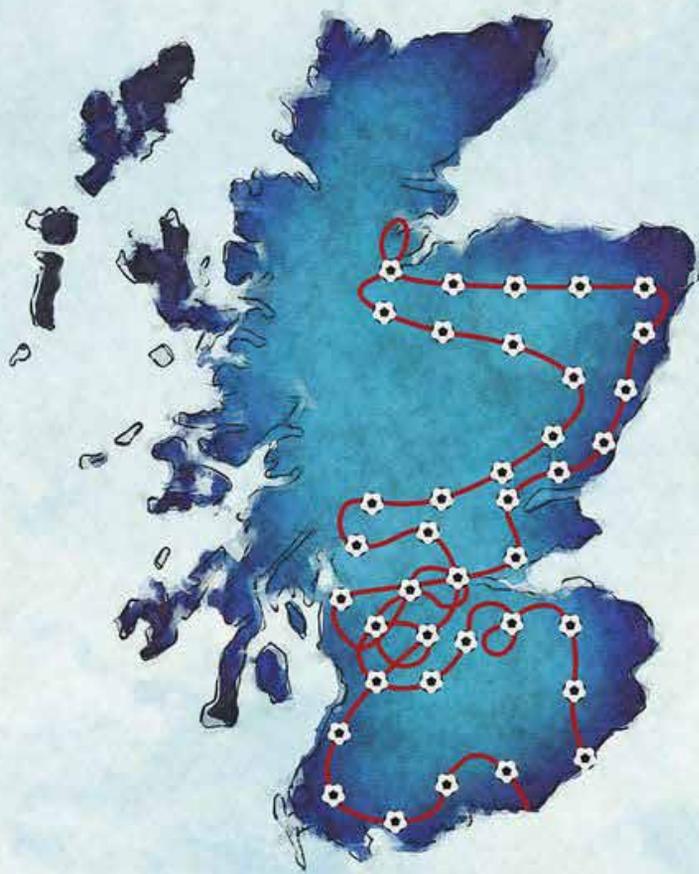


Scotland 42 England 1

An Englishman's Mazy Dribble
Through Scottish Football



Mark Winter

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RANGERS v
ZENIT SAINT PETERSBURG

UEFA Cup Final
City of Manchester Stadium
Wednesday, 14 May 2008

I'D BEEN looking forward to seeing Fiorentina play for weeks and booked my tickets in March. I'd been a fan since the early 1990s when Channel Four secured the rights to show live Italian games on a Sunday afternoon. Serie A was the best league in the world at the time and *La Viola* were invariably a treat to watch on their day, with Gabriel Batistuta and Rui Costa being the star turns. With their unshakable sense of swagger and their natty purple shirts, they soon became my favourites. Within a year or two I started making an annual pilgrimage to Florence to watch them play. Even though they could still count themselves among the greats of European football, their likely final opponents weren't the Bayern Munich of old and I fancied Fiorentina to edge a tight game and lift the trophy. As is so often the case when I plan stuff I have no control over, a huge fly was seen wading through my ointment a couple of weeks before the final.

All Fiorentina needed to do to reach the final was overcome a dour and uninspiring Rangers side, who'd nonetheless been turned into a side to be reckoned with under the guidance of the late Walter Smith. Despite failing to have a noteworthy shot on goal in three and a half hours of football,

they drew both legs of the semi-final 0-0 prior to beating Fiorentina on penalties in front of the Italian club's own fans at the Stadio Artemio Franchi. I responded to the setback in a very grown-up fashion by kicking some furniture about, having already booked two return train tickets to Manchester at ruinous expense. Citizens of Bavaria were equally miffed, I'd imagine, after Zenit battered Bayern 5-1 on aggregate.

Initially I thought I might scratch the fixture, but after an hour of stressful deliberation I opted to go anyway. It was a special occasion, after all, and one I thought I'd be unlikely to get tickets for again. What I hadn't banked on was the lengths some hoteliers would go to in order to make a buck. Before Rangers had even stepped on to their flight home, the prices of Manchester hotels had gone through the roof on the night of the final.

After searching for a B&B for two that wouldn't cost a week's salary, I put in a call to the Manchester tourist board. Fourteen years on, I still struggle to believe that the following conversation really did take place. I assure you that it did.

'Hello, I'd like to book a hotel in Manchester on the night of 14 May, please.'

'Certainly, sir. Is this just for you?'

'No, it's for my 17-year-old daughter as well so a twin room, please.'

'That's fine, sir. Just stay with me for a moment.'

'Righto!'

After 15 minutes of listening to music I'd wager was nobody's favourite, my telephone sales professional did indeed return.

'I'm sorry for the wait, sir, but I think I've found you just the place. It's a cosy, family run B&B in Altrincham which is a short distance from the centre of Manchester.'

Like many fans of the English non-league game, I'd been to Altrincham as a visiting supporter. Thus I knew it was a

good 15 miles from the centre of Manchester, but figured I might as well hear him out, now that we'd got this far.

'That would be £365 for the night, sir. Does that fall within sir's budget?'

I can't recall my exact response other than shock, but I think I held back from being too rude to a lad doing his best in a job he probably despised. Later that same night and on the point of taking my own cardboard box in which to kip overnight at Manchester Piccadilly, I had a stroke of luck searching a website that specialised in rooms over pubs and came up with just the place for £40 a night for the two of us. The Ox, situated opposite Granada TV Studios, proved ideal and I've stayed there every time I've visited Manchester since.

I won't dwell on a journey on a train that was on time but packed, hot, and uncomfortable and crammed with Rangers fans, many of whom were 'travelling on the off-chance'. If I were a particular type of weasel I've no doubt I could have sold my ticket for £1,000. Rosie would have swapped hers for a decent pair of shoes, being the type of ungrateful mare for whom her parents should unquestionably take the blame.

Leaving the train, we merged into a slightly staggering mass of royal blue humanity that stretched as far as the eye could see and made a racket I'd only previously experienced in the front row of an Iron Maiden concert. After that we hopped into the first available taxi that could take us on the short trip to The Ox in Castleton, we dumped our bags, refreshed ourselves with a damp face flannel and enjoyed a surreal experience in the pub garden.

Though having a chat with the locals is all part and parcel of the experience, Rosie seemed a bit star-struck as she enjoyed the company of a bloke she knew only as Kevin Webster, the mechanic in *Coronation Street* who doesn't seem to have aged much in the last 30 years. For my part I chatted to the same bloke, Michael, a United fan who was

waiting to see if he'd be working on the night of his team's Champions League Final in Moscow given that he'd already been promised a ticket.

Refreshed by a couple of snifters, Rosie and I joined the vast blue human crocodile weaving its way to the stadium without the aid of public transport – which seemed to have been cancelled for the day – or a local police force that seemed to have been given the day off. The two of us seemed to be the only ones not decked out in royal blue; a fact that might have cost me my job under different circumstances.

A couple of days after the game, I learned that ITV's cameras had focused on my lass and I for several seconds during the pre-match build-up. As the only ones not wearing colours – and though I say so myself, Rosie is a photogenic girl – we must have stood out like the proverbial sore thumb and while a few folk at home saw us on the box, I was grateful that one didn't. Withholding a name in order to protect the guilty, I shall simply add that a friend of mine was watching the game at the home of his mother-in-law, my boss. Knowing I'd taken a couple of days' sick leave, my friend, an intelligent lad but not always quick on the uptake, made a lame excuse to stand in front of the TV until the adverts came on. Since this day I've stuck up for him on the frequent occasions he shuns husbandly DIY duties to sneak off and play cricket.

It transpired that most of the constabulary of north-west England had gathered at the City of Manchester Stadium, seemingly doing nothing more constructive than standing in the way of a small army of stewards and security staff, trying to get everyone into the ground as quickly as possible around an hour and a half before kick-off. They succeeded admirably, as minor hold ups were accepted with good grace by those who'd experienced much worse in their time.

Inside the state-of-the-art stadium accommodating the full house it deserved, a fabulous atmosphere, with every spare

inch of space covered in Rangers flags from all around the planet, greeted the players as they lined up for kick-off. Under the circumstances, it was a shame that Zenit immediately set about sucking the atmosphere out of the place. In truth the game wasn't much of a contest.

It doesn't happen often in the life of a neutral football fan to bear witness to an individual display of a player that will live long in the memory. Today was one of those days as Ukrainian international Anatoliy Tymoshchuk seemed to operate at walking pace and unchallenged inside his own postal district. Tymoshchuk – five years later to become a Champions League winner with a Bayern Munich side that Zenit had battered to get to the final – played five yards in front of a flat back four. With metronomic distribution, Tymoshchuk was instrumental in everything Zenit did well and ensured that those behind him were under-employed courtesy of his superb reading of the game.

If Rangers' players had hearts the size of buckets, it was clear throughout that they'd met their match, even though the game remained goalless with 20 minutes remaining. Zenit then took the lead with a peach of a goal as Andrey Arshavin, days away from becoming Arsenal's star summer signing, provided a sublime pass to send Igor Denisov clear to stroke the ball past Rangers' keeper Neil Alexander. Though substitute Nacho Novo wasted a great chance to take the game into extra time, the difference in pure talent between the sides was emphasised by Zenit's second goal in added-on time. As Arshavin and Fatih Tekke swapped passes to set up a chance that Zyrianov tapped in from barely a yard out, a final score of 2-0 was the very least that the Russian club's almost total domination of proceedings deserved.

It was mid-morning on the following day when I heard there'd been trouble in the city both during and after the game. We were on the train and halfway back to London

when Rosie's mother rang to check if she was OK, and only then did we have some idea of what had occurred. When a giant screen showing the game in Piccadilly Gardens had failed, the good-natured atmosphere that had characterised the build-up went with it. As police charged fans throwing cans and bottles, 30 arrests were made. For my part I didn't so much as hear a swear word during the 18 hours my daughter and I were in Manchester. The Rangers fans we met – and Rosie seemed to warm to being called 'hen' – could not have been friendlier.

A few weeks later Rangers went down to another defeat in Europe, losing 2-1 to the fourth best team in Lithuania in the first week in August. Under the circumstances, it was hard to view defeat in a UEFA Cup Final as failure.