

AIDAN WILLIAMS

EURO

1984



THE GREATEST TOURNAMENT
YOU NEVER SAW



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Chapter 1

1980 and All That

FOR A tournament that would end up being described by the winning French manager, Michel Hidalgo, as ‘a triumph for attacking football’, the European Championship was not in a good state ahead of the era-defining 1984 edition. It’s not even stretching things too far to describe the 1984 finals as being nigh on make or break for the European Championship.

Europe was a significantly different place in the early 1980s to the one we know today. The political and national boundaries were still shaped and fixed by the Cold War and its Iron Curtain. European football was moulded and defined by this, as was its showpiece international event. Long before the break-up of the Eastern European nations, UEFA comprised just 33 members, but enjoyed a strength and level of competition that ought to have made the European Championship close to the World Cup in terms of significance and difficulty.

Having existed as a four-team finals tournament from its inception in 1960 through to 1976, the expansion to eight finalists in 1980 hadn’t produced the anticipated feast of football. In fact, the 1980 finals in Italy had produced such dour, unimaginative, uninspiring football that it left the European Championship in the unenviable position of being seen an unloved, inferior local squabble when compared to the significantly more inspiring World Cup.

Expansion was not entirely without merit, of course. It had all been intended to give the European Championship a shot in the arm; an attempt to make it into more of a spectacle. If not to rival the World Cup, then to at least sit proudly alongside. Europe, of course, had sufficient quality national teams to make such an expansion a reasonable idea: not so much giving hope to the mid- to low-ranking nations, but instead enabling Europe's showpiece to include more of Europe's strongest national teams, producing a tournament of strength and quality across the board.

This was during a time where the World Cup had yet to expand beyond 16 teams, meaning places at the global event were in short supply for European nations too. And when it came to the European Championship, the previous format may have given us genuine excitement with the jeopardy of two-legged quarter-finals to earn a place at the finals, restricting the showpiece event to just four nations – to just semi-finals and final itself – but it was certainly in need of a revamp.

In their wisdom, however, UEFA hardly helped themselves with their chosen format for 1980. Two groups of four was a natural split, but to reward all but the group winners with elimination was presumably chosen as a mirror of the final group stages of the two most recent World Cups. It was a poor format in those World Cups of 1974 and 1978, although it was at least understandable if you insist on having a second group stage at a World Cup. For the European Championship, though, it was disastrous.

To remove the hope of recovering from an opening loss was a short-sighted fallacy, leaving several teams with little to play for. Sending the second-placed teams directly to an unwanted third-place play-off merely enhanced the foolishness. The impact of a loss was so severe that it caused most teams to retreat into their shell: too afraid to attack

and leave themselves vulnerable, too cautious to compete for victory. If the aim had been to encourage the teams to risk all in attacking intent to secure top spot in the group and a place in the final, it was a forlorn hope.

Instead, it produced a display of negative, overly physical, dour defensive football. Those star players that were there – Bernd Schuster, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, Giancarlo Antognoni – found their positive impact either reduced or overshadowed by the general air of negativity formed by the defensive approaches of almost everyone. Other stars simply failed to shine through the depressing air of negativity, notably the sublime skills of Kevin Keegan in his prime. Unsurprisingly, this led to a succession of dull, meandering, uneventful matches played out by lacklustre teams. The only matches of any real quality and entertainment, and there were only a couple of them, were those featuring Schuster, whose quality appeared out of place in such a dour tournament.

It was perhaps UEFA's misfortune that their expansion to eight teams came at a time when the inventive, attacking verve of the early 70s was long gone. Where previously innovation and inspiration had flourished in the colours of the strong national teams of the Netherlands, West Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and many more besides, now such exuberance was replaced with caution, fear and cynicism. Had the European Championship expansion happened four years earlier in 1976, perhaps it would have met with more instant success. As it was, despite the strength of European football at club level, the international scene was one of stodgy, semi-functional teams, lacking the ability, the guile or the inclination to play a brand of football that inspired and excited.

Even the best of tournaments can endure a string of poor matches, so long as this is compensated for by iconic moments: a spectacular goal here and there, a sprinkling of

inspiration, a dazzle of genius. And yet the 1980 European Championship was a tournament bereft, a tournament abandoned by the joys of sporting moments that live a lifetime in the minds of those who saw them, and embed themselves into the collective recognition of those who have studied them since.

That it was all played out in front of disappointingly sparse crowds, save for the matches played by the Italian hosts, made matters even worse. It was little different on television, with audiences across the continent largely uninterested, other than if their own team was playing. Apathy reigned it seemed. Far from invigorating the European Championship, the 1980 edition had almost killed it. Even Italy, the only team to provoke moderately decent attendances, were playing under a shadow. The *Totonero* betting scandal had been the focus of much attention recently, with its final fall guy, Paolo Rossi – who had starred for Italy at the 1978 World Cup, and would do so again with startling distinction in 1982 – receiving a ban from football shortly ahead of the 1980 European Championship, depriving the *Azzurri* of their principal striker. Italy, qualifying as hosts, had also spent the previous two years playing only friendlies. Little wonder there was a general air of indifference around Italian football at the time. One match, Czechoslovakia against Greece in Naples, attracted a pitifully small attendance of around 7,000.

There was also the grim spectre of hooliganism. Through the 1970s, violence around football was a rising menace. The hooligan disease hit the headlines with a higher profile than it had perhaps done before when the group match between Belgium and England in Turin was halted for several minutes during the first half. Rioting in the stands led to the Italian police firing teargas into the crowd before wading in to combat the disorder. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described the scenes as ‘disgraceful’, while the

England manager Ron Greenwood didn't hold back in his assessment: 'We are ashamed of people like this. We have done everything to create the right impression here, and then these bastards let you down.'

If there were to be any enduring images of the 1980 European Championship to British audiences, the sight of the English and Belgian players struggling on through the lingering teargas smoke, as chaos ensued in the stands behind them, was probably it. On the footballing front there was little other iconography to surpass this apocalyptic scene and perhaps leave people with a warmer reminiscence. Aside from the sporadic skilful contributions from the likes of Schuster, it was the team that had shared the pitch with England in that combustible opening encounter that left the strongest impression of any.

Belgium surpassed the expectations of most observers, and indeed themselves, by securing top spot in their group to reach the final itself. Inspired by an emerging generation of talented players, Belgium proved one of the few bright spots of the tournament. Jan Ceulemans, a prolific attacking midfielder, was perhaps the leading light in an attacking sense but he was ably assisted by the likes of Eric Gerets and Jean-Marie Pfaff in defence and goal, and Erwin Vandenburgh and François Van der Elst up front. They were narrowly beaten in the final by the tournament's other vaguely positive footballing team, West Germany.

The 1980 tournament may have ended with a memorable final between two good teams, with the strongest in the competition deservedly winning through, but it couldn't mask what had gone before. The paucity of goals, the repeated dirty play and endless fouling, constant bickering with referees, woeful crowds, and hooliganism all combined to produce a tournament that deserves the judgement history has bestowed on it: the worst of the modern, post-expansion

European Championships. A tournament best forgotten, undoing a lot of the good work of the more entertaining 1972 and 1976 editions.

How then could the 1984 European Championship revive the fortunes of a flagging tournament? Perhaps the safe bet would have been to award the 1984 finals to one of Europe's football hotbeds, but then again Italy was one such hotbed and the tournament was on its knees following its Italian summer of 1980. England had expressed an interest in hosting in 1980, but didn't do so again when it came to 1984, presumably feeling the increasing reputation for the disorder of its fans would render any thoughts of hosting redundant. In the end only two nations seriously put themselves forward to host in 1984: West Germany and France.

Of the two, at that time only West Germany could have been considered one of football's hotbeds in terms of fan enthusiasm, attendances and also in terms of the performances of its clubs and national team. When the decision was made in December 1981, however, it was to France that the tournament was awarded. This was something of a gamble on UEFA's part, but in returning to the nation that gave us the European Championship – and indeed the World Cup and European Cup – it was perhaps a retreat to a symbolic comfort blanket: a return home for a tournament that had maybe tried to spread its wings too far too soon. There needed to be some changes, however, if the 1984 edition was to be a success.

Firstly, there was the format. The removal of the semi-finals was a failed experiment, soon to be swiftly cast aside. UEFA were later to describe the format as having 'not met with great success'. Even a smidgen of foresight from the power-brokers ought to have prevented it from ever having been considered in the first place. Alas, the impact of such decisions didn't seem to have been a primary consideration.

Aside from the competitive impact, it was also a disastrous financial decision. Would the group stage attendances have been so poor had there been a greater possibility of progression for each team? Would two competitive, jeopardy-laden semi-finals not have provided an incentive both for teams and spectators alike? Nothing stirs the emotions quite like knockout football. In a small, compact tournament such as the eight-team European Championship, such possibilities are naturally limited anyway. To deliberately remove the potential excitement, and income, of the semi-finals was a mistake UEFA would never make again. The semi-finals would make a return in 1984.

Then there was the third-place play-off; that unnecessary, unloved, waste of everyone's time. Even when there had been knockout semi-finals, to have a third-place play-off seems more a punishment for teams that would have rather gone home to lick their wounds. But in 1980 it simply meant sending both group runners-up into a meaningless contest, apparently as a reward for not finishing lower in the group. Unlike the World Cup, where this play-off persists, UEFA took the chance to rid themselves of this futile clash for good.

There had been an acceptance that the poor attendances in Italy in 1980 hadn't been helped by the ticket prices being set too high. The sparse crowds ruined both the spectacle and the bottom line, and a repeat was unthinkable. As well as a better pricing plan, the 1984 tournament would see a concerted effort to promote the tournament more professionally across Europe. It would be the first European Championship to benefit from such investment, dragging the tournament into the commercial age: a transition from simply a sporting tournament into a modern construct where the image of the football, the way the action on the pitch was packaged and portrayed, was increasingly important. This was the same year that the Olympic Games took on a

similar seismic leap, with the Los Angeles event marking a watershed between the old world and the new. It was UEFA's hope that the 1984 European Championship would do the same for their competition before any lingering interest in the whole concept ebbed away. A hope? More a desperate need, in order for the tournament to have a future of any great relevance.

'UEFA concluded that the marketing strategy for the 1980 competition hadn't been up to much, and they realised the impetus provided by 1972 and 1976 had petered out,' Jonathan O'Brien, author of *Euro Summits: The Story of the UEFA European Championship*, told me:

So, for 1984 they put a lot more effort into the promotional side of it. It was the first to be called 'Euro' followed by the year, whereas 1980 had been branded 'Europa 80' and the older ones weren't branded at all. The French also organised a massive poster campaign across the country, with well-known artists like Raymond Savignac, Teddy Radko and Jacques Servais designing the posters, one for each host city.

There was also a mascot, a cockerel named Péno dressed in a France kit, to boost their marketing efforts. This all helped to raise the profile of the tournament in a country that had never been a dyed-in-the-wool football country like Italy or England. This level of promotion was deemed necessary to engage the public, and for the public, in turn, to embrace and enjoy the tournament.

France was a country with an ambivalent relationship with football in many ways. There were hotbeds of fanatical support, of course, but football never consumed France and the French public in the same all-encompassing way it did in

England, Italy, West Germany or Spain. The fear was that the French public wouldn't flock to the matches, that France wouldn't become subsumed by the tournament and all its anticipation and drama. Hosting a finals can be something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, the nation can act as the 12th man on the pitch. The reverse can also be true, building an unbearable degree of pressure. France, enviously looking at its more successful neighbours in Italy and West Germany, and even to Spain and England, who had both won a trophy, wasn't a country certain to give its unwavering backing to its team, and the tournament in general.

'Basically the French people get behind the team if they're doing well and completely ignore them if they're not,' added O'Brien. 'And you can multiply that several times over when it comes to Paris.' It had the additional impact of modernising the whole enterprise, adding a degree of professionalism to the organisation off the pitch, to match the better thought-out plans for the on-field tournament structure itself.

The organisers were desperate for the negativity of 1980 to fade away to a distant memory, to be replaced by that of a tournament full of memorable moments, players and matches. The 1984 European Championship needed good football, to replace the strangling negativity and limiting fear with the excitement of positivity and exuberance. It needed the tournament to be fun: for players, for spectators, for fans across Europe and beyond.

It also needed the host nation to perform if the tournament was to be a success, and there was major pressure on France as a team. For all that it was a Frenchman, Henri Delaunay, who had been the main driver for the creation of a European Championship, France had barely caused a ripple in its entire history. Holding the 1984 edition would mark only France's second appearance at the finals, following their hosting of the inaugural 1960 event.

Fortunate, then, that France had arguably the greatest team in their history, coming to a peak at just the right time. And not only that, but they also had the greatest player in their history in his prime: Michel Platini. Although more recent history may subsequently associate him with scaling the greasy pole of UEFA and FIFA administration and his subsequent rapid crash back to earth, Platini was the most elegant, gifted of players. Part striker, part playmaker, he excelled at both without ever fitting either category neatly. He was a bit of everything, a force of nature capable of the astonishing, the exquisite and the prolific. Despite the abilities of those who have subsequently inspired France to their more recent glories, Platini ranks above them all as the finest France has ever produced. In 1984 he was on top of the world. With Diego Maradona still on the rise at this point, Platini was arguably the world's greatest, and the reigning Ballon d'Or winner – the first of three successive European Player of the Year awards. French ambitions, and those of UEFA for a festival of positive football, would both be significantly aided by the performances of a genius of his craft. The perfect player, in the perfect place at the perfect time. His presence was a boost to the hopes of a tournament that simply needed to be good.

France was ready, but there were 32 other nations desperate to join the party too. The qualifying process had begun shortly before the 1982 World Cup finals, when Romania beat Cyprus 3-1 in front of just 9,000 people in the Transylvanian city of Hunedoara. It would last until December 1983, by which time the 32 had been whittled down to seven qualifiers. The story of the 1984 European Championship may naturally be dominated by what occurred in that sizzling French summer, but it's a story that began with many extraordinary tales of fortune, hope and despair during the qualifying rounds. It saw the emergence of new

stars, saw some giants toppled and others come perilously close amid heroic performances, last-gasp drama and a dose of controversy. The qualifiers were played out in small groups that were mostly highly competitive, in a format full of jeopardy, with only the best, the group winners, making it through to the finals. Of the qualifying teams, only Belgium made it through by a margin greater than a single point.

The final line-up could so easily have been different from the way it ended up. A twist of fate here, a bounce of the ball there – such fine margins decided the destinies of so many. But the ways in which the seven who did qualify secured their places in France became a collection of epic tales themselves, adding to the rich history written by this astonishing tournament, enhancing its allure with every kick of the ball.