

TEARS FOR **ENGLAND**



Obsession, Hope and Heartbreak
with the England Football Team

ROBERT TAYLOR

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1974–1978: Come on, Holland and Scotland!

WHEN ENGLAND get knocked out of the Euros or World Cup, which happens like clockwork every two years, the grief is intense. It's physical and guttural. Call it a despairing wound, if you like.

Other people don't feel this. Even the players and managers get over the losses more quickly and comprehensively than I do. Gary Lineker, for example, is entirely phlegmatic about the way Maradona cheated us in 86, even making a friendly documentary about the guy a quarter of a century later and befriending his family. Terry Venables, late in life, still thought about Gazza's miss against the Germans in 96, but not as obsessively as I do. David Beckham has been far too busy and, I'm sure, sensible, to go over in his mind time and again the injustice of being sent off against Argentina in 98. I have no such luck.

And then there are the fans. By which I mean people who appear as passionate as I am about England during the match, but who can barely remember, a few months on, which team we were playing. What's wrong with them? How do they move on? How do they forget? How can they stop caring? It's a mystery.

Me? It takes me a good week to start to get over a big England loss, after which I'm left with a low-level ache.

Eventually, that ache becomes dormant, only to resurrect, and begin aching again, with the slightest prodding.

This means that I hold inside myself dozens of aches belonging to England and, from the old days, West Brom. The FA Cup semi-final loss to Ipswich in 78? I can sense myself now, as I write, standing with my father, and my brother Stephen, bang in the centre of Highbury's North Bank, hopeful, expectant, then crushed by two Ipswich goals within the first 20 ruddy minutes, right in front of us. We went into that match as big favourites too.

And with England? All fans of my generation remember 86, 90, 96 and so on. But how about 2012, and the penalty shoot-out in the Euros versus Italy? How about the defeat to Iceland in 2016? And what about Marco van Basten's stunning hat-trick past Peter Shilton in 88? I retain that pain, and it pops out at the most inconvenient and sometimes inexplicable moments.

When big losses first happened to me as a youngster, and in those days it was typically West Brom, I consoled myself that I'd eventually grow out of such childish behaviour. After all, win or lose, Stephen had his face in a book within seconds of the match ending. But I was different. I couldn't just flick a switch and move on.

In fact, I've always found Stephen's complete lack of interest in England to be inexplicably baffling. How can someone who shared my upbringing and a big portion of my genetic makeup, and who sees eye-to-eye with me on almost every social, cultural and political issue, feel so completely different about something that's so huge to me?

He retains a loyalty to West Brom because of the matches we went to as children. He loved the tune they played, and still do, at The Hawthorns as the players warmed up, and the way the fans sang 'The Lord's My Shepherd' in a strong West Midlands accent. Oh, and he loved the fact that our grandparents used to take our father

to The Hawthorns as a boy, and remembers going there with our grandad and the delight on his face when Albion scored. But the football itself? It was a big yawn for him. He just couldn't get interested. And when it comes to England, he'd almost literally rather watch paint dry.

As for my father, a huge West Brom fan (far more than an England fan) he always shrugged off the disappointment of a loss within a few minutes, or seemed to, despite being an ardent Baggy his whole life, even holding season tickets at one stage. So that's how grown-ups respond to football losses, I thought to myself. Thank goodness, it won't be as bad when I'm older.

I was wrong. It's worse. The weight of disappointment builds over decades. With my first big England disappointment, the failure to qualify for the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, I only had that one tournament to grieve over. But when England were knocked out of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, Harry Kane's missed penalty sat atop all those other tournament exits stretching back over more than 45 years. Each new defeat compounds the last.

So, unlike my father, I've never grown up. At least, not in that respect. I never forget. I can't. The big moments are lodged in my mind for good. I can't recall every match England have played in the last 50 years, of course. But I certainly do remember, all too well, in vibrant colour, the moment England were knocked out of every major tournament, all 24 of them, since I started watching international football as a child.

More than that, I can remember exactly where I was, and who I was watching with. I recall the key moments, and my reaction to them. In fact, I can still *feel* that reaction.

Is that normal? It can't be. It's silly, and means I have loads of useless England football information stored in my mind, which should really make way for more important knowledge. As a result, I'm pretty pathetic at Trivial

Pursuit. But ask me to name the starting line-up for the World Cup semi-final of 1990, and I'll rattle it off like it happened yesterday. Impressive? Not at all. Useless? Of course. But that's me.

* * *

I was six. That's the age I can remember watching my first-ever international football match. It didn't involve England. But it was quite a game: the 1974 World Cup Final between West Germany and Holland. Nobody talked about the Netherlands in those days. It was always Holland. Holland is technically inaccurate, but it carried so much greater resonance and power. Nowadays, we just say the Netherlands. And the Netherlands' footballing fortunes, it appears, have declined with the phasing out of the term Holland. They've even started losing to England.

Two of the world's greatest footballers, Johan Cruyff and Franz Beckenbauer, were playing that day. Back in 1974, however, I had no idea who they were, and was just gloriously aware of the spectacle. I remember it in colour, even though my family only had a black and white TV set. And most of all I recall my father, midway through the second half, exclaiming 'Come on Holland!' as the game drifted towards a West German victory. Even then, nobody wanted the Germans to win.

That match, with its drama and appeal to the spirit of nation, instilled in me a love for international football – the colour, the splendour, the crowd, the chanting and the massive sense of occasion. From then on, I was hooked.

I was already hooked on club football, of course. In the autumn of 1973, I attended my first match: West Brom v Oxford United in the old Second Division. Albion won 1-0 that day, and I remember little of it other than my reaction to the goal itself. Huge joy and hugging my father.

In those days, West Brom and England carried equal weight in my affections, and continued doing so until 1990, when England took over. Now, there's no contest. I look out for West Brom, but I'm obsessed with England. But back in the 1970s, they were both equally, massively and disproportionately important. In totally different ways. At my school in Birmingham, most of the kids were Aston Villa fans. Villa were the big Birmingham club. The other teams in our area – Birmingham City, Wolves and West Brom – had their own lesser though equally vocal followings.

So, my love of West Brom was about family. I was the third generation of West Brom fans among the Taylors, as was Stephen of course. It was day to day, and week to week. If I got a football shirt for Christmas, it was always a West Brom one. If we went to a match, it was always West Brom. It was part of my identity. 'Which football team do you support?' adults would ask me. 'West Brom,' I'd reply. The posters on my wall were of their players. So were the stickers in my album. And when I played in the park, I was always Tony Brown, Willie Johnston, Bryan Robson, Cyrille Regis or Johnny Giles. West Brom heroes, all. When I met Giles by chance a few years later on the 18th hole at Edgbaston golf course, I was so star-struck I could barely speak.

And England? It spoke to a different part of me. England was more rarefied and distant, yet attractive for its inaccessibility. The only international matches I saw in the mid-70s were the annual home internationals, which always took place in late spring. Going to Wembley was an impossible fantasy, so whereas my experience of West Brom was live at The Hawthorns, often in atrocious, freezing conditions – the ground is at the highest altitude of any in the country among the professional clubs – my experience of England was always on TV. (And that's where it's largely remained, though I'm no less madly passionate for it.)

So, England, especially once my family ditched its black and white set in 1975, was colourful, sunny and distant. The England kit was attractive to my childish eyes, all red, white and blue. And Wembley seemed so glamorous. Don Revie, the manager, had a charisma to him too, commanding everything from the bench in his suit and tie.

But most of all, England was uniting. Whether your club team was Villa, Blues, Wolves or Albion, we all supported England. There was no nasty gloating in the playground after a loss, because everyone was disappointed together.

And that unifying element to the national team has remained, to this day, the most intoxicating element of supporting England. A whopping 23 million of us watched the England-Spain Euros final in 2024, close to half the population if you take England by itself. And it's the same every two years. Yes, of course, in these divided islands, you get plenty of Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish folk wishing defeat on us. But, by and large, we're all pulling in one direction, and I love England for that alone.

The boy next door to us in the 1970s, Mark, was a Villa fan, and his team always thrashed West Brom in a way that hurt me to my core. We just simply couldn't beat the buggers. Often, they won by an embarrassing margin. And while Villa won league cups, and eventually the league itself and the European Cup, West Brom never won anything. Villa, in consequence, were and still are West Brom's ultimate bogey team to any fan of my generation. When it matters, Villa always triumph, God damn them.

But when England played a World Cup qualifying match against Italy in the autumn of 1977 Mark and I were on the same side, and watched at his house, just the two of us. England had to win to stand any chance of making it to Argentina, after Don Revie had resigned halfway through the campaign to take up a lucrative contract in the Middle

East, with Ron Greenwood taking over. It was also the first big match, outside the home internationals, I'd seen England play. And it didn't disappoint. Kevin Keegan scored a looping header in the first half, and Mark and I immediately embraced and spontaneously did a celebratory jig together. We were on our feet again, doing our little jig, when Trevor Brooking sealed it for England in the second period.

Horrifyingly, that was the last time England beat Italy in a major tournament for 46 years. And even then, Italy had the last laugh, topping the group on goal difference, sending us out. With the benefit of hindsight, I should have given it all up there and then. My goodness, the crushing pain I'd have saved myself.

Is it the chicken or the egg? Do I feel more English than British because of my passion for the England team? Or do I feel passionate about the England team because of my intense sense of Englishness? All I know is that I have both, and both have grown as the years have gone by.

For example, could I now, in my late 50s, imagine supporting Scotland, as I did in the 1978 World Cup? Of course not. But then, we all did. It's that unifying element again.

I get mixed responses when I ask Scotland supporters how they felt about hordes of England fans supporting them that year. But support them we did, with relish. No, it couldn't happen now. Certainly not to the same extent. But in 1978, as the smash-hit song went, we were all part of Ally's Army (that's Ally MacLeod, Scotland manager); we were all going to the Argentine (in spirit, at least); Scotland would shake 'em up, and win the World Cup (Ally as good as promised that); 'cause Scotland were the greatest football team. We believed. We hoped. And for

one tournament, we were all Scottish. I think I even wore a kilt at one stage.

In fact, that World Cup could hardly have been worse for Scotland, and a West Brom player, our star winger Willie Johnston, was partly responsible, sent home in disgrace after failing a drugs test. The shame we Baggies felt. But that was the least of Scotland's problems. They struggled in their two opening matches, which we'd all assumed they'd win comfortably, against Peru and Iran, and then had to beat the mighty Holland (not the Netherlands) by three clear goals in the final group match to progress to the knockout stages.

Incredibly, they nearly managed it. Archie Gemmill's magnificent goal, which saw him jink past several Dutch players before firing into the net, was made famous, again, two decades later, in the film *Trainspotting*. Apparently, the goal inspires, even now, a feeling of orgasmic euphoria among Scots of that generation.

Well, I was only ten, and too young for anything of that sort. But, watching at home in Birmingham with Stephen, who might have had half an eye on it, and our childminder (our parents were out that night) I did what I've done with every important England goal since then. I leapt up, punched my right arm into the air and hugged the person next to me, Stephen, who probably had his head in a book for most of the match. This routine has occasionally been embarrassing down the years. For example, when England scored early in the final of Euro 2020, the guy next to me was Alex, an erudite shipping lawyer from Hull. He's a lovely chap, and a dear friend, but I don't think he deserved my crazed and rather embarrassing embrace, though he was too polite to say so.

But back in 1978 Stephen was already quite used to my extravagant celebrations when West Brom scored. And for a few minutes, with just one more goal needed, it did indeed look as though Scotland would pull off the miracle.

Sadly, as I've discovered time and time again over the years with West Brom and England, no goal is so great that disappointment cannot follow. The Dutch scored again. The match ended in a narrow Scottish victory, which, though an excellent result, still meant Holland were through and Scotland sent home. I tore off my Scotland top. And I've never worn one since. Nor a kilt.

As the 1970s became the 1980s, and as I entered my teenage years, it was England all the way.

1978 World Cup qualifying campaign

- Manager: Don Revie then Ron Greenwood
- How far did England get: did not qualify (Italy topped the group)
- Pain factor: 3/10
- 'What if' factor: 1/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10
- How well England played: 5/10
- Top villain: Don Revie