place over definitions of amateurism and the specific issue of broken-time payments. There was very little negotiation or appreciation of other viewpoints as the FA withdrew into a form of splendid isolation.

The broken time issue developed during the Congress of Rome in 1926 and drew in wider issues of discontent. The interpretation of broken time payments was down to individual associations and in accordance they interpreted the issue differently. The FA were also concerned to stop any interference by FIFA into the internal control and decision-making of a national association. The FA felt it was, at least partly, their position to dictate to the world governing body whether they could involve themselves in advice or procedure with one of their constituent members. Paramount among the FA's concerns with FIFA's involvement was that there

was to be no changing of the laws of the game. The laws, according to the FA, were sacrosanct and carved deeper into stone than the tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. In reality the rules and codes of football had been subtly and regularly altered since the 1860s. It was not the case that an original set of rules conceived in a singular meeting had remained untouched for 60 years.

Association football was not alone in splits over the definition of amateurism and in many sports, such as rugby union and athletics, inconsistency and conflict existed over many decades. However, it was the core value point that the FA chose to initiate their removal from being involved with an organisation which they had paid lip service to and found no beneficial reasons to remain within. This was a fateful decision which almost completely removed English involvement in European and world developments. The moat was deepened, the drawbridge pulled up and the portcullis slammed down to focus on the annual England v Scotland matches and the weekly happenings of matches in Stoke, Huddersfield and Sunderland.

It was 20 years before England rejoined and engaged with FIFA with a more internationalist outlook. This was in no short measure due to the efforts of one man – Stanley Rous. As Willy Meisl, a man never short of an opinion, stated in *World Sports Magazine* from November 1954, Britain's two-decades-long isolation had led to a virtual exclusion from the blood circulation of international soccer. These interwar developments did not just include the original invitational World Cup of 1930 and the expanding, European-based World Cups of 1934 and 1938, but such tournaments as the Mitropa Cup. The Mitropa Cup was founded in 1927 by Willy Meisl's brother Hugo and was competed for by the best club teams in Austria, Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia

and Czechoslovakia. Clearly English clubs could not have competed directly in this competition, but it was indicative of a broadening of the competitive base which English clubs were removed from.

Though England were not members of FIFA for most of the interwar period they did play matches, all friendlies, on the continent. A total of 23 were played by England in Europe between 1929 and 1939. With the four home nations rejoining, and crucially, remaining in FIFA, from 1947, it opened the door for regular competitive matches against elite European countries and later a smaller number of games against the powerhouses of South American football – Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.

During this immediate postwar period England had a superb array of individual talent that overrode any issues around tactical awareness. This was never more apparent than in the incredible game against Portugal in 1947, specially arranged to celebrate the official opening of the Stadium of Light in Lisbon, where England destroyed their hosts 10-0. In one of Billy Wright's multiple autobiographies, *Football is My Passport*, there is a superb photograph which encapsulates the confidence of the English team. In many respects it is a standard photo of a pre-match line-up, but in reality it tells us so much more. The match in question was a zenith performance. A 10-0 away victory in European international football belongs to an era of clear disparity, to an age long lost, and is only replicated today against the minnows of San Marino or Andorra.

Perhaps in this photograph we have the greatest line-up England ever produced. The legendary names override any concerns for systems or tactics. The warmth and bright light shine out from the photograph with the England players all having rolled up the sleeves on their shirts to above the elbow.

Their perfect white shirts, expansively opened at the collar, are unfettered by any form of colouring or advertising, with just the large badge of the three lions over the left breast. The forward line of Matthews, Mannion, Mortensen, Lawton and Finney exude a relaxed and confident countenance. A packed stand fills the background. Goalkeeper Frank Swift looks slightly away at an angle, but most of the team look directly to the camera. It appears that in their minds they know they are going to destroy the opposition. How could you not be confident you would win comfortably with that forward line and Swift, Scott, Franklin and Wright behind?

However, only nine days previously England had suffered a 1-0 defeat to Switzerland which brought out a myriad of excuses from various quarters. In *The Stanley Matthews Story* the star winger stated that the main reason England lost this particular match was the size of the stadium and pitch. Matthews was unequivocal, 'A small ground doesn't suit an English international team. We are used to playing on spacious ones. On the small grounds the Swiss teams use, English players are apt to get a feeling of being closed in and playing on top of each other.' Matthews was informing us that this defeat in Zurich didn't really count as the home team had not obliged their opponents by selecting a pitch which was to their advantage.

Matthews was more concerned that the pitch's size affected his game and performance; with wing play compressed on a smaller and narrower surface the impact of line-hugging individuals was diminished. The question of whether England had adapted play, system or shape was not raised as a logical response to changing circumstances. The pitch and ground were the wrong size for England's one-dimensional approach. Dennis Brailsford, in *British Sport: A Social History*, describes football reeling from England's

unthinkable defeat to Switzerland and a similar result for Scotland against Belgium, but the Switzerland defeat was repackaged with no inquiry or inquest. The excuses were made, and football moved on to the next game, which in this case was the aforementioned victory in Lisbon.

To celebrate the new union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland being a full and active part of the wider football world, a major match was proposed. In fact, it was a monumental game in which, for the first time, a united British team took on the Rest of Europe. The match was held at Hampden Park in Glasgow, still the world's largest capacity football stadium in 1947. The combined talents of Swift, Ron Burgess, Matthews, Lawton and Billy Liddell swept aside Europe 6-1. Surely there was nothing to worry about from Europe with a result such as that. The *Daily Express* proclaimed the British team 'The Bosses of Soccer' and why would any of the 135,000 people watching the match conclude anything different? In other aspects of the game too this was a Golden Age. Attendances at English club matches reached their absolute peak in the late 1940s. Many crowds were simply restricted by the stadium capacity. In 1946/47 35.5 million people attended matches and this rose to the all-time high of 41.25 million in 1948/49.

A scratch Great Britain team playing a scratch European team was one thing, but now England were to start playing European nations on a more regular basis. There was no European Nations Cup until 1960 and FIFA rather generously allowed the British Home International Championship to double up as qualification for the 1950 World Cup finals held in Brazil. However, England playing a broader range of internationals brought a new range of tests not faced before. In addition to the Great Britain team match of 1947 there were the two, previously mentioned, widely

differing results for the England team in that year which set a confusing pattern of positives and negatives. England attempted to deal with brilliant players, coached teams and differing systems as the proclaimed masters found out there were other approaches to the Beautiful Game.

England's first major test of genuine world football came in their appearance at the 1950 World Cup. This tournament provided a whole range of challenges and issues for which the FA party was completely unprepared. It also produced a match forever remembered by England fans with a shudder of incomprehension even at 70 years removed but had a different set of conclusions in 1950. When is a calamity not a calamity? When no one notices or gives a shit or every single excuse in the book is utilised to explain away the inexplicable. So it was with the performance of the England national team at the fourth World Cup, their first, and in particular the 1-0 defeat to the USA on 29 June 1950. The scene of this extraordinary result was Belo Horizonte, Brazil. In England's 1,000-plus full internationals this remains and almost certainly will always remain their worst result. The self-proclaimed supreme team, self-appointed favourites to win the tournament, were defeated by a genuine rag-tag and bobtail outfit who gave themselves so little chance of winning that they, allegedly, went out on the bevvy the night before.

Stanley Matthews epitomised the confused and illogical stance of this period. He stated before the 1950 finals, 'It looks like a piece of cake for England to win the World Cup.' This was despite the tournament being played in a country England had never played an international in before, in fact in a continent they'd never played an international in before. Even though the England players knew nothing of their opponents in Pool 2 – Chile, Spain and the USA. Despite

all these overriding factors, Matthews still concluded after watching Brazil defeat Mexico 4-0 that England would win the tournament. Preparation was an alien concept to the FA party in Brazil with decisions and non-decisions reaching farcical levels. There were some voices, Stanley Rous and Walter Winterbottom, attempting a broader approach and vision, but their outlook was not shared by too many of those directly involved in the tournament.

A major contributor to the recorded memory of the USA match is England captain Billy Wright. The producer of four autobiographies during his playing career, Wright covered the defeat in considerable detail in both *The World's My Football Pitch* (1953) and *Football is My Passport* (1957) where he laid down the points and arguments that became the gospel for all following generations of England fans and commentators. Coached in the casual racism of the 1950s, Wright was clearly no fan of Brazil as a country, or Brazilians – it wasn't Ironbridge. He described the whole Brazilian experience as a pain in the neck. In the saccharine sweet and anodyne world of 1950s footballers' autobiographies this is about as strong as it gets. Clearly, he hated the whole experience.

Wright offered a wide range of reasons why England flopped, as he termed it, at the 1950 World Cup. The USA game appeared to offer a form of template to try and excuse every team's defeat before or since. In general terms the two group defeats were due to the plethora of missed chances by the strikers (a beautiful dumping of responsibility for defeat on to attack from defence, as Matthews would later reverse responsibility for the 6-3 defeat), the humidity of Brazil which made breathing difficult and led to a negative effect on players' stamina, the thick grass of the pitches which was unusual for the England players and the

complete change of diet which created the 'Rio stomach'. So somehow one of the reasons for England being defeated by the USA was Brazilian people cooking Brazilian dishes in a Brazilian manner, which affected some of the players. It was perceived as the responsibility of the Brazilian hotel staff to prepare British meals without any previous experience of cooking such food. It wasn't the responsibility of the touring party and FA management to have thought about, planned and prepared for this issue in a party of 30 in Brazil for potentially three or four weeks. These points create a framework for excusing poor results, with differing aspects all neatly covered – team-mates, pitch, the foreign nature of everything and the weather. Wright then moves to the USA game specifically.

In an enhanced batch of contributory factors there were the inadequate changing facilities, which led to interference from Walter Winterbottom and the team changing at a local sports club. For Wright the forward line was clearly to blame as they had a dozen chances where the ball did not run for England and end up in their opponents' net. Two more excuses followed – one the oldest in the game of football and the other an unusual message which became core in concluding this defeat as being in some way invalid. In a single sentence Wright connected this match with thousands that went before and after, 'Some of the poorest refereeing I have ever seen gave the Americans more than their share of good fortune.' Every follower can understand the captain here. Even though virtually no fans travelled from England to see the game, we all know that at the very least the man in black had the eyesight of Mr Magoo. The second of the reasons was far more unusual and in 1950 was, perhaps, a difficult one for the English football public to take on board. This was the legal validity of several of the American team

for even being on the pitch. Not only had England lost to Johnny Foreigner but there were incorrect foreigners in the team. The goalscorer Gaetjens was Haitian and there was a Scot lurking in the team too, an ex-Wrexham player. The negativity and endless excuses continued with Wright not being able to give Gaetjens any credit for his match-winning goal. It was a stone-cold fluke. According to Wright the ball just hit the back of his head as he attempted to duck under the ball and the deflection threw the goalkeeper, Bert Williams. Further flukes followed with the USA goalkeeper making numerous saves with his face. The goal was not even a real goal scored by someone who shouldn't have been on a pitch that was cut at the wrong length for England in a stadium that wasn't up to scratch in a country that was humid and foreign.

All players and supporters develop their safety net of excuses for defeats as soon as they are involved in the game. From the most crazed eye-popping ultra to almost every manager ever to screaming, hyper-ventilating South American commentators to seven-year-olds just starting their playing and supporting journey, we all do it. A never-ending, always-increasing list of excuses for defeat – ranging from the totally logical to the surreal. From our own personal database of excuses, we will bring forth a selection to explain away in our own minds the defeat of the team we were playing for or watching. We couldn't possibly have been beaten by our opponents because on the day they played better than us and took their chances and deserved to win. The endless flow from our own personal filing cabinets all on immediate standby to explain our own or our team's inadequacies – it was too hot, too cold, too muddy, too waterlogged, grassless pitch, bone-hard pitch, biased referee, corrupt referee and linesman, injuries, lucky goalkeeper, fluke goalkeeping performance,

deflection, rain, snow, mist, sleet, hail, wrong kit, wrong boots, intimidating crowd or stadium, poor preparation, poor hotel, poor changing facilities, poor transport to ground, poor fans, no fans, aggressive fans, too much atmosphere, no atmosphere, incorrect offside decision, cheating and blatant fouls not given – all add to the mix to create a scandal of Watergate proportions against you or your team.

Alf Ramsey, who played in this game, was of a slightly different opinion as he claimed to be of the view that the USA were never going to be a pushover. He felt that on the decent surface of the Belo Horizonte pitch the USA were a good team, with Ed de Souza and Eddy McIllvenny both having particularly good games. David Winner, writing 55 years later, held the exact opposite opinion, stating that the USA were genuine no-hopers who had lost 9-0 to Italy in a World Cup warm-up game, only emphasising that England's defeat was, using Brian Glanville's word, cataclysmic. Winner retrospectively connected this defeat with Winston Churchill's claim that the few years after World War Two marked the greatest fall in the rank and stature of Britain in the world since the loss of the American colonies 200 years previously. However, although USA had lost their first game at the tournament 3-1 to Spain, they had actually taken the lead and held on to it until just ten minutes remained.

All these excuses and negative comments created a web of non-responsibility. The defeat was due to a vast range of factors, most of which were beyond the influence of the FA or any of the players on the pitch. Wright's advice for England to improve and, fundamentally, compete at world level was not to look forward but to look back, in a similar vein to Matthews. Wright argued that the future of the game in England was to return to an Excalibur-wielding mythical age where all opponents were dispatched to the sword. His

concluding statement of a call to arms was so vague it's very difficult to unpack what is actually being argued, 'The sooner we in Britain return to the old teachings the better it will be for our footballers. The game as a whole ... we in this island are capable of producing the best football in the world, providing all connected with the great game are prepared to put everything they possess in to achieving this end.'

Wright's autobiographies came out as regular as clockwork throughout his playing career, and as previously mentioned, *The World's My Football Pitch* (1953) was followed four years later by *Football is My Passport*. In some areas his outlook of the world game became a little bit more sophisticated but in others it remained an *idée fixe*. In his 1953 version of a world XI (and two substitutes) the result was overwhelmingly insular with nine Englishmen, two Welshmen and a Scot present and only one foreign player – Gerhard Hanappi of Austria. There was no room for Ferenc Puskás, Nándor Hidegkuti or Alfredo Di Stéfano. However, the four-year gap and two defeats to Hungary and the 1954 Switzerland World Cup had not altered his fundamental range of factors for defeat to the USA. In fact, a few new ones were added for good measure – bone-hard pitches, all five England forwards had an off-day together, and Gaetjens' goal was now relegated to the level of being the freakiest goal Wright witnessed in his entire career. Only on one occasion did Wright complement the United States for their victory, in the form of player Ed de Souza, who he rated as a quality player with the skill and football brain to unlock the England defence. Apart from this one positive comment on the USA team Wright's negative diatribe continued with further lamentations on the attributes of the referee, whose performance was now concluded as extraordinary. Wright was not at any point concerned about tactics or systems. The focus was to package and explain

away this defeat as a fluke that was due to a totally bizarre combination of factors including the weather and preparation of the opposition, all of which were completely beyond the remit of the FA party and players.

The other England player on the pitch in Belo Horizonte and later at the Hungary game, to comment considerably in a contemporary autobiography, was Alf Ramsey. Ramsey was, perhaps, the most nationalistic Englishman who ever walked the earth, so it is no surprise that his view of the USA defeat was even more lacking in balance than Wright's. In the rather slim at 110 pages *Talking Football*, published by the stalwarts of sporting biographies Stanley Paul, Ramsey took us through a fabulous list of mistakes and blatantly unfair scenarios leading to the US defeat. He stated that in training matches he was already finding it very hard to breathe. The humidity or altitude clearly had a negative effect on Ramsey as he argued he felt infinitely more tired after an easy kickabout than after a hectic league match.

In complete contradiction to Matthews' statement that England would, basically, walk the 1950 World Cup, Ramsey stated that he never thought it was going to be easy against the USA. Ramsey brought forward a range of factors, mostly echoing those of Wright. The stadium was not complete with inadequate changing facilities. He equated the stadium to playing in a prison with a crowd that was totally hostile to the England team and enthusiastically supported the USA and reiterated the central point that several of the USA team were not qualified to play in the match. Ramsey then beautifully manoeuvred the result to one of English largesse, 'A player can only play in a World Cup for the country for which he is qualified by birth, so England, if they had felt that way, could have lodged a protest against the USA, but that is not our way of going about things.'

An England team containing some of the greatest players ever to wear the shirt may have lost to a raggle-taggle bunch of disparate semi-professionals, but the moral, almost imperial, high ground was retained. Ramsey encapsulated the tsunami of excuses after offering up the beautiful riposte of 'I'm not making excuses, but' – all tied up in a bow to bring forth every excuse possible including a year's bad luck in the first half, the USA goalkeeper stopping multiple shots with his face, Gaetjens' goal was a one-in-a-million freak, Mortensen having a goal disallowed and the superhuman efforts of the England team going unrewarded.

The construct of the Belo Horizonte myth was complete. The core issue was that almost no England supporters travelled to Brazil to see the game live and there was no cinema film or British television coverage. The events as laid down by the likes of Wright and Ramsey became the absolute truth for generations of fans and followers from 1950 onwards. In his 2003 autobiography Tom Finney recalled that the English press had a field day with an inquest that ran and ran. However, the reality was somewhat more complex, and the construct of the fluke was laid on this result, which excused any need to change approach in a deeper manner.

The game was in a tournament new to most British football fans, in a city most had never heard of, in a country almost no British people had visited. The tumult of excuses, factors and reasons brought forward meant the whole match was placed in a drawer marked 'embarrassing defeat – fluke'. Of course, not everyone in the small group of players and observers was motivated by trying to get this game brushed under the carpet. For some journalists present the USA defeat represented more. However, they were very much in a minority as their sports editors concentrated on other parallel sporting calamities, notably the England cricket

team's defeat to the West Indies in a Test match. Amazingly, when the footballers returned from Brazil there was only one reporter at the airport to interview Billy Wright and the myth-laying process began from this point.

Leo McKinstry viewed the defeat to the USA in catastrophic terms and he, surely, was correct to describe it as the greatest upset in the nation's sporting history, a record almost certainly never to be touched unless San Marino win 3-0 one day at Wembley. McKinstry claimed it haunted the players involved for years afterwards and was always a stain on their reputations. Perhaps that is correct and that was always the main motivation for the approach of the likes of Wright and Ramsey. McKinstry's other central contention that England had been turned into an international laughing stock was somewhat more complicated. All sporting performances and results are relative, and England were not alone in a poor or even disastrous World Cup. Brian Glanville ranked the three other pre-tournament favourites as Brazil, Italy and Sweden. Sweden made it to the final pool and were then beaten by Uruguay and lost 7-1 to Brazil. Italy were knocked out at the same stage as England and Brazil suffered their psychological catastrophe of defeat in the final match against Uruguay, which caused years of existential torment. For various differing reasons Germany, Argentina, Hungary, Scotland, France, Czechoslovakia and Austria weren't even there.

A point often downplayed or ignored is that after this defeat England still had an opportunity to qualify for the final pool phase by beating Spain. The match took place just two days later but also ended in a 1-0 defeat and England were on their way home – immediately. The thorough inquest and assessment did not take place and the party started their mythologising from the moment Billy Wright spoke to the

single reporter as he got off the plane. The relentless nature of professional football, as so brilliantly detailed in *Red or Dead* by David Peace, meant that even in 1950 there was the switch to cricket, players' holidays, pre-season training and then the undisputed focus on the 42-game league season for Blackpool and Bolton, Tottenham and Arsenal. The players, of course, had a lot of motivation to deflect, downplay or blame someone or something else and move on swiftly to the opening game of the 1950/51 domestic season. We've all cocked up at work and used those two key tactics – blame someone else or try to minimise the damage by never even mentioning the issue. Footballers went to work, and their work was professional football. In certain respects they were no different from anyone else.

The inquest may have been shelved for most people but for those with a bigger perspective they took some underlying factors from the 1950 World Cup. England had lost two games out of three in a group that looked straightforward enough in a depleted tournament. Stanley Rous had commented that the USA had seemed 'fitter, faster and better fighters', but this was just a general comment on the gap in preparation between England and other teams. From kit to diet to selection process, England had bordered on a joke. While Brazil racked up astonishing score after astonishing score with their plethora of coaches, dieticians and a psychologist, England had Arthur Drewry, the Grimsby fishmonger, as their sole selector present in Brazil. The team was only exclusively selected by the manager when Alf Ramsey took the post and he made that a core condition of accepting the job. In the long reign of Walter Winterbottom the team was chosen by the international selection committee. Over the 1950s and early 1960s Winterbottom increased his voice on this archaic process, but in 1950 the committee chose the

team and the coach got on with it. The committee brought a short-term outlook, ego, localised agendas of members pushing players from their own club and 'flavours of the month' appearing from nowhere for one or two caps and then being cast into oblivion if they weren't Steve Bloomer, Raich Carter and Stanley Matthews rolled into one.

When the 1950 World Cup debacle was over for England after their defeat to Spain there was very little desire for almost any of the FA party to stay in Brazil for one minute more than was necessary. Wright and Matthews both claimed that they wanted to stay to watch the final stages of the tournament, but they were informed that everyone was to return to the UK together. The longer-term problem for England was that the tournament performances could be swept under the carpet and there was a quick move to business as usual. There was no deep or wide-reaching inquiry to assess England's performances or to investigate areas for improvement.

One major development that did come forward from the dual force of Rous and Winterbottom was the ad hoc expansion of international opponents, up to the November 1953 match against Hungary. Historically England had played a surfeit of matches against Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. With the clear exception of Scotland, it was annual matches against Wales and the Irelands which gave England such a strong win ratio. The expansion of European opponents involved games against a disproportionately small number of countries – France, Belgium and Austria. From 1950 onwards England started to regularly play other European nations and there was further expansion to start playing matches against the major South American countries – Argentina and Uruguay in 1953 and Brazil in 1956. In the three years between the

USA defeat and the 6-3 Hungary match England played Yugoslavia, Argentina, Portugal, France, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Chile, Uruguay, USA and the FIFA Rest of Europe team.

The evolutionary process after the 1950 World Cup was glacial, not revolutionary. The split of football in England was clear during this period with those wanting to hitch a ride on the new ideas coming through doing so and those who didn't continuing to exist in their self-defined bubble and excusing or ignoring failures and shortcomings. The two main drivers of development – Rous and Winterbottom – implemented an FA technical subcommittee to try and assess what was required to improve English football in the competitive international arena. Several club chairmen, international players, managers and some press met and had some limited input, but core issues such as team selection by the international committee were not forcefully challenged.

The committee asked a myriad of voices for their opinion on how to progress and, unsurprisingly, they got a myriad of responses. The position of coaching remained controversial at the elite end of English football. There were calls for advanced training for internationals which juxtaposed against the widely held view that coaching was overvalued to the detriment of match practice. The endless obsession with the club v country argument reared its Medusa's head with a focus on the conflict between international and league football. There continued to be an appreciation by clusters of minds of the riches of the world game in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Vienna and Budapest, but they acted as islands of interest and knowledge. The real tragedy of the World Cup in 1950 is that England lost to the USA and that game could be packaged as a fluke, that they weren't played off the park by Brazil or Uruguay. The power and

influence of the apologists remained for this reason. One of the few concrete implementations was the introduction of 'B' internationals, though their importance and relevance to developing a top-class international side can clearly be questioned.

There were new and challenging experiences for England during the period of 1950 to 1953. These matches should have shown to everyone not necessarily England's inferiority or set ways but, that there were approaches across Europe and South America which had other stories to tell. Three important components consistently written about by commentators contemporary and secondary are the 1951 home draw against Austria, the 1953 tour of South America and, rather bizarrely, the 4-4 draw with the FIFA Rest of Europe team four weeks before the Hungary game in 1953.

Austria had long been a focus of football development. The bigger sister to Budapest in a *Mitteleuropa* hub of ideas and discussion of the game involving some of the greatest football coaching and management brains – Béla Guttmann, Hugo Meisl and Gusztáv Sebes. The interwar Austrian *Wunderteam* was long gone, swallowed up in the Nazi stroll across the border that was the Anschluss. However, the team of the early 1950s were held as one of the strongest on the continent. England played Austria twice in six months, in late 1951 at Wembley and in May 1952 in Vienna. In his *Talking Football*, Alf Ramsey interestingly pointed out that the Wembley-based 'Match of the Century' Austrian version was attended by many English professional players who were there to pick up tips, in a precursor to the galaxy of future important managers and coaches who attended the 6-3 game. Some professionals were clearly interested in viewing different teams, systems and approaches. Indeed,

this was only the second non-British and Irish team to play a full international at Wembley.

Brian Glanville saw Austria as the pre-eminent European side who had developed after the 1950 World Cup, with their star performer Ernst Ocwirk. The master British football writer viewed this match as another clear clash of football styles and culture. England rolled out their 'normal' game, with a 'dogged, uninspired, uncoordinated attack and a defence which persistently fell back before Austrian attacks'. This was the straightforward tactic of retreating defence. Geoffrey Green went further, interpreting the season of 1951/52 as the year of real awakening in terms of international football. He defined the Austria match as one of the truly great ones. England took the challenge seriously enough to arrange specific training at Maine Road, Manchester City's ground, in what Green termed an unprecedented step. Though after this level of preparation there was the oft-repeated issue of injuries that meant Billy Wright was not utilised in a new role in attack as a 'loose' forward but was retained at wing-half and Stan Mortensen was withdrawn.

The selection panel decided to award first caps to Ivor Broadis and Arthur Milton. Green was under no illusion that this was a scratch England team. The importance of the 2-2 draw is placed in a global context of retaining England's unbeaten home record, for one more match at least. Green acknowledged that it was a close thing with Austria's skilled ball players who exhibited energy, a smart approach to the game and, the writer perceived, with a combination short and long passing game, the Austrians possessed a deeper knowledge of the game than England. Other contemporary commentators on the match included stalwart journalist Ivan Sharpe in *40 Years of Football*. Sharpe went back to

pre-World War Two analysis, being present in a myriad of situations from audiences with Benito Mussolini and the Italian World Cup winners of 1934 to being privy to secret information from former Burnley player and referee Charles Sutcliffe during the Pools War of 1936.

International selection games have always held a strange position in how much attention is given to them. Of course, it's exciting for fans and commentators to experience these dream teams, but what real relevance do they have? Gusztáv Sebes, Hungary's coach, was clear that the October 1953 match between England and the FIFA Select XI had no relevance whatsoever. He refused to release any of his players for the fixture as he didn't wish to pander to the egos of a few high-ranking FIFA and FA officials. The purity of the game shone through for Sebes.

The amazing thing about this fantasy game is how much was written about it, both at the time and down the decades, and how much store was put on both result and performance to a level not replicated in other select internationals. When Great Britain had dispatched FIFA in 1947 it was seen in Britain as confirming that the old order reigned. The England v FIFA match in 1963 and even the bizarre sight of seeing Tommy Smith lining up for Team America v England in 1976 never got anything like the same attention as the 1953 game. The FIFA team for that encounter was not a World XI but a completely Eurocentric side. There were no players from the current world champions, Uruguay, and neither Brazil nor Argentina. The FIFA team consisted of three Austrians, three Yugoslavs, two Spaniards, a West German, an Italian and a Swede. Players came from just six European nations with ex-Hungarian international László Kubala representing Spain in one of those fluid nationality decisions which sport deals so well in.

In response to this range of talent the England selection committee countered with experienced star players – Merrick, Ramsey, Eckersley, Wright, Dickinson, Matthews, Mortensen and Lofthouse formed the core of the team, but there were also a couple of selectors' specials in Ufton and Mullen. Derek Ufton, of Charlton Athletic, had the unenviable role of facing up to Europe's best strikers playing in a formation unfamiliar to most English defenders. Without any sense of irony Ufton stated that it had been impossible in two days of preparation for him to understand how the rest of the team played and how to react to them. Of course, Ufton played against all those players every season. The team that had very little preparation and had to deal with additional complexities such as language barriers and formation disparities were their opponents.

Ufton struggled in the FIFA match to pick up and deal with Gunnar Nordahl who was playing a more withdrawn role. Bill Eckersley was reputedly furious at the positional confusion and at half-time berated other defenders. Winterbottom tried to defuse the situation by talking to Ufton and agreeing that the approach in the first half wasn't working and that the revised plan would be to let Nordahl go, stay back and seal the central defensive area. Poor old Ufton was held responsible for the poor performance of the English defence that day and his showing against the combined talents of some of the world's best players was to be his one and only England cap. Here was the reality of England's national team in their final match at Wembley before hosting Hungary 35 days later.