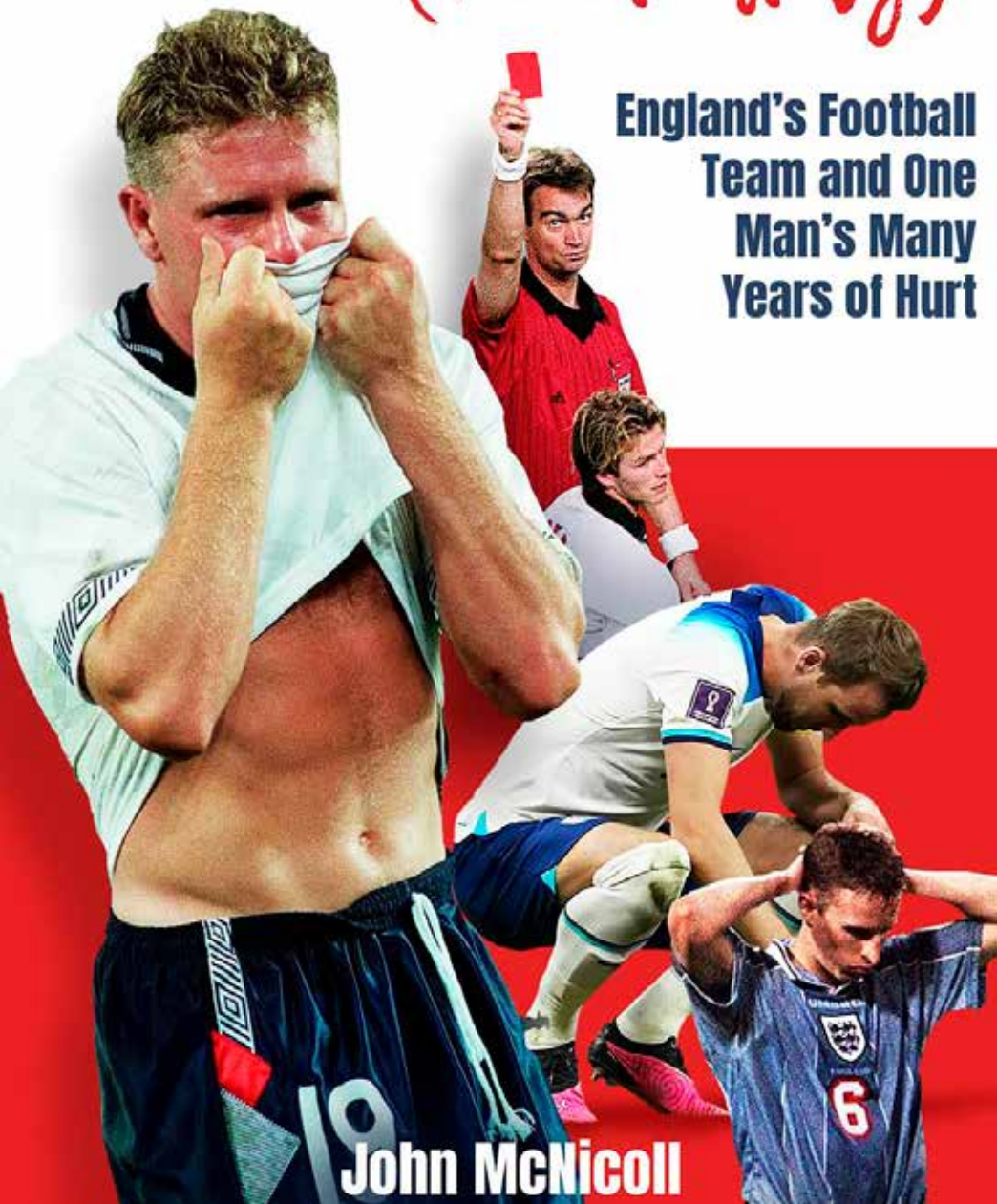


IT'S
COMING HOME
(Probably)

**England's Football
Team and One
Man's Many
Years of Hurt**



John McNicoll

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Italia '90 – Bye, Bobby

Hosts: Italy

Holders: Argentina

England's chances: Not fancied amidst media unrest.

Shilton, Woods, Beasant, Pearce, Dorigo, Walker, Butcher, Wright, Parker, Stevens, Webb, Platt, Gascoigne, Robson, Waddle, Hodge, Barnes, McMahon, Steven, Lineker, Bull, Beardsley.

THE INK on Bobby Robson's P45 barely had time to dry prior to the team heading off to their World Cup training base in Sardinia. The England boss had been offered a lucrative deal with Dutch giants PSV Eindhoven and with the Football Association making noises about heading in a different direction once Robson's contract had expired, the lovable Northerner decided that his future lay elsewhere on completion of the forthcoming summer's tournament. Robson had taken charge of the Three Lions eight years earlier, following the exit from the 1982 World Cup that saw the end of Ron Greenwood's tenure.

He had led Ipswich Town to the UEFA Cup in 1981 with a swashbuckling brand of football never before seen in Suffolk, which prompted those at Lancaster Gate to opt for his services and a year later in the July of 1982, they landed their man. Robson took the national job in his stride with

a qualifying record which included only one blemish in 28 matches, a defeat to Denmark in the qualifiers for Euro 1984. The Danes were coincidentally Robson's first opponents and to prove that he would be no roll-over, he instantly dropped double Ballon d'Or winner, Kevin Keegan.

His two tournaments prior to Italia '90 had produced a mixed bag of results with the World Cup in 1986 ending acrimoniously after Maradona's 'Hand of God' goal had helped to derail England's bid for glory at the quarter-final stage. Robson, who was clearly quite shaken by proceedings in Mexico, barked to the press: 'It wasn't the hand of God. It was the hand of a rascal. God had nothing to do with it.' The European Championship in 1988 had been a complete disaster, with the Three Lions finishing rock bottom of their group, which comprised the Republic of Ireland, eventual runners-up the Soviet Union and the eventual winners, the Netherlands. The less said about this tournament the better.

Despite England winning all of their qualifying matches prior to Italia '90 without conceding a single goal, a draw with Saudi Arabia in the run-up to the competition sullied the mood with the press. All this against a backdrop of Robson's resignation was enough for the red tops to do what they do best and sharpen their knives. One paper had even prompted the headline 'In the name of Allah, go', while *Today* newspaper called Robson a 'Traitor'. Robson, who had reached boiling point, sued *Today* over their comments.

'It's garbage,' said Robson in his hastily arranged press conference. 'I was stunned when I heard about this last night. The facts are that I received an offer from abroad, openly, and honestly and directly went to see our [FA] chairman, Bert Millichip. He said to me that he did not think my contract would be extended and he did not know what would happen in the World Cup and I accepted that. I didn't think there was a job for me, and he gave me full

permission to speak to PSV. But resign – why should I do that on the eve of going out with the players to try to win the World Cup? I have worked hard for four years to get us from one World Cup to another and on the eve of us leaving for the championships, this happens.’

The written press was gunning for the manager but had agreed a truce in the name of support for the team at the tournament. Not another mention of defecting back to club football would be typed out across any newspaper in the land, not until the end of England’s competition anyway. That wasn’t to say that the negativity around the team at the time didn’t remain intact. English players’ reputations had fallen behind their foreign counterparts after a blanket ban on English clubs taking part in European competitions meant that the players’ football focus lay solely on domestic soil. Nevertheless, Robson had total confidence in the 22 men that he had selected in his squad.

England had again been drawn against the Republic of Ireland, European champions the Netherlands and African qualifiers, Egypt. The Dutch side had a wealth of talent at their disposal with the likes of Ruud Gullit, Marco van Basten, Frank Rijkaard and Ronald Koeman. The Irish themselves had a whole host of players who plied their trade in the top tier of English football, so were familiar with Robson and his men. The boys in green were managed by fellow Englishman and World Cup winner, Jack Charlton, another alumnus of the North East of England.

I was nine years old as the team touched down in Italy. My first real tournament of any significant memory. The opening credits of the coverage on TV with *Nessun Dorma* playing still bring goosebumps to the back of my neck every time I hear it. For as long as I live, I will always associate that song with my first taste of international wizardry. I guess the expectation for England in any competition is

secretly high, albeit this one was against the backdrop of a witch hunt against the manager. I mean, there is a kind of arrogance about the English football supporter. We gave the sport of association football to the world. Why shouldn't we be masters of the game while the others remain our apprentices? Unfortunately for England, the upstarts were quickly becoming the dominant force as we slipped further and further down the international pecking order.

Due to England's notorious 'hooligan' element, the Three Lions were forced to play all three of their group games in Cagliari's Stadio Sant'Elia, on the island of Sardinia. Keep them out the way, I expect the bigwigs at FIFA decided. England arrived with a fitness worry over midfielder and captain, Bryan Robson. The manager's namesake was struggling with an Achilles injury but remained upbeat when interviewed upon landing on the continent. Speaking to *The Times*, Robson said 'this is the best England side in my ten years. The only way to prove that is to go beyond the quarter-finals.' Fighting talk from the Manchester United dynamo. England were going to need all the skill and fight they could get their hands on if they were going to achieve Robson's prediction and reach a first semi-final since the World Cup win back in 1966.

All attention was on 11 June 1990, the day of the opening fixture for Robson's men. The tournament had already thrown up a huge surprise when unfancied Cameroon upset the applecart by beating the holders Argentina, in a historic 1-0 win in the opening match. François Omam-Biyik sent the Africans into wonderland with a second-half strike in a game that will be remembered more for the terrible tackling rather than the dazzling football. The build-up to the opening game was one of both excitement and trepidation as Robson and Charlton exchanged friendly banter while being interviewed by ITV.

'Jack knows, he knows the importance of a good start,' said Robson. 'Their players come from the same league as ours, we are all in the First Division, same players, same league. It's not an easy match for either of us, you know. It's gonna be a big match. It's going to be white-hot on the day. And anybody who is a little bit fluffy there [points to his head], will not play his part for that team and I need to make sure that we don't have anybody like that in our team.'

The squad had trained well to this point and excluding Mark Wright, who had a slight neck injury, England were at full strength. Robson's first selection consisted of Peter Shilton, Gary Stevens, Stuart Pearce, Des Walker, Terry Butcher, Chris Waddle, Robson, Paul Gascoigne, John Barnes, Gary Lineker and Peter Beardsley. The manager was hoping that his captain would stay fit after a shoulder injury during the previous campaign in 1986 meant a premature end to the midfielder's tournament.

England got off to the perfect start. Waddle, picking up the ball on the right touchline, angled a delightful pass into Lineker. The Irish defence were caught flat-footed and as Lineker took the ball on his chest, he somehow managed to bundle it past the outward-rushing goalkeeper, Pat Bonner.

The start signalled a false dawn as England were unable to maintain a sustained period of pressure and then began to struggle to even string a series of passes together. To make matters worse, when a poor touch by Liverpool midfielder Steve McMahan landed at the feet of Ireland and Everton counterpart Kevin Sheedy, little did Peter Shilton know that just a few seconds later, he would be picking the ball out of his net.

A 1-1 draw was not the worst result in the world but by the same token, England had again failed to win in an opening match of a tournament. Bobby Robson was in

positive mood, however. 'I thought the game was won, but we made a crucial mistake. I made a substitution to nullify the Republic's substitution, but in the end, it cost us the game. We had it won and then lost it,' he told the waiting press as he boarded the coach back to the team's hotel.

The Dutch lay in wait on matchday two, a daunting task for Robson and his charges, who really needed a win to have any chance of qualifying for the knockout stages. The silver lining to this particular cloud was that both Egypt and the Netherlands had also played out a 1-1 draw in their opening fixture. Suddenly it was all to play for. Just a day after my tenth birthday, England again saddled up, this time to face the *Oranje*.

My birthday falls on 15 June, which means that every other year I get to celebrate during a major tournament. On the day I was born, Sunday, 15 June 1980, England faced Italy in Euro '80. I ventured into this world at 6.45pm, giving my dad just enough time to high five my mum for her good work before setting off to the pub to watch the game. England have played many times on my birthday since, which is always ideal when planning a night of revelry.

So, 16 June, and an introduction to the world, if they ever needed one, of a certain Mr Paul Gascoigne. Gazza was my hero growing up. The way he used to dribble past players as if they were just standing still, the goals he scored, were both sublime and spectacular – just unbelievable. As a primary school child, I would shout his name aloud as I attempted to dribble around various bags and people. At secondary school, when I had filled out slightly and could kick the ball a little harder, I would attempt to bend the ball over the wall into the goal. Think Gascoigne's 35-yard free kick against Arsenal in the FA Cup semi-final in 1991. The problem was that I wasn't very good and the wall I was imagining would in fact be a group of girls all congregating

in the playground minding their own business. Apologies to Shayna, Tracey, Corinne, Kerry, Michaela, Steff, and anyone else who I may have inadvertently struck while pretending to emulate my role model.

While I digress, it was to be the midfielder's performance against Gullit and company that catapulted him into the echelons of footballing superstardom. Robson switched from his traditional back four to a five and brought in fit-again defender Mark Wright at the expense of forward Peter Beardsley. The manager was wary of facing the reigning European champions and probably showed them a little too much respect, having been dismantled with ease at Euro '88, 3-1 in Düsseldorf.

The game itself was a slow burner. In the first half, Gazza glided past two Dutch defenders before pulling back a cross that Bryan Robson headed over the bar. At the other end, Shilton had his hands warmed by a long-range effort that was in the end a pretty simple save.

England had the ball in the net shortly after half-time, only to be denied by the offside flag with Paul Parker having edged forward a little too eagerly. Then came a moment of pure brilliance from Gascoigne. Facing away from goal and with little to no option, Gazza mimicked the Cruyff turn, made famous by Dutchman Johan, to beat Ronald Koeman: a truly remarkable and flagrant display of showboating on one of the biggest stages of all. Again, England had the ball in the net at the death but once again a flag ruined the day for Robson. A 0-0 draw and two points from two games.

'We were lucky to draw,' was Ruud Gullit's honest and accurate assessment after his team had managed to make it through the match unscathed. The worrying thing for the England manager was the withdrawal from the game on the hour mark of his captain. Bryan Robson limped off

with what looked like a flare-up of his troublesome Achilles and would play no further part in the tournament. It was a cruel way to end his campaign, four years after limping out of the previous championship in Mexico.

David Platt was no bad replacement, mind. The young midfielder had been ripping up trees at Graham Taylor's Aston Villa. Robson would have no problems at all with swapping his captain for Platt. The Villa man was dynamic on the field and could chip in with goals, much like Robson, although he probably never quite covered the whole pitch as the Manchester United captain could. Platt was a target off the field, most notably from Gazza. The two midfielders had hit it off, but like all members of the squad on that tour of Italy, no one was safe from Gascoigne and his pranks.

'On one of our days off we went down to the beach to sunbathe,' said Gascoigne in his book *Glorious, My World, Football and Me*. 'David Platt had joined the squad and ever since we arrived, hadn't stopped going on about Doug Ellis, the Aston Villa owner and Platty's boss. It was all, "Doug Ellis has the best yacht. Doug Ellis is going to do this. Doug Ellis is going to do that. Doug Ellis had installed the best pitch. Doug Ellis has flown to the moon." By lunchtime we'd had a few drinks, although we shouldn't have, and I decided it was time to take the piss. There was a big-ass yacht anchored about three hundred yards off the beach and when I saw it, I shouted, "Ooh look, Dougie and his boat."' "

Gascoigne continued. 'I started to swim out to it and a few of the lads followed, mainly because I said they would probably have loads of drink on board. As we got nearer, I was calling out, "Oh Dougie. Oh Dougie. Where are you?" Just then a bloke peered over the side. "Hello, Paul."'

'Fuck me, it *was* Doug Ellis. About eight of us clambered on board, including Gary Lineker's missus. We must have got through about thirty bottles of champagne

and all of his food. It was brilliant. At one point I leapt on Mrs Lineker for a laugh and we both tumbled over the side and into the ocean. Fortunately, she saw the funny side, but I'm not sure Gary did.'

Egypt and Ireland had also played out a draw in their fixture, which meant that after two rounds of matches all four teams were on identical points. With the final game still to be staged, it was a real conundrum how the group would play out. England, despite their two draws, had their destiny in their own hands, which is the best scenario for any team in a tournament. The last thing you want is to be relying on someone else to do you a favour as more often than not, they won't.

Robson again made changes as the team reverted to its 4-4-2 roots with striker Steve Bull coming in for defender Terry Butcher, while Liverpool's Steve McMahon replaced the injured Bryan Robson in the centre of the pitch. The Wolverhampton Wanderers forward had an outrageous goalscoring record for his club and was still operating in the Third Division, albeit his Wolves team had secured promotion to Division Two by the time the tournament had kicked off. Bull had scored on his international debut against Scotland in 1989 and added to his tally with further goals against Czechoslovakia and Tunisia, in the build-up to Italia '90.

The first half of the match was a drab affair, which was a surprise considering what was at stake for both teams. Only a Gascoigne-inspired dribble into the Egyptian penalty area was worth noting during the half-time break. Mind you, Des Lynam was certainly not mincing his words during the analysis with studio guests Jimmy Hill and Ray Wilkins. 'I bet you viewers at home are thinking "What a load of rubbish" after that first half, like we are in the studio here. What do you think of that, Jim?'

'All our worries have come home to roost,' said Hill. 'We are playing wingers and we have a natural goalscorer in Bull, have we seen any of that?'

The second half got under way and much like the first, produced little to no urgency from either country with both seeming to cancel each other out. In the 58th minute, England were awarded a free kick on the left-hand touchline, midway inside the Egyptian half. Gascoigne looped an exquisite delivery into the penalty area, causing the Egyptians to back-pedal towards their own goal. Mark Wright rose the highest to glance the ball into the net and past the despairing Ahmed Shobair in the opposition goal.

England held on for the win which, although uninspiring, had the desired effect. *Football Monthly* mirrored the watching nation with their assessment of the dour match. 'England moved comfortably into the knockout phase of the tournament with a performance that certainly did not earn a high rating but, at this stage of the competition, it's results that count. Only with the final whistle could England relax in the knowledge that they had safely topped the closest of all qualifying groups.'

The manager, as usual, was a little more upbeat about the team's performance. 'We came top of the group, and we were the only side to beat Egypt. You can't do much better than that.'

The Dutch and the Irish had played out yet another draw which meant that with a grand total of four points, somehow, England had managed to top the group. The press were not convinced as the day after England secured qualification to the round of 16, *The Times* declared that 'England appeared to be disjointed and uninspired.'

Robson was keen to ensure that despite that show of negativity back in Blighty, his players were rested and in positive mood ahead of their next fixture.

Belgium were the next opponents in the round of 16 match. Like England, the Red Devils were sprinkled with talent but were never able to reach the promised land of international paradise. Enzo Scifo was talismanic for the Belgians as was goalkeeper Michel Preud'homme. Robson sensed the danger and again switched the team into a back five. Butcher returned at the expense of Bull and England lined up in a 5-4-1. Despite only conceding one goal in the group stage, the manager was well aware that the opposition held a threat in the final third.

England, for the first time in the tournament, headed to mainland Italy. The northern city of Bologna would host the Three Lions' first game outside of Cagliari. The Red Devils kicked off the game and in the Red City, began to work over Robson's England. Wave after wave of Belgian attacks embarked on Shilton's goal, forcing the custodian to pull off a couple of decent saves. Belgium captain Jan Ceulemans then struck a sweet left-foot drive against the upright as England were huffing and puffing, unable to gather any real momentum.

On the stroke of half-time, Gary Lineker, picking up the ball just inside the penalty area, lifted a pass behind the Belgian defence and into the path of John Barnes, who despatched the ball into the net at the far post. As per the Dutch game, the linesman's flag was again the foe for England.

The Belgians began the second period as they had the first and again peppered England's box with crosses and had the majority of possession, Scifo again making Shilton work as a low shot was clawed away by the experienced stopper. Robson needed to get a reaction from his team and threw on David Platt for his first taste of the tournament, replacing the departing McMahan. The game looked destined to finish as a goalless draw after 90 minutes but what was to

be significant at the time, although no one then knew it, was a booking to Gazza in the 88th minute of the match. Scifo, looking to break on England again, was clumsily tripped by Gascoigne in what was a lazy, tired tackle. The referee thought as much and brandished a yellow card at the England playmaker.

Extra time followed and with energy levels beginning to drain in the dry summer heat, Robson gave his troops one last rousing speech before sending them back on to the field. The 30 minutes that followed were those of teams more petrified to lose rather than to trying to progress. A chess-like period of ball retention with very little attacking intention ensued; that was until the 119th minute. With only 60 seconds left on the clock before the lottery of a penalty shoot-out, Gascoigne embarked on a run from deep inside his own half. With one last puff of wind in his lungs, the midfielder burst through the centre of the Belgian midfield and deep into their half before a mixture of tiredness and clumsiness from the opposition brought Gazza crashing to his knees.

A free kick to England, although not in an ideal position for a direct approach. Robson, urging Gascoigne to lob it into the box, was bellowing his instructions to the midfielder. With basically the last attack of the game, Gazza would have been forgiven for thinking he might just as well take a punt on goal. His manager had other ideas. After what seemed like an age of deliberation, Gascoigne placed the ball on the turf and lofted a pinpoint pass to the back post. David Platt had escaped his man and with the angle seemingly against him, hooked a volley over his shoulder and into the far top corner of the net. His goal defied physics. He had no right to score from where he was. No one cared: well, no one associated with England.

The goal was a contender for the goal of the tournament, but don't take my word for it. Have a look yourself on any well-respected search engine. *The Times* wrote: 'The finale was spectacular and almost unbearably dramatic. England, though elated and relieved, were also mentally drained and physically exhausted. The foundation of the victory was a team spirit which refused to yield ... Belgium, who struck the woodwork twice, were left with nothing to show for their technical superiority.' Remember folks, it's not how you start, but how you finish and in knockout football, getting into the next round is the most important part of the process.

Another quarter-final for Robson, except this time England were actually the favourites to proceed into the last four. Cameroon were to provide a stern test and were sure to be no walkover as they had already seen off Romania in the previous knockout round, as well as shocking the holders, Argentina, on matchday one. The Africans had shown that they had reached this stage on merit and with the corner-flag-dancing Roger Milla in their side, *Les Lions* had captured the imagination of the watching world. At 38, Milla had become the oldest player to score in the knockout stages of the competition after his two extra-time strikes against the Romanians were enough to see the boys in green through to the last eight.

The location for England's next match was to be the San Paolo, Naples, where Robson replaced McMahon with Platt in the only change for the Three Lions. I can remember thinking that we should batter this team as, quite frankly, with there being little to no African coverage of football back then, no one had any idea of who they actually were! How wrong could ten-year-old John be?

England started brightly, and, midway through the first half, took the lead through David Platt, the saviour of the

previous round placing a header past the goalkeeper from a sublime cross by Stuart Pearce. 1-0 and off and running. This is it, now we are in the lead, we can only go on and score more. Again, how wrong could ten-year-old John be? Half-time and England were leading by a single goal. Cameroon played their trump card and the veteran Milla entered the fray. The 38-year-old defied his years, glided across the pitch and into the England penalty area where he was ineptly tripped by Gascoigne. The referee pointed to the spot and Emmanuel Kunde fired Cameroon level.

Worse was to come for England as just three minutes later, substitute Eugene Ekeke picked up the ball in the centre circle and played a delicious one-two with fellow sub and thorn in England's side, Milla. The old timer laid a beautiful ball into the path of Ekeke, who, with the Three Lions defence sliced open, chipped the ball over the onrushing Shilton and into the top corner of the net. Oh dear, this was clearly not in the script pre-match.

The drama was not over as with just six minutes remaining, Gary Lineker was upended in the penalty area after collecting a bouncing ball from a free kick. The Tottenham Hotspur forward dusted himself off and placed a fine shot into the goalkeeper's top left-hand corner. Desmond, 2-2.

For the second consecutive match England had to endure an extra 30 minutes of football. Cameroon though, sensing that their chance had gone, looked leggy and disjointed. Gascoigne, finding more and more space beginning to open up around him, picked up the ball and slid a beautiful pass into the run of his Spurs team-mate. Lineker sprinted through the heart of the Cameroon defence before being bundled to the ground by both defender and goalkeeper. Take your pick over who you would like to penalise for the offence, but the outcome would still be the same. Penalty to

England, Lineker again the taker and as cool as you like, he fired the ball straight down the middle of the goal.

Through grit and sheer determination England held on to proceed through to the semi-final of the World Cup. *The Times* reported: 'Bleeding and drained of energy, they stood tottering on the edge of elimination ... For spirit alone, Bobby Robson's side deserves the utmost credit. At times, it was all they had to protect themselves, an ultimately enthralling quarter-final.' The team was nearly running on empty, having played extra time in both knockout matches. It was going to take pure adrenaline to get the team through the next 90 minutes of football, against West Germany, and possibly more.

Peter Beardsley was brought back into the starting eleven at the expense of John Barnes, who was dropped to the substitutes' bench, in a bid to bring some fresh legs into the attack. The Germans were a class act who hosted a raft of top players in their squad, most notably Lothar Matthaus, Guido Buchwald and Jurgen Klinsmann. They were much fancied to win the tournament, never mind just beating England in the last four, but the lads headed to Turin to try and overcome the odds.

A subdued first half meant that the game was a stalemate as the teams headed down the tunnel for some much-needed hydration. With an hour on the clock, the game burst into life. A free kick just outside of England's penalty area enabled the attacking side to manoeuvre a set piece. It was a direct kick, but the West Germans decided to play a two-yard pass to the left for the onrushing Andreas Brehme to lash the ball towards Peter Shilton's goal. As soon as the ball had been touched, Paul Parker sped forward in a bid to close down the strike, but the ball ricocheted off the England full-back, high into the Italian night sky and after what seemed like an eternity, looped over Shilton's head and into the back of the net. Disaster.

With just ten minutes remaining, Parker this time turned provider as his cross from the right-wing position bounced across the body of Klaus Augenthaler and into the path of Gary Lineker, who cleverly used his body to control the ball before sending a low drive past the goalkeeper's left hand and into the far bottom corner. The game finished 1-1 and again England were looking at playing an extra 30 minutes of football. How much more, physically and mentally, could these boys take?

Jurgen Klinsmann wasted a golden chance for the West Germans as a Brehme cross was headed straight down the throat of Peter Shilton. England then had a decent chance of their own as a failed clearance found Chris Waddle in acres of space on the left-hand corner of the penalty area, only to see his angled drive come crashing back off the upright. David Platt flew in but was inches away from the rebound. It really was a great advert for the sport with both countries trading blows with a place in the World Cup Final at stake.

Both sides were going full throttle, so much so that in the heat of the battle, a leggy Gascoigne overreached for a tackle in the 98th minute, bringing down West Germany's Thomas Berthold. Despite Gazza making his apologies after the tackle, the referee would show him his second yellow card of the tournament. What followed was an iconic scene, particularly from my childhood, of a man crying on a football pitch, with the game still carrying on around him. Despite this, gathering his emotions, he knew he had a job to do. England could still get to a final, even if one of their best players was due to miss it.

Speaking of the incident afterwards, Gascoigne said, 'I got the ball in the centre circle and bundled my way forward. Then, as Matthaus tried to nick it off me, I nudged the ball out of his reach, but overran it. I had to stretch as Thomas

Berthold came across. I was giving it 110%. It was the World Cup semi-final, and I didn't want to give them anything for free. To this day I honestly don't think I touched him, but down he went, rolling around as if in agony. I crouched down to make sure he was OK, and at that stage I wasn't thinking I was in trouble. There was nothing in the challenge. Then everything turned to slow motion.'

His manager knew why the player had turned into an emotional wreck. He could sense what it meant to him and echoed Gazza's heartbreak. 'My heart sank the moment the referee took out the yellow card,' said Robson. 'My heart hit my shoes. Because I realised instantly, that was the final for Paul Gascoigne, out. And that's a tragedy – for him, me, the team, the country, the whole of football. Because he was so good, and he was superb in this particular match. The bigger the game, the better he got.'

The game finished in a tie, ensuring that the lottery of a penalty shoot-out would determine the result. It was now down to who could hold their nerve and get the job done. Brehme, Matthaus and Riedle all had success and Lineker, Beardsley and Platt followed suit. Stuart Pearce, so clinical for his club side, drove his penalty straight into the legs of Bodo Illgner and it was advantage West Germany. Olaf Thon placed a right-footed shot past Peter Shilton, so it was over to Chris Waddle to keep England in the tournament. To this day I have watched the footage many times but yet the winger just seems devoid of any confidence as he is given the ball. Fair play for having the balls to step up and take one, mind.

Waddle placed the ball on the spot, began his run-up and blazed his kick high into the terraces of the Stadio delle Alpi. The Three Lions were out, beaten by eventual winners West Germany. There was certainly no shame in the performance from the side. They were within touching

distance of a first final since 1966 but alas, it wasn't to be. *The Guardian* wrote: 'Until the West Germany game England were a hybrid, a mixture of faces old and new striving towards a common end but barely a team. That all changed on Wednesday night. Paul Gascoigne is the brightest jewel in Robson's bequest. "He has probably been the best young player in this tournament," said Robson, "and I would think he has a terrific future."'

Andreas Brehme was also full of praise for the nearly men when interviewed years later. 'That semi-final was the best match of the World Cup,' said the West Germany left-back. 'It was a fantastic match involving two great teams – it was the final before the final. For 120 minutes the game went one way and then the other. England had an exceptional group with Gary Lineker, Chris Waddle, Paul Gascoigne. Paul was a great player, the same as when I played against him [for Internazionale against Lazio]. He had everything – he could win the ball, he struck the ball well, he could beat his opponent in a one-on-one. Technically he was strong and tactically too.'

His words went further than just the semi-final match itself though, as Brehme believed that England could well have gone all the way. 'That final was horrible, Argentina didn't have a corner, they didn't create a chance on goal. We had ten chances to score. Argentina had a terrible World Cup but a lot of luck. Would England have beaten them? Definitely, 100 per cent.' I guess we will never know now, but in a World Cup that began with the press and the manager at loggerheads, I think it is fair to say that on the squad touching down back on home soil, it was only right that they were given a heroes' welcome.

Sat on the edge of my sofa in my pyjamas, England had broken John's heart, but it was only the beginning.