TEARS FOR ENGLAND

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Obsession, Hope and Heartbreak with the England Football Team

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pitch

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The Cast

Me: madly obsessive England fan, still looks out for West Brom, approaching 60, waiting in vain for a trophy.

Father: big West Brom fan, doesn't care much about England.

Mother: big rugby fan, doesn't care much about football.

Stephen: brother, bookish academic, vaguely supports West Brom but totally uninterested in England and goes to Tesco during big knockout matches.

Irena: Arsenal fan, fellow England supporter and now invaluable WhatsApp chum before, during and after big matches.

Mark from next door: Villa fan, always had bragging rights.

Andrew: university friend and historian, more interested in Thomas Hobbes than Thomas Tuchel.

Jon: economist and intellectual with eccentric and original views on England football.

Mike: Wolves fan and friend in Sri Lanka from 1990 to 1992.

Michael: bilingual former journalist from Indiana, insists football is 'a game of chance', sends barbed emails from Bordeaux every time England lose.

Badger: fellow Brummie of Irish lineage, fond of espousing undying patriotism towards the England team, for ever convinced 'we're going to win it'.

Richard: valued colleague, nearly smoked himself to death during the 1990 World Cup semi-final.

Thurl: Kiwi friend living in London between 2000 and 2004, used to winning with the All Blacks, got soaked in beer when England beat Germany.

Suzi, Steve, Simon One, Simon Two and Tracey: fans of various club sides and England-watching friends from the late 1990s onwards.

The boy: son, passionate England fan.

Alex the erudite shipping lawyer from Hull: Erudite shipping lawyer from Hull.

PART ONE

Prologue

I WAS the first person, anywhere, to realise that England had beaten Germany in the semi-final of Euro 96. I was the first, anywhere, to know that Paul Gascoigne had scored the golden goal. I realised it before even Gazza himself. Before Terry Venables, the England manager. Before the TV commentators. Before the 75,000 fans packed into Wembley. Before the 30 million watching on TV throughout the country, and many more throughout the world.

I was the first. I was ahead of the game.

I was ahead, as Alan Shearer fired the ball across the German box. I was ahead as I saw that the outstretched arm of the diving German goalkeeper, Andreas Köpke, would be too late, and ahead as the ball hurtled towards the waiting Gazza right there in front of the open German net. I was ahead as I realised in one delicious moment, before all those millions of others, that the 30 years of hurt had ended.

England had finally defeated Germany. And in the most dramatic of possible circumstances. It was revenge for the 1990 penalty shoot-out. And it banished the terrible memories of Koeman in 93, Brolin in 92, Van Basten in 88, Maradona in 86, Olsen in 83 and Keegan's wayward header in 82. An awful lot of hurt had gone into my two decades of supporting England, and I was only 28. But none of that mattered any more. We, England, had finally done it.

So, I leapt skywards with bulging eyes, feet outstretched and fists pointing towards the heavens. I was a human star,

two feet off the ground. And as I reached the high point of my leap, I released a joyous exclamation – more like a gigantic scream-vomit – 'YEEEES!'

Beneath me was a sea of heads of several hundred England supporters in a huge central Manchester pub, with the big screen beyond. We had spent the previous two hours seesawing through torment and hope. We had almost reached exhaustion. But now, it was all over. A golden goal is the end. There is no comeback. England had won. And, gloriously, Gazza had scored it for England.

It was the best moment ever. That's how much England mattered. From those hazy memories of the home internationals in the mid-70s, I was hooked. And, as any England fan will tell you, the most potent bit of the drug is the hope. You know it's always ended in tragedy. But you retain the hope that it will all come good. One day. The more it doesn't, the more desperate you become. And the more glorious you know the moment will be when, if, it does.

Now it had. And what made it all the sweeter, above that sea of heads in central Manchester, was that my solo, delirious joy was about to be shared by everyone else. All those other heads beneath me were about to leap skywards to join me in footie ecstasy. Wembley was about to erupt in hysteria. Gascoigne would charge manically towards the crowd behind the goal, leaping over the photographers and billboards, ripping his shirt off, swinging it above his head and roaring his triumph.

We were all about to share that unbelievable, miraculous joy. And that would make it, if it were possible, even better. For no individual joy is a fraction as sweet as collective joy.

But for now, it was my moment alone. And it was the loveliest thing. If you could capture that moment in freeze-frame, it would be the ultimate human emotion: pure, unsullied release.

* * *

There is a scientific explanation for what happened to me, though I only discovered it 25 years later. I had often wondered, during that quarter of a century, how it could be possible that I saw something – Gazza scoring the golden goal – not just before everyone else, but before it happened. And of course, the trouble with seeing it before it's happened is that it might not actually happen.

I now realise I was the victim of magic. It's explained by Gustav Kuhn, Reader at Goldsmiths, University of London, and director of the MAGIC-Lab. Kuhn has found that people can convince themselves that they are seeing something not on the basis of doing so, but – and this is crucial – on the basis that they *know they are about to do so*.

Kuhn gives the example of a magician sitting behind a table in front of a group of people, gently throwing a bright red ball up in the air before catching it again. Let's imagine that the magician throws and catches nine times, but before the tenth 'throw' he lets the ball fall into his lap and then throws an imaginary ball into the air.

The result? Many members of the audience see a ball go upwards, then vanish, even though no ball went anywhere. So convinced are these people that they saw a ball go up, that they assume that it must have got stuck in a net somewhere above the magician's head, or perhaps that it had fallen without their noticing it. The expectation of seeing the ball thrusting upwards out of the magician's hand is enough to give them the physical sensation of seeing something that wasn't there.

Is that what happened to me that night in Manchester? Had a lifetime of watching football, and an obsession with England, so accustomed me to what was surely about to happen, and given me such certain expectation, that I saw the future a fraction ahead of time, ahead of anyone else, and witnessed Gazza connecting with the ball and

sending it into the German net, only for that not actually to transpire?

Because it was Gazza. And anyone who saw Gazza play knew that for all his many and well-documented human failings, the guy was the nearest thing, certainly in my lifetime, along with Glenn Hoddle, to an English footie genius. And when presented with an open net and a place in the final of Euro 96 ready to be accepted, then, like a child taking a chocolate from a box, Gazza obviously wouldn't miss.

Nor would I. Nor would you. Nor would your Great Aunt Matilda. Nobody would. Nobody. It would be far, far easier to score than miss. It was that simple to score. And that difficult to miss.

Yet Gazza missed. England's football genius missed.

Why? How?

Because, while the angle of the TV cameras clearly showed me, two feet in the air in my Manchester pub, that Köpke would be too late to get his fingers to the ball flying across his goal area, Gazza had an entirely different angle. And Gazza thought that Köpke might just, JUST get the tip of one finger to the ball. Gazza, therefore, fatally, broke his stride in the expectation that the ball would deflect towards him. He would then have been perfectly placed to score.

But, as we now know, the ball missed Köpke's outstretched hand by millimetres – we will never find out exactly how much – and by the time Gazza realised this, it was too late. He lunged, but was able only to scrape the leather with his outstretched left foot. A millisecond earlier and he'd have scored. With ease. As it was, the ball slithered away. The chance for glory had gone.

Must we remind ourselves what happened next? I suppose so. It went to a penalty shoot-out. All our five penalty takers executed brilliantly. But so did the Germans. So it went to sudden death, and Gareth Southgate became

the fall guy. The Germans won again, and Andreas Möller, their last taker, embarked on a gloating, haughty strut across the Wembley turf just to rub it in.

That evening, I walked the few miles back from central Manchester to my shared house in West Didsbury. I could have taken a bus, but in moments of grief I like to be alone. To wallow in misery. And I walked slowly. Grimly. If only, if only, if only, kept going round my head. If only Gazza had been a less perfect footballer, he wouldn't have had the gumption to anticipate a deflection. A less perfect footballer would have scored. It was our moment. It was there for the taking. The country would have had a collective sporting multiple orgasm. We'd have triumphed, at last, instead of that horrible, familiar hurt. Someone else would feel that pain in our place. And we'd know only glory.

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We've all heard of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The experts tell us they don't happen in order, necessarily, and some people find certain stages more acute than others. That's certainly the case with me when England get knocked out of major tournaments.

Denial never happens. I'm acutely aware right away what's occurred when England are eliminated. I don't feel numbness or anything resembling shock. Just immediate pain. I guess that's quite healthy.

Anger, on the other hand, is often all too prevalent. I rage at the referee for missing an obvious handball or foul, or an opposition player for feigning an injury or trying to get one of our players sent off. It's happened all too often, particularly in 1986, 1993, 1998, 2006, 2010 and 2022. Or I feel anger at lady luck deserting us, resulting in freak goals that seemingly only ever happen to us, like in 1990 and, though some might disagree, 2002.

The trouble is that I never feel *enough* anger. Instead, I get stuck in bargaining. And it's a horrible place to be, as I go over the 'what if' moments on a loop of doom. With Gazza and Euro 96, I'm still in that loop. And I probably always will be. The same goes for Marcus Rashford's missed penalty in the final of Euro 2020 at Wembley, and Harry Kane missing his second penalty against France in 2022. What if. What if. What if.

It never leaves me.

Depression accompanies bargaining. A longing for what might have been, alongside the beige emptiness of what is. I'm stuck badly in this phase for a week after England exit a tournament. It then gradually starts to ease. But a little of it always remains.

Acceptance is the final stage of grief. The pain eases, and you learn to move on. That's the theory. I never get there.

* * *

The whole tournament had been like a long summer holiday. The sun was shining that June. I'd only recently moved up to Manchester from London to work as an account director at a PR firm, a job, sadly, for which I was ill-suited. But I'd also just discovered the joys of surfing in Cornwall, and dashed down the M6 and M5 whenever possible. It was there, in Newquay, with my friends Jon and Steve, that I saw England beat Scotland in the group stage of the tournament – with Gazza scoring one of the most incredible, audacious England goals in my lifetime. And I was there a week later, this time just with Jon, for the victory over Spain in the quarter-final.

That Spanish match was notable for two things, as well as the joyous Wembley scenes. First, England actually won a penalty shoot-out. In my lifetime, the ledger in knockout matches currently reads three shoot-out wins to seven losses

– a desperate return, though better than it was right up until 2018, when it was one win and six losses.

Secondly, it was the first time since 1966, and the first time in my life, that England had won a knockout match against a major footballing nation. If we'd have known then that we'd be waiting 25 years for the next, we might all have given up.

But we knew none of that back in the summer of 96, and as I and some colleagues left our central Manchester office that Wednesday evening to walk the few hundred yards to the pub, there was genuine expectation. Genuine belief. Yes, the Germans were favourites, but their star striker Jürgen Klinsmann was out injured. England had a good side. We had Gazza. We were at Wembley. And we'd learned how to strike penalties.

But not for the last time, we were to discover that when England have the cards in their favour, they still lose.

* * *

How should you cope with endless sporting grief? How do you deal with the fact that in 50 years of watching football, I've never seen my team win a trophy? How do you deal with the biennial surge of hope, which becomes more desperate each time, always to be followed by despair?

It helps to have supportive chums who understand the obsession, even if they don't suffer quite to the same extent. Like my friends Irena and Suzi, both big Arsenal fans, with whom I watched many big England matches from 1998 onwards.

It was football that originally drew those two together, happily chatting during the match about anything from work to friends and fashion while keeping an eye on the screen, with one of them occasionally shouting 'shoot!' or 'God, how did he miss that?', before continuing as if nothing had happened.

They would always tell me that club success, of which they saw plenty, while I, a West Brom fan, saw none, made disappointments with England so much easier to bear. I guess that must be true, because they were certainly able to brush off defeats far more readily than I ever could. They also tried their best to help me keep things in perspective.

But they never really succeeded. In fact, as the years have gone by, and despite their support, I've found England knockout matches to be more and more stressful. The tension builds in the few days beforehand, to the extent that I feel queasy when I wake up on matchday. I may pretend, to the family, that I'm concentrating on normal domestic matters, like eating breakfast, having a shower, opening the post and so on, but really, I'm fixated on something totally outside my control.

Sadly, I've discovered that alcohol helps me deal with this growing anxiety, the hope and the fear of defeat. In the moments before England kicked off against France in the 2022 World Cup quarter-final, I had a brief WhatsApp exchange with Irena:

Irena: *How are you feeling?*
Rob: *Stressed as hell*
Irena: *Drink*
Rob: *Am*
Irena: *More*

Good advice. Yes, watching England has turned me, over many years, into a nervous wreck.

1996 Euros:

- Manager: Terry Venables
- How far England got: semi-final (beaten by Germany)
- Pain factor: 10/10
- 'What if' factor: 10/10
- Unluckiness factor: 5/10
- How well England played: 8/10
- Top villain: Andreas Möller

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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.

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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.

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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

2

1978–1984: Innocence shattered

IF MY experience with Scotland in 1978 had led to disappointment, for both me and Scotland, it was a mere taste of what was to come with England in the years ahead. But as the 1970s turned into the 1980s, and as I approached my teenage years, I was blissfully ignorant of those impending, crushing blows.

Yes, all right, my football experience to date hadn't exactly been joyful. West Brom and England had looked good at times – in West Brom's case, very good, finishing third in the league in 79 – but the ultimate glory of winning something had remained agonisingly out of reach. Still, as far as I was concerned, they both had as much chance of winning a major tournament as anyone else. They were heady days.

Only much later, in my 50s, did I start to realise, though not accept, that I might go through my entire life and never see either of my teams triumph. Isn't the definition of madness doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result? Well, at least I'm not mad then, which is a small mercy.

Actually, back in 1980, the rest of the footballing world would have agreed with me about England. After all, we had won the World Cup a mere 14 years earlier, and were still regarded as a major footballing nation and something of a sleeping giant, odd though such a suggestion now seems.

Our club teams, in those days populated almost entirely by players from the British Isles, dominated Europe. And we had that pocket dynamo Kevin Keegan and the gentleman of the game, Trevor Brooking. World class, both.

It amuses me that, even now, more than four decades later and with a history of failure and outrageous underachievement, England are still regarded as something of a scalp to teams like Poland, Hungary, Austria and Sweden (though less and less to Germany, Italy, France and Spain). They seem to think we're good. And decades of English failure hasn't dissuaded them.

But that was neither here nor there to me. When you're 12, as I was in 1980, anything that happened before you are about five is simply ancient history. To me, 1966 and all that might as well have been 1866 and nothing much at all. Yes, it's lovely to know that England triumphed when I was minus two. But frankly, you can never rejoice in something you didn't witness. You might as well rejoice in Agincourt or Waterloo. For me, 1980 was year zero, when my England journey at major finals began. What had gone before was irrelevant. I never really thought about it. All that mattered was the now.

* * *

The 1970s had been grim for the UK. Economic misery. Blackouts. Decline. Depression. Strikes. Aggro. Appalling fashion. Terrible results for the English national team. Good telly.

The 1980s, we thought, couldn't be worse. So, we looked forward with positivity and determination, shrugging off the old ways of doing things and carrying out a thorough spring clean. Margaret Thatcher became prime minister and, just as importantly, ITV's football highlights programme, *The Big Match*, chucked out its trumpety theme tune and replaced it with a tangy, zany number. I never

warmed to it, but it was certainly different and modern, even to my musically uneducated ears.

And, yes, England were at the European Championship finals. I recall little of that 1980 early summer now, and nothing of our first match in the group stage, a draw with Belgium. But I remember the build-up to the second match against Italy, which if we had won, would have as good as guaranteed our passage through to the third-place play-off or even the final (no semi-finals for that event). If we lost, it was pretty much all over.

Nowadays, after decades of bitter experience, the day of a big match for me is full of tension, a modicum of hope but, in the main, a sense of impending doom. I experienced none of that back then. I was in the back garden – it was a glorious Sunday afternoon – and was so full of excitement and expectation that I had to burn off the adrenaline by playing tennis against the wall, something that I spent hour after hour doing in my childhood years, often fantasising about the goals England would score, and the goals I'd score for them about a decade later.

As ever, England football was colourful, sunny, summery and glamorous. I was loving it. As far as I was concerned, England would win, and as I struck ball after ball against the wall, I looked forward to witnessing it. We just had to beat Italy. How hard could that be? A place in the final was as good as secured.

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Later that day, after Italy had triumphed, I felt a kind of confusion. Something's not right, here, I thought. This isn't the way it's meant to be. If this is what the fresh new decade's going to be like then I'm not sure I like it one bit. I trust this is an aberration, England. I trust this won't happen again.

If only I'd known.

It was, of course, crushing. But there is one good thing about the timing of the two major international football tournaments. They always take place in June and early July (yes, we all know about Qatar in December 2022). So, after England get knocked out you can at least console yourself that the summer holidays are stretching ahead. And for me, that summer meant my first trip abroad, across the Channel to France and a self-catering chalet in the Alps. All thoughts of footballing failure were forgotten as I sampled life outside Britain and found I absolutely loved it. What is true now was very much true then: a complete change of scene does wonders for your mental equilibrium. I adored France, and still do.

Actually, there was another aspect to France which, at that stage, I enjoyed. France were pretty rubbish at football. Like England, they failed to qualify for the 1974 World Cup, then bombed in Argentina in 78, and, unlike us, didn't reach the Euro finals in 1980 at all. So there was none of that footballing inferiority that we English have to suffer now when we venture across or under the Channel. Far from it.

The following year, I experienced much more of France. As a child I'd suffered bad asthma, and my parents sent me to the Pyrenees for five months in the middle of 1981 to take advantage of the fresh, pure mountain air before I headed off to senior school. The children's chalet I was in was full of hundreds of wheezing, asthmatic kids, nearly all French. There were just three of us English children, and we weren't natural companions, so I found myself, with limited French skills, isolated and pining for home.

Football, though, is the international language, and I gained some relief by playing against the other children. That's when I realised that France had a great footballing future ahead. Because let me tell you, these kids were good. And I don't just mean good for kids with asthma, but really

skilful and powerful. I remember one drill up in the little stadium in Font-Romeu, the mountain village where we were all living. The ball was passed at speed across the edge of the penalty area, and you had to shoot, at right angles to the ball being crossed, without first controlling it.

Timing is everything in such a drill. Just a fraction too early or too late, and you swing at nothing but thin air and fall over. That's exactly what I found myself doing, which gave me a good indication of my future England prospects. But not these French kids. My goodness, no. The ball was flying into the net every time with deadly accuracy. So much so that I found myself speculating, there and then, that the French football team clearly had a great future if this was the standard of a bunch of kids with a chronic chest condition. England had better look out.

Indeed, we had. Just three years later, in 1984, Michel Platini and co won the Euros. In the decades that followed, Platini was succeeded by the equally world-class Zinedine Zidane and Kylian Mbappé, arguably the greatest footballers of their respective eras, with France winning two World Cups and a further European Championship, while reaching three other finals. England? Move on, please.

At least I knew it was coming.

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England's qualification campaign for the 1982 World Cup in Spain is remembered now for the loss in Norway, after which the local commentator went completely nuts with his deluded rant about Lord Nelson, Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill, and 'Maggie Thatcher, your boys took one hell of a beating'. I doubt if Thatcher cared, but, as I say, in those days, and to an extent even now, the second tier of footballing nations in Europe regarded beating England as something quite miraculous. For the record, Norway finished last in the group, despite their heroics that night,

while England qualified unconvincingly in second place behind Hungary.

So we approached the 1982 finals with a bit of trepidation. Yes, it was great to be there for the first time in 12 years, but I don't think we were ever considered one of the main contenders, especially with Keegan and Brooking, our two standout stars, battling injury. (And that, of course, was a recurring theme in the years that followed).

As for me, I hugely resented the fact that England's first match, against the French, kicked off at 4.15pm UK time, a mere five minutes after my school day finished. What, I thought to myself with some considerable frustration, did they think they were doing scheduling such a match at such a stupid time?

Well, England fans are not easily dissuaded from seeing their team play. I arranged for my father to pick me up at the top of the school drive (the fact that this would mean his missing the opening few minutes too didn't worry me in the slightest) and I sprinted up there, dived into the car, which had its engine running and the radio commentary on, and we sped back towards our house, which was about a mile and a half away. It would mean missing only the anthems and about five minutes of action.

Of course, England had to go and score in that time. Bryan Robson's goal, after just 27 seconds, remains to this day one of the five fastest in World Cup finals history. Part of me was overjoyed, and part of me resentful as hell I'd missed it. Anyway, we were back home for the rest of the match, with England running out comfortable 3-1 winners. That was just about the last time we were expected to beat France. Nobody was that surprised.

Things were looking good. And they continued to look good as we won the next two group matches, which meant that we went into the second group stage (for some reason FIFA was still experimenting with that strange format;

this was four groups to decide the semi-finalists, following two groups used to decide the finalists in 78 and 74) with matches against hosts Spain, and, you guessed it, West Germany.

Only the top team would go through to the semi-final. We played out a nervy 0-0 draw with the West Germans, who then went on to beat Spain, which meant that England had to beat the Spaniards by two clear goals in the final match to finish top.

There was some speculation about whether Spain would really try that hard, given that the loss to West Germany meant they were already eliminated. But it's amazing what national pride can do for you, especially in a home tournament, and they played their hearts out.

As usual I was watching at home, but this time it was with my mother, who is far more of a rugby fan, but will watch the England football team in big games, albeit without an awful lot of enthusiasm. (In fact, even now, she's fond of saying how she had to be shooshed by some friends towards the end of the 1966 World Cup Final when she loudly declared that England deserved to lose because they were time-wasting.)

Well, with about 25 minutes to go, and getting desperate, Greenwood threw on Brooking and Keegan for their first appearances of the whole tournament. 'Hooray!' exclaimed Mum, as the cameras showed the two stars about to be introduced into the action. (She liked them because they spoke well in after-match interviews). 'About time,' I think I added. Both of us were now off our chairs, and sitting on the floor right in front of the set, as though proximity to the screen might suck the ball into the Spanish net.

And it so nearly did. Suddenly Brooking was clear in the area but, agonisingly, shot straight at the goalie. And then, I can still see it now, a Bryan Robson dink-cross found

Keegan free with an open goal in front of him. It was my first England 'what if' moment. Because 99 times out of 100, Keegan would have scored with ease. A completely match-fit Keegan would never have missed. But he did miss. And back in Birmingham I flung my arms in the air in anticipated triumph only then to cover my face in despair. Brian Clough, in the studio afterwards, said he felt sorry for Keegan. I just felt sorry for myself.

We were out. The Germans were through, something that we would have to get used to in the decades ahead. And my footballing innocence and belief that England had it in them was smashed.

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The next three years were grim for me and awful for England football, creating in me a lifelong suspicion that the two might somehow be linked. But it is absolutely true that on the three occasions since 1982 when England have failed to qualify for major tournaments – 1984, 1994 and 2008 – I was going through periods of my life that were rough for either personal (the first two) or business (the last one) reasons.

I wasn't a good teenager. The whole process seemed to puzzle me no end, and whereas others seemed, outwardly at least, to progress from Lego to lager without too much difficulty, I found teenage boy behaviour at my single-sex school a mixture of the repulsive, the absurd and the unfathomable. So, I retreated. Those I mixed with were also misfits. It's not that the cool kids dismissed us. It's just that they barely noticed us.

Following my lead, West Brom started their long slide towards oblivion. Some Baggies fans clung to the hope that the 1979 Ron Atkinson team was the beginning of greatness. In fact, it was the high watermark. We went downhill fast, and have continued ever since. Now,

the thought of Albion challenging for the league title, as we did in 1979 and to a lesser extent 1981, is an absurdity.

And England, now under Bobby Robson, failed to qualify for the 1984 Euros, beaten to it by a good but not world-beating Denmark. The match against the Danes at Wembley, at the end of that campaign, was particularly depressing. Denmark hadn't beaten England before, and only managed a draw in the Copenhagen fixture a year earlier. But at Wembley they never looked like losing, and with the little winger Jesper Olsen tormenting the home defence, the Danes ran out worthy winners. The 1984 Euros would not include England, and my early teenage years, already troubled, hit a new low.

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1980 Euros

- Manager: Ron Greenwood
- How far England got: group stage (Belgium topped the group)
- Pain factor: 4/10
- 'What if' factor: 1/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10
- How well England played: 5/10
- Top villain: my expectations

1982 World Cup finals

- Manager: Ron Greenwood
- How far England got: second group stage (West Germany topped the group)
- Pain factor: 6/10
- 'What if' factor: 8/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10

- How well England played: 6/10
- Top villain: Keegan's injured back

1984 Euros qualifying campaign

- Manager: Bobby Robson
- How far England got: did not qualify (Denmark topped the group)
- Pain factor: 2/10
- 'What if' factor: 2/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10
- How well England played: 5/10
- Top villain: teenage angst

3

1984–1986: The hand of a cheat

BY THE age of 18, I didn't have the starry-eyed innocence about football that I'd experienced as a young child. When you're eight, you assume that sport is fair, and that the players and teams get what they deserve. That's what you're taught at school and told by your parents. It's the way life should be.

A decade on, however, and I knew that cheats sometimes prospered. I'd seen injustice and corruption. I knew that bad guys often won, and good guys often lost. I'd seen that infamous game between West Germany and Austria at the 1982 World Cup – a result arranged by the players so that both teams went through at the expense of Algeria. I'd raged at the complete failure of FIFA to punish anyone. To this day, as far as I'm aware, all involved got off scot-free.

During that same World Cup, I'd seen West Germany knock out France in the semi-final after the German goalkeeper had committed a horrendous and unpunished block – more like an assault – on a French player who would otherwise have scored. The guy could have died, it was that horrific. West Germany, of course, won the penalty shoot-out.

I'd heard about the mysterious arrest of Bobby Moore in the 1970 World Cup in Mexico, and the strange sudden sickness that had hit Gordon Banks on the day of the quarter-final against West Germany (yes, them again). In

club football, I'd read all about Derby County's European Cup semi-final in 1973, and the claims that the Italian side Juventus had bribed the German referee, as well as Bayern Munich's victory over Leeds United in the European Cup Final of 1975 (readers may notice a geographical theme here), following two inexplicable decisions by the French referee.

In other words, and although it was still a few years before the drugs cheating scandals that plagued athletics and cycling, though we now know such cheating was already happening, I was aware that international sport was not above skulduggery of various sorts.

Even so, I assumed that England would suffer no such injustice. Not at the World Cup. Not in front of a global audience. Surely, if we got beaten on the biggest stage of all, it would simply be a matter of the more deserving side winning. Surely, if someone blatantly cheated, the referee would intervene. And if not, surely FIFA would step in to ensure that the cheat didn't prosper. I really was that naive.

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By now, like most fans, I thought I knew better than Bobby Robson about team selection. And I did. If I'd been England manager, we'd have won the World Cup. Because I'd have built the team around Glenn Hoddle. Quite simple really. Hoddle was not only the most skilful player in England, but must have been close to the most skilful in the world. Any other international side would have realised what a rare gem they had.

Sadly, though, for me and England, I wasn't the manager. But even without Hoddle at centre stage, and even though English clubs had been banned from European competition after the horrendous Heysel Stadium disaster in 1985, we had a good team with reasonable prospects. There was Shilton in goal, still going strong. The snarling

Terry Butcher was at the back, with the solid Kenny Sansom to his left. Bryan Robson was in midfield. So was Hoddle, though Bobby Robson insisted, for reasons best known to himself, on playing him out wide on the right where he could have far less influence. Up front we had Gary Lineker and Peter Beardsley. On the wings we had John Barnes and Chris Waddle, though as the tournament went on, Bobby started them on the bench. It was a team packed with skill, and good enough to win the tournament.

The matches, beamed live from Mexico, were often broadcast in the late evening in Britain, and Mum, Dad and I got used to watching until around midnight, though without Stephen of course. This suited me, as I was a night owl anyway, and would cram for exams right through to 3am, even if I was due in the exam hall just a few hours later.

As so often since, England struggled in the group stage losing their first game against Portugal. In the second match, against Morocco, Bryan Robson dislocated his shoulder again. Bobby had begged Manchester United to let the player have an operation in the months before the World Cup, thereby ensuring his fitness. But, as ever, the clubs hold all the cards, and United had simply refused, insisting that Robbo be available for the remainder of the domestic season.

So, England's captain – Bobby referred to him as Captain Marvel – was out of the tournament. Almost as bad, Ray Wilkins got sent off for mindlessly throwing the ball at the referee. He too wasn't to play again in that tournament. England fought out a 0-0 draw, leaving them in desperate trouble, with one point from two games. It was wretched.

But for the Hoddle fans among us, Wilkins' absence was a cause for celebration. We felt that, for all his solidity, Wilkins was a conservative option, and there was simply no excuse for playing him in the centre of midfield when

our man was a so much more skilful and creative option. Now, however, shorn of both Wilkins and Robson, Bobby was forced into a change, and finally decided he'd have to play Hoddle in the centre with Peter Reid drafted in alongside him. OK, Hoddle fans would have preferred him to be partnered by Robson, but at least we finally had him in the middle of the action.

We were proved right. England immediately improved, and in our final group match against Poland, a liberated team absolutely smashed it, 3-0, with Lineker gobbling up a hat-trick and Hoddle reigning supreme. England were suddenly looking good. And dangerous.

The same team took on Paraguay in the second round, and Hoddle's and Lineker's magic worked again. England triumphed 3-0, with Lineker grabbing two and, when he was down injured after a deliberate elbow to the throat, Beardsley one. 'That's the way to show them,' declared Mum, always one to celebrate justice being served.

Suddenly, the trauma of those opening two matches was ancient history. We were looking good. We were strong and balanced. All we had to do now was to beat Argentina in the quarter-final.

* * *

Looking back at that infamous match now, four decades on, you'd be forgiven for thinking that England had no chance. After all, Maradona was the greatest player, albeit horribly flawed human being, I've ever seen play. Even if the rest of the Argentinian team was fairly ordinary, Maradona could win on his own. He was that quick, skilful, powerful and ruthless.

But in 1986, we really didn't know much about him. He'd played in the 82 World Cup in Spain, but got sent off against Brazil for a terrible assault on one of the opposition players. And we hadn't seen or heard much of him in the

four following years. The blanket coverage of football that we have now just didn't exist in those days. Before that 86 World Cup, I'm not sure I'd ever seen Maradona play.

Of course, he had starred in the group stage, and he was beginning to develop his reputation as the world's leading player. But, as ordinary England fans, we didn't fear him. The BBC's commentator, Barry Davies, merely expressed his hope at the start of the match that we wouldn't see much of him over the next 90 minutes.

If only. Because if Maradona didn't have a huge reputation before the match, by the time it had finished, he had most certainly gained one.

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When England are knocked out of a World Cup or European Championship, the experience is so painful that I rarely watch a repeat. And that was, until recently, the case with the match against Argentina in 86. But when Maradona died in 2020, the BBC, only too willing to revel in one of England's darkest footballing days, showed the entire match again, and, in the mood to torture myself, I got sucked into watching it for the first time since it took place.

It was far more even than I remembered, with Maradona's brilliance coming in flashes rather than through sustained dominance. And the 'Hand of God' incident came out of nowhere. It was, of course, a clear handball. Yes, Maradona, a natural-born cheat, tried to disguise it by flicking his head as he punched the ball into the net, but it was transparently obvious that the goal couldn't possibly stand.

At home in Birmingham, in the summer evening with Mum and Dad, I saw exactly what had happened, as did everyone else. We all saw it – the players, coaching staff, crowd and millions on TV (though strangely, at first, not Barry Davies who wrongly thought the England players

were claiming an offside). But the referee didn't, or didn't want to, and nor did the two linesmen.

I felt disbelief, followed by horror. Even Mum looked shaken. Surely, surely, one of the two linesmen will intervene. Surely someone, anyone, will. Surely the referee will accept the obvious. But no. The realisation that we'd been cheated hit me in a sickening instant. And any residual belief that England would stand or fall on their own efforts went in that one moment, never to return.

When, years later, France knocked Ireland out of a World Cup qualifying play-off because of a deliberate Thierry Henry handball, Henry was so mortified, and so racked with guilt, that he suggested the game be replayed.

But Henry is a gentleman. Maradona had no such shame or remorse. In fact, the opposite. He was clearly delighted with himself, celebrating wildly, and inspired enough to go on and score a goal which, to my continuing dismay, is repeated endlessly owing to its utter brilliance. You can't avoid it. I've even seen it come out, in surveys of English football fans, as the greatest goal ever. Even though it should never have been given, because the move started with a clear foul on Glenn Hoddle.

Was it that good a goal? Yes, I'm afraid so. It was fabulous. John Barnes had scored a similar one against Brazil in Rio two years earlier. But that was a friendly. This was the World Cup quarter-final. It knocked the stuffing out of England, and at home in Birmingham I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach then, two minutes later, smacked me in the face.

Well, one thing an England team never does is give up. A quarter of a century later, in 2010, and losing 4-1 to the Germans, England were still pushing forward, even though they knew it was pretty hopeless. And in 1986 it was no different. Bobby threw on Barnes on the left wing, who immediately jinked past a couple of players and crossed

beautifully for Lineker, who headed the ball into the net. That made it 2-1, with still enough time to equalise.

And then came my second 'what if'. With renewed belief, England pressed. The ball went wide on the left to Barnes again, who curled in another perfect cross to Lineker, this time only a few feet out. I was up on my feet, punching the air, because surely he'd scored. But no. Somehow, an Argentinian defender, in a moment of brilliant defending, had dived beneath Lineker and deflected the ball out and away. Lineker was in the net, but not the ball. And I held my head in my hands, unable to believe it. It was our last chance.

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Some England players will never forgive Maradona for his cheating. Others, like Lineker, are more sanguine, saying that even if England had equalised, Maradona was so exceptional that he would have scored a third and knocked England out anyway. Perhaps they're right.

Where do I stand? Well, of course, I'll never forgive nor forget. It's not in my makeup. But I also feel sorry for Argentina. The most famous goal that country has ever scored was a cheat. In contrast, England's most famous goal, before I was born, sadly, was Geoff Hurst's third in 66. The fact that Maradona's cheat, to this day, is celebrated in Argentina, says all you need to know. England may not have won, but at least they played honourably. Despite the pain, I'd far rather be us.

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While England were playing in Mexico that summer of 1986, I took my A-levels. Then, only two days after the loss to Argentina, I flew off across the Atlantic, my first time outside Europe, to join Camp America for two months, which involved working at one of the thousands of summer

camps that American kids go to each year. As with France four years earlier, the change of scene worked wonders.

That autumn, university beckoned, though I didn't know which one. The future opened up in front of me. There were so many paths to choose from, and it was a matter of selecting the best one. I got some things right and some badly wrong.

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1986 World Cup finals

- Manager: Bobby Robson
- How far England got: quarter-final (beaten by Argentina)
- Pain factor: 9/10
- 'What if' factor: 8/10
- Unluckiness factor: 9/10
- How well England played: 7/10
- Top villain: Maradona

4

1986–1990: The bloody Germans

IT WASN'T even the whole of Germany. Even though the Berlin Wall had come down a few months previously, West Germany contested, and won, the 1990 World Cup without any help from the East. (Imagine if only West England could ever compete – we'd never win a match). But they certainly got some help from two of our penalty takers, and from an outrageous deflection over Peter Shilton's head.

England had never contested a penalty shoot-out before, and it showed. We were hopelessly ill-prepared and naive. The Germans dispatched theirs with the kind of efficiency and ruthlessness for which they were already known. Us? Well, Gary Lineker, Peter Beardsley and David Platt all scored. Then Stuart Pearce had his effort saved, followed by a rugby conversion from Chris Waddle, whose body language as he approached the kick, head down with slumped shoulders, showed us all that he knew he would miss. He duly did.

If you were to study England's entire post-1966 footballing history, right up to the present day, encompassing all that pain, grief and injustice, the 1990 shoot-out against the Germans is the wound that, more than any other, still stings England fans the most. Quite simply, it refuses to heal. Maybe it never will.

A West End play came out of it. So did a pizza advert. So did any number of English neuroses, leading to an appalling

overall shoot-out record in European Championship and World Cup knockouts of contested ten, lost seven. And I've seen them all. If we'd somehow won that shoot-out, which, in truth, never looked likely, the subsequent history of English football would have been massively different. We'd have surely won a trophy or two.

As it is, the loss, and the agonising over it during the years that followed, has engrained in the English psyche a fear of the 12-yard spot-kick quite out of proportion to the mechanics involved. No other nation has built it up into such a psychological Everest. That's the English for you. We love torturing ourselves.

* * *

That four-year World Cup cycle, 1986 to 1990, was an emotional whirlwind for me personally, and for the world as a whole. If 1990 was, as Francis Fukuyama unwisely called it, the 'end of history', then we certainly didn't know it at the time. Frankly, many of us were too busy having fun. And suffering heartache. Sometimes inflicting it. And getting drunk. Sometimes worse. I'm ashamed to say that many of those stupendous events of the late 1980s passed me by.

I was at Oxford University, studying Modern History. In many ways I had little right to be there. I had failed to get in when I took the entrance exam in late 1985 before I took A-levels. But I decided to take a gap year and have another crack at it after returning from that coming-of-age stint with Camp America in the autumn of 86.

Somehow, I succeeded. Not because of any brainpower, but because I understood how to give a good interview. I knew how to press the right buttons, get the interviewers nodding in agreement, and turn something really quite ordinary into an impressive-sounding insight merely with tonal variety, timing and emphasis. In short, I blagged it.

Saying that, I loved Oxford. After the rigidity and discipline of school life, I now had complete freedom. All right, I had to turn up to a tutorial once a week, and read out an essay, but that was just about it. And nobody seemed to mind unduly if my essays were pretty mediocre.

You didn't have to attend lectures, for example. So, I didn't. Actually, that's not quite true. In my third year I went to one for the novelty but left halfway through owing to its unspeakable tedium. I think I had to ask my friend Andrew, fellow historian, not a footy fan (he claims these days not to know who Thomas Tuchel is), where the lecture halls were. I certainly never set foot in the History Faculty, though I seem to remember meeting Andrew and others just outside it once before going to the pub.

I recall reading a few books – enough, just about, to get by in those tutorials. But I was otherwise a pretty poor student, and someone who, by rights, might have been 'sent down' after a term and a half for abject laziness. The fact that I survived tells you all you need to know about certain corners of Oxford in those days.

I was at Oriel College, which was then second-rate academically, but world-class at rowing, not a sport I ever took to. My tutors were Jeremy Catto and Robert Beddard, who tolerated me, I thought then and still think now, because I exuded a kind of blue-eyed innocence – possibly too sweet to be mean to. So, while they gently reprimanded for not doing enough work, I never felt under the slightest threat. Not that I'd have done much about it if I had been.

That left me plenty of time to play football for the college second team, and occasionally the firsts, and, of course, to watch England. Bobby Robson had attracted so much sympathy after the quarter-final loss against the Argies that there was little doubt he'd stay on for another four years. And to be fair, England looked pretty good in

qualifying for the 88 Euros in West Germany. Just as in 1980, the finals involved only eight teams in two groups of four, with the top two teams in each going forward to the semis.

As usual, and despite Gary Lineker looking out of sorts (later diagnosed with hepatitis B), England went in with high hopes. As usual, they were quickly dashed. Jack Charlton's Republic of Ireland won a shock victory against us in our very first match, but it was actually Robson himself who opened the door to them by leaving out Hoddle and playing the journeyman Neil Webb instead. Webb was a poor man's Ray Wilkins. I'm convinced to this day that had Hoddle started that match, and I can recall no rational explanation from Robson as to why he didn't, England would have won comfortably. I remember Bobby Charlton agreeing with me, or rather, me agreeing with him, when Robson announced his team.

As it was, a defeat left us facing the Dutch of Marco van Basten, Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard in a must-win match. Despite a super Bryan Robson goal, we were comfortably beaten. Van Basten destroyed Tony Adams so comprehensively that I imagine Adams still wakes up in a cold sweat.

So that was that. Another major tournament had come and gone, and I went down to Oriel bar to drown my sorrows, only to find Andrew, who told me to snap out of it and start reading some history books for a change. As for Bobby Robson, more recent England managers would surely be fired. But he was permitted to soldier on. Like me at Oxford, he was perceived as just too sweet to sack.

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As ever, the summer holidays beckoned, and took the sting out of national footballing disaster. I went inter-railing with Andrew and another chum, Simon, which involved a month

touring Europe, and a bit of Turkish Asia, with a sum total of about three nights in rubbish bargain-basement hotels for a quick shower and a reasonable night's kip. The rest of the time we slept on trains, station platforms and even a cave halfway up a hillside just outside Ankara. Them were the days.

Then it was back to Oxford and two more silly but glorious years that coincided with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Soviet Union.

Such is the lot of the mad football fan that I remember the 1990 World Cup, and even the matches leading up to it, in rich technicolour. But the famous TV pictures of the Berlin Wall coming down? Nicolae Ceaușescu helplessly begging the massed crowd to stop jeering him, just a few days before he was executed in cold blood? I draw a blank. What mattered to me far more was Steve Bull's late charge for a spot in the England squad and Paul Gascoigne's remarkable transition from precocious newcomer to world-beater.

As ever, England arrived for the tournament, in Italy that year, with belief. Lineker was still at his peak and now healthy, with Beardsley still his foil. Chris Waddle and John Barnes were on the flanks. Bryan Robson was still bossing things, though, as usual, he timed injury to coincide perfectly with a major tournament. But we had the up-and-coming David Platt to work alongside Gazza in the middle, and we had skilful young defenders – Mark Wright, Des Walker, Stuart Pearce and Paul Parker – supplementing Terry Butcher. It was a fine side.

The 1990 World Cup clashed almost perfectly with my university finals, which I've used ever since as the reason I achieved only a 2:2 rather than the 2:1 I craved and didn't deserve. Still, from the day I left Oxford in 1990, I reckon I've only been asked what degree I got about three times, and all before the end of 1992.

Why are university finals (and GCSEs and A-levels) always scheduled bang in the middle of major football tournaments? It so obviously conspires against obsessive fans. How I was able to concentrate on the reigns of James I and Charles I, and the causes of the English Civil War, when England were playing vital warm-up matches, I have no idea. No wonder I can remember, in vibrant colour, the key moments of every England game during that tournament, but scratch my head helplessly if you ask me what I wrote in my exam papers. Whatever it was, it wasn't impressive.

I had spent my third and final year at Oxford living in digs down Abingdon Road with Andrew and our fellow historians Philip (also no interest in football) and Hugh Hornby, who had huge interest and would later become curator of the National Football Museum before dying at the tragically young age of 51. Most Oriel students liked living away from college for that final year, as a sort of bridge back to the normality that would hit us as soon as we graduated. I profoundly resented it. For me, the whole point of Oxford was to live in a medieval courtyard, where you could imagine it was 1690, not 1990. Actually, although that should have happened during my first two years, my rooms, by chance, were in the more modern third quad in my first (in the now infamous Rhodes Building) and in a flat overlooking Oriel Square in the second. But it was close enough. And that to me was the true Oxford experience.

But our shared terrace house in the third year didn't feel like Oxford at all. It could have been in just about any street in any town in England. That's why I decided to block out my surroundings and keep the curtains in my room closed, come rain or shine, all year long, much to the astonishment of my housemates. Well, it made sense to me.

Oxford really was its own bizarre little world, and I loved it. Even then, of course, there were plenty of students who wanted to sweep away all that made Oxford different,

and bring it into the mainstream of British universities. So, the traditions of formal dinners, chapel, boat-burning ceremonies and taking exams in 'subfusc' – that familiar dark formal clothing – were all on their radar. They thought all that fuddy-duddy stuff alienated people from 'ordinary backgrounds' and maintained Oxford's elitism. I get that train of thought, but disagree. We had the rest of our lives to live in the real world. Why not glory in something uniquely different for those three precious years? Why the need for uniformity?

So, while I did little in the way of actual work, I threw myself into these traditions with gusto. I was far too shy and lacking in confidence to speak in any debates at the famous Oxford Union, but I was a regular visitor, admiring from afar as the likes of Michael Gove and Jacob Rees-Mogg strutted their stuff. I'm fairly agnostic on religious matters, but could often be found on Sunday evenings in Oriel Chapel for Evensong, followed by dinner in the medieval hall next door, preceded by a quite absurd Latin grace.

There is of course a grating clash between all that traditional stuff and my England football fix. But to me, at the time, both sides of my personality needed full expression. And I wasn't going to miss an England match, least of all in the World Cup, because I was busy living in the 1690s. Far from it. I happily made excursions into the late 20th century for the matches with one group of friends, including Hugh, of course, and Jon, an economist with an excellent mathematical brain and original views on everything, including football, before sinking back into the 17th century once it was over with another group of friends, like Andrew and Philip.

Nobody gave England much hope of actually winning in 1990, not after the crushing disappointment of the Euros in 88. But our hopes rose as the tournament progressed. We couldn't get past a solid Republic of Ireland, still led

by Jack Charlton, though we did at least draw this time. And then we played a belter against Holland (or had they become the Netherlands by then?) before scoring, or so we thought, from a free kick in the last minute. Hugh and I were so busy leaping up and down with unbridled joy in our little living room that I'd completely failed to notice that the referee had only given an indirect free kick. Perhaps Stuart Pearce didn't notice either, because he appeared to shoot straight for goal.

The ghastly disappointment. Couldn't they have allowed us to celebrate for just a few more seconds? It was orgasmic, just like in *Trainspotting*, only for England. Still, no matter. We won our last game against Egypt with a Mark Wright header, and progressed as group winners to a second-round knockout match with Belgium.

* * *

England have had so many near misses, so many unlucky moments, so much hurt, that we sometimes forget the close shaves, lucky bounces and crucial refereeing decisions that could easily have gone the other way (the quarter-final of Euro 96 against Spain springs to mind, and the semi-final against Denmark in 2021). OK, the former have comfortably outweighed the latter, but, even so, the rub of the green has on occasions been English.

I'm told that football fans of my vintage in Belgium still look back on that match as one that got away. And they're right. I watched it in Oriel College's crowded junior common room annexe, and for some reason (even I can't remember that detail) arrived late, just as the anthems were being sung. Being the mad, obsessive football fan that I was, I asked the guy sitting next to me which line-up Bobby Robson had picked. He looked at me as though I was talking a different language, with eyes that said, 'What you on about mate?' Amid the excitement, I realised, fleetingly

and with momentary self-realisation, that not everybody who tunes into an England World Cup match is as obsessed by the minutiae of team formations as I am.

Well, Robson had, rightly in my view, ditched England's traditional 4-4-2 and gone for a kind of 5-2-3. That was a better balance, and allowed an athletic, fearless young Gazza to play in an advanced midfield role behind Lineker in attack. Fabulous.

The only trouble is that Belgium had come to play. I don't remember a single one of their team, but, my goodness, the effect was impressive. We were lucky to get to extra time. Belgium were better than us and deserved to be ahead, but it remained goalless.

It looked for all the world like England's first penalty shoot-out was about to happen. And how the history of English football might have been different, and brighter, had it done so and we'd won. Would we have screwed up the shoot-out in the semi against the West Germans if we'd already triumphed two matches earlier? Would we have developed such a phobia?

We'll never know, because it didn't get that far. Sitting in that Oriel annexe, I was physically shaking. Only true fans know how this feels. And as you approach the last minute or so, you know that any mistake is the end. There is no tomorrow. It's all over, whether they think it is or not. I was just desperate for the ref to blow the final whistle. Even penalties would be better than this agony.

And then it happened. One thing that can never be said about Bobby Robson is that he lacked courage. In that moment, in the last minute of extra time, he came into his own. England were awarded a free kick in the middle of the Belgian half. Gazza looked set to play the ball sideways and run down the clock. But Robson sprang off his bench, wildly gesticulating that he should send the ball into the Belgian penalty area. Gazza obliged.

I don't know if Gazza intended to play it over David Platt's shoulder so that the poor guy had his back to goal. Well, whatever. Platt somehow pivoted and hooked the ball with his right foot into the net. Wow.

I've heard John Motson's commentary on that moment dozens of times since. 'England have done it!' OK, those few words don't have the poetic majesty of 'They think it's all over' but there's something in Motty's tone, rather than the words themselves, that capture the moment.

Of course, sitting where I was, I heard nothing except the sound of myself roaring with excitement and seeing a sea of wildly flailing, celebrating arms and bodies in front of me. Did I hug the guy next to me who had looked at me with such bewilderment two hours earlier? Hell, probably. It's just my reflex.

It was a moment of sublime joy, and it took me a good couple of days to come down from the high. But I now look back at that day with a degree of melancholy. Because of all the tournaments in my lifetime, that is one of only two or three occasions I can recall England inflicting on another nation the experience that has so often been inflicted on us – winning a knockout when we didn't really deserve it. Belgium should have won. Yet they lost it in the cruellest of circumstances. Worse even than a penalty shoot-out. And for all our joy in England, there was equal grief in Belgium.

Perhaps I shouldn't feel like that. Perhaps I should just take the win, and celebrate that, for once, we weren't on the receiving end of the cruelty. Does anyone ever grieve for us? I doubt it. I have good reason to believe they don't. But, even so, poor Belgium.

* * *

We were into a quarter-final with Cameroon, and of course England expected to win. Never mind that we hadn't played a semi-final since 1966 (I'm not counting the Euros in

1968, where the 'finals' in Italy involved only four teams). Never mind that there is no such thing as an easy knockout match. Never mind that we were up against an ageing but inspirational Roger Milla, who had taken the tournament by storm and was scoring goals for fun. Everyone assumed that England would find a way. I was one of them.

And we did. But only just. I watched that match with a girl I'd just started dating, so at least, when it came to the crunch points, I hugged a person who might reasonably have enjoyed the experience, though I can't recall her specifically saying so.

Nowadays, England get more penalties than I have hot dinners, and Harry Kane usually, with one crucial exception, hammers them home. But back in Robson's era, England were *never* awarded penalties. So, to get two in one match was astonishing. Without them we'd have lost, mainly because Milla looked like scoring every time he got near the ball. Gary Lineker, who is now a controversial figure, was then just a great marksman, the Kane of his day, and a hero to all England fans. He nervelessly dispatched both spot-kicks, one to draw us level at 2-2, and one in a torturous extra-time period to pull us ahead.

So, England had got through. By the tiniest of margins. By the skin of Robson's teeth. A semi-final against West Germany lay ahead.

* * *

If we'd known in the run-up to that match that we'd be replaying it in our poor English minds more than three decades later we'd have lobbied FIFA to abandon the whole tournament owing to its wanton cruelty. It is the match that more than any other defines the years of hurt. England played so well and fearlessly. They really did make us proud. The German goal was a ludicrous fluke – a massive deflection over Shilton. England's, by Lineker again, was

snatched in the nick of time. It was 1-1 at full time, which meant 30 more minutes.

It was said that Gazza's extra-time yellow card and the tears that followed made football popular and fashionable again in England after several years of hooliganism and disgrace. That's not the way I see it. It was a profound tragedy. He lost the ball and then lunged to retrieve it, giving the German guy, Thomas Berthold, an excuse to roll around as though in agony, when actually Gazza had barely touched him.

Nevertheless, the optics were awful. It was the sort of youthful mistake that Gazza made, and continued to make even when he was no longer youthful. Brilliance and idiocy, often in the same match. Even if England had got through to the final, Gazza's yellow, his second of the tournament, would have ruled him out.

And as soon as the referee brandished the card, and the tears started flowing, the writing was on the wall for England. The match was destined for penalties and Gazza was in no mood to take one.

The Germans had suffered penalty heartache before. In 1976, they lost the final of the Euros to the Czechs in a shoot-out. But in stark contrast to us English, who have used the 1990 loss to wallow in self-pity, the Germans simply decided that such a tragedy would never happen again. They'd leave nothing to chance, and would use science to ensure triumph. They got it right too. Since that loss in 76, the German record is played six, won six. I can hardly bring myself to compare that to ours.

Had we even practised penalties before that semi-final? It didn't look like it. And Shilton got nowhere near saving any. The 4-3 scoreline, in retrospect, was horribly inevitable.

I watched the whole grim saga in Oriel's middle common room overlooking Oriel Square with a whole bunch of people, from mad obsessives like me to those,

and there were quite a few, who just thought they ought to. It was the end of Bobby Robson's reign, and my time at Oxford was over too. Robson went to the Netherlands to coach PSV Eindhoven, and I decided that only one place on earth could follow a penalty shoot-out loss. I got on a plane to Colombo, Sri Lanka, and stayed there for two years.

* * *

1988 Euros

- Manager: Bobby Robson
- How far England got: group stage (the Soviet Union and the Netherlands qualified for the semi-finals)
- Pain factor: 6/10
- 'What if' factor: 3/10
- Unluckiness factor: 3/10
- How well England played: 4/10
- Top villain: Lineker's hepatitis B

1990 World Cup finals

- Manager: Bobby Robson
- How far England got: semi-final (beaten by West Germany)
- Pain factor: 10/10
- 'What if' factor: 5/10
- Unluckiness factor: 5/10
- How well England played: 8/10
- Top villain: Thomas Berthold

5
1990–1996: Rollercoaster

YES, SRI Lanka. In my final year at Oxford, I applied for and got a job there. It was, or seemed to me at the time, tremendously glamorous. At the start, I was to be a teacher of English as a Foreign Language for Colombo International School, and gradually move into a different role, and this is the glamorous bit, helping to create a TV programme designed to teach English to people throughout the whole country.

Why would I and a few other Oxbridge graduates, with no TV experience, be asked to do this? Well, Colombo International School always hired Oxbridge graduates as teachers. They were cheap, and the Oxbridge bit impressed rich parents within Colombo's elite. And when the Sri Lankan government asked the school to help it spread English teaching throughout the country through the medium of television, to help with the tourist industry, I suppose the school just thought it made sense to continue its policy of recruiting only from Oxbridge.

So, in September 1990 I waved a tearful goodbye and jumped on the plane to Colombo.

I was OK as an English teacher, solid rather than inspiring, and relied heavily on textbooks. The tropical lifestyle, however, suited me down to the ground. We weren't paid very much, so we got around Colombo on bicycles, and lived in shared flats and houses rather than

expat compound apartments. But we had enough dosh to eat out most evenings in cheapish restaurants and to drink beer on the terrace of Otters, a swimming and tennis club close to the school. At weekends we explored the rest of the country, which was small and accessible, from Yala in the south to Anuradhapura in the north. Great days. Youthful and carefree.

There was of course a civil war going on, so Colombo was regularly bombed. And when I say bombed, I don't mean the kind of device that might kill two or three, IRA-style. When the Tamil Tigers planted a bomb, they could take out 100 or so. On one occasion I was sitting in the British Council library reading the back pages of the British newspapers – along with a grainy BBC World Service, that was the only way to keep up with the sports news from back home – when the whole building violently shook, to the extent that I held the table in front of me for support, wondering what could possibly have happened. 'It's an earthquake!' shouted an official, breathlessly hurrying into the room. But he was wrong. It was a massive car bomb about a mile away, which had just killed 60 people.

On another occasion, a huge device went off within a student block right opposite the flat that I lived in during my first three months in the country, and had recently vacated for a more modern abode a mile or so away. Three of my colleagues, however, still lived there, and one of them, my friend Mike, woke up to find the roof of his bedroom on top of him, and blood (his) all over the sheets.

These occurrences were all too frequent, and, looking back, it was incredibly perilous. But I didn't worry that much. None of us did. We just got on with it. As did Sri Lanka, which is one of the most resilient little countries I've ever known. In 2004, Sri Lanka was one of the main victims of the Asian tsunami. Nearly a quarter of a million people

were killed and a huge number of communities in coastal areas were destroyed. The suffering was incredible, but the country just, somehow, bounced back and rebuilt with the minimum of fuss and complaint. We in Britain could learn a lot about how to treat life's ups and downs from the people of that brave little island.

Keeping up with the England football team was tough. But I just about managed it, and, never short of an opinion or two, quickly came to the realisation that Graham Taylor, who'd succeeded Bobby Robson, just wasn't up to it. His face fitted in the corridors of the FA, however, and he was a good egg, so the fact he sent out mediocre England teams was just something we all just had to put up with.

Watching England, as opposed to reading about them, was even more difficult though, thousands of miles away. So, I didn't much. Those two years in Sri Lanka were the only period I've actually lived for any length of time away from England, and there wasn't the option of rocking up at a pub to watch the action. If we wanted to watch television, it would mean a trip to one of the big city-centre international hotels, and, even then, finding one that might show an England football match was a struggle.

Not surprisingly, then, my memory of England, for the only time in my life, goes a bit dry when I look back on that period between the 1990 World Cup and the 1992 Euro finals in Sweden. If I did see any of the qualifying matches, I don't recall them. I knew that the team that got to the World Cup semi-final in 1990 was gradually splintering. No Peter Shilton, Terry Butcher or Bryan Robson, all retired, and Gary Lineker was declining, though still our main marksman. The newcomers weren't as good. It wasn't the worst time to be several thousand miles away.

The early 1990s were, in retrospect, the last time the world felt big, in that era before internet ubiquity and mobile phones 24/7. Sri Lanka, certainly, was like a different

planet. People stared at us because we had a different skin colour. Phone calls home were few and far between. Trips home were even rarer. The food, even to those of us used to Oxford curry houses, was often blow-your-head-off hot. The spiders and snakes were enormous and sometimes lethal.

You had to be resilient. And we few expats at Colombo International School stuck together. I became particularly close to Mike, a Wolves fan and deeply intelligent maths teacher and English literature enthusiast, with whom I had endless mainly friendly arguments about political matters and whether West Brom or Wolves had the more glorious past (it's about even, I reckon), while laughing about the absurdities of our expat lifestyle.

It really was a ridiculous period. As time went on, I became increasingly involved in producing those English TV shows, under the direction of Barbara Goldsmith, a wonderful recently retired BBC executive who'd been hired by the school to head up the entire project. I loved working with Barbara, and quickly found myself being given more and more responsibility.

The TV show was heavily based around the BBC English language series, *Follow Me*, which had been received with huge acclaim in other countries around the world, not least China, where it apparently attracted an audience of 100 million. We didn't have quite that number in Sri Lanka, but seven million folk, out of a total population then of around 18 million, regularly tuned in. More than Terry Wogan got back in the UK, I used to boast to Mike, who'd remind me that the competition on Sri Lankan TV wasn't all that stiff. He was right.

Anyway, our job, as producers, was to create local teaching content and weave it into the original BBC show, as well as to create textbooks for teaching centres up and down the country, and, every so often, to produce a TV quiz

show where schools would compete against each other to show off their English language skills.

I was one of the three judges on that show, and also appeared on advertisements for the latest textbooks. Bit by bit I became reasonably well known in Sri Lanka, and then, to my great surprise, was asked to act in a commercial for the razor brand, Permasharp. After that, even if I wasn't exactly mobbed every time I appeared in public, people knew me pretty well and would shout out 'Hey, Mr Follow Me!' and 'It's Mr Permasharp!' as I cycled or drove past. I loved it, of course. Utterly shameless.

Sri Lanka is small enough that you could pretty much go anywhere you liked in the whole country for the weekend, except the war-torn far north and east, and be back in time to start work on the Monday morning. So we'd set off in one of the school vans or by public transport to Kandy and Nuwara Eliya in the mountains, or Bentota, Galle or Yala on the coast. It was all dirt cheap by European standards, and we had epic beer-fuelled weekends, including swimming, hiking, sightseeing and chat about everything from the meaning of life to who was sleeping with whom. There was a lot of that, as you can imagine.

Back in Colombo, we seemed to be out just about every night. We rarely cooked (I never did) so food meant a vast array of eateries including Otters, the tennis club; the German restaurant, a particular favourite for Mike and me; the excellent vegetable curries at the absurdly colonial Galle Face Hotel; and any number of local cafes where super rice and curry could be bought for just a few rupees. It was a wonderful couple of years, the sort that you can only get away with when you're in your early 20s.

On one occasion, we were all invited to a party in the large garden of the British High Commissioner's stately residence. We arrived early and started tucking into the copious amount of booze on offer, so much so that by the

time the other guests, all of whom were very distinguished, turned up, we were pretty pissed. Then the High Commissioner decided, God only knows why, to introduce me to former President J.R. Jayawardene. As I shook his hand one of my chums tried to give me a knowing little nudge-kick, but misjudged the distance he had to stretch and fell over.

Later in the evening I compounded our misery when being introduced to former prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Not only was she Sri Lanka's first female prime minister, but the first female prime minister anywhere. It was therefore a huge honour, which even in my state, I think I just about appreciated. Unfortunately, the old lady was sitting down when I was speaking to her, and in trying to kneel beside her I instead landed with a drunken thud on my arse. I think we were asked to leave shortly afterwards.

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The two years rushed by, crazy, hedonistic but spellbinding, and before I knew it was the summer of 1992 and the Euros from Sweden. But it's fair to say that by the time the tournament started I was less familiar with the England team than at any time before or since.

Nevertheless, it is quite impossible for someone like me to miss an England match in a major tournament without at least making major efforts, so, along with a few of the other expats, I journeyed up to the Taj Hotel in central Colombo to watch the team slide towards an early exit without reaching the knockout phase. We drew with the Danes and French, goalless on both occasions, and then crumpled in the face of the Swedish hosts and a spectacular second-half Tomas Brolin goal that flew past Chris Woods's outstretched hand. Graham Taylor inexplicably took off Lineker, who was furious, and England never looked like

finding an equaliser. We finished last in our group and were out. As usual, the Euros had been abject.

I was livid with Taylor for what I saw as tactical ineptitude, poor selection and awful man-management. I grumbled loudly in the rickshaw all the way home to our shared house, much to the amusement of one or two of my colleagues, for whom an England loss wasn't even a minor inconvenience.

Still, I can think of few better places after a big England humiliation than Sri Lanka, and I shrugged it all off in double-quick time. A few beers down at Otters did the trick, followed by a weekend away in Bentota. The massive, peaceful Indian Ocean, with the sun slowly sinking towards the horizon, is enough to dispel any England Euro blues. Even mine.

Sadly, however, my time in Sri Lanka was coming to an end. I don't regret many moments in my life, but my decision to come back to the UK is right up there. It's a bit of sliding doors, really. What would life have been like if I'd stayed on for a permanent expat Sri Lankan lifestyle, as a couple of my fellow expat teachers did? One of them's still out there, I'm told. Where would I be now if I'd made that same choice?

It wasn't to be. I was convinced that two glorious years were enough, and that it was time to come home and do something conventional. So, I returned to England, and found myself at Oxford University Careers Centre, which many of my fellow students would have passed through a full two years earlier and were already into successful careers. My life spread out ahead of me. The UK was still in economic depression, Black Wednesday was about a month away, jobs were few and far between, and I hadn't got a clue what I wanted to do. I was lost.

In retrospect, taking the public relations ring binder off the shelf was the single worst decision I've ever taken, right up there with becoming a West Brom and England fan. I

suppose I can see why I did it. Sri Lanka had given me a taste of working in the media, while wordsmithing, which I assumed might come in handy in PR, was one of the few skills I possessed. I wasn't to know then that I'd be so ill-suited to the whole thing and that the mere act of taking that binder off the shelf was to catapult me towards a full decade of doing something that I never liked and always, on one level or other, resented.

A few weeks or so later I found myself in Watford beginning a one-year diploma in International PR at a place called West Herts College. To be fair, I rather enjoyed that year, and met some lovely people, one of whom I started dating, though it ended horribly, at least for me. As for Watford, I do wonder, looking back, what on earth I thought I was doing there after three glorious years at Oxford, and two bizarre but intoxicating years in Colombo.

I duly got my degree, and managed to get a job in the healthcare division of Burson-Marsteller, then regarded as the world's leading PR company. In August 1993 I bought a tiny one-bedroom flat in Holborn, central London, and started my first nine-to-five job. It was appalling. I hated the work. I hated healthcare PR and hated living in London. I felt like a fish out of water.

England also hit rock-bottom, which I'm convinced is no coincidence. The sorry last year or so of Graham Taylor's ill-fated reign is brilliant chronicled in the fly-on-the-wall documentary, *An Impossible Job*. I can think of no other reason than spectacular self-regard for why Taylor agreed to let a TV crew follow him throughout that campaign. It's bad enough being one of England's worst-ever managers, though I'm told a lovely man outside football, without a compelling piece of TV documenting it all. Sorry to speak ill of the dead.

As it happens, it was during Taylor's time that I made my first trip to Wembley and first trip to see England play

live. It was early September 1993, and I'd only just arrived in London. Well, why not? So, I managed to get hold of a solitary ticket for the World Cup qualifier against Poland, and ventured north on the underground.

I've always been one for getting to football grounds early, to feel the atmosphere building up, and I was one of the first people there that Wednesday evening. Wembley was by far the biggest stadium I'd ever been in. Most of the football I'd seen had been at The Hawthorns, which in those days had a capacity of around 40,000. Wembley could fit more than twice that, and the sense of scale hit me as I walked down the steps towards my seat. At the far end of the ground, a huge screen simply said the word 'Wembley', as though the old stadium knew how intimidating it was, and merely had to state its own name to impress its audience. It certainly worked on me.

By the time the teams came up the famous tunnel an hour later, and with more than 70,000 people packed in, I knew for a fact that England would win. Yes, a fact. If I'd been able to bet everything I owned on a home victory I'd have happily done so. The venue and atmosphere were just so overpowering that I could be 100 per cent certain. In fact, I wondered how anybody could ever beat England in such a setting. I was wrong about that bit, of course.

England duly won 3-0, including a smashing Stuart Pearce free kick right in front of me. But we had already made it tough for ourselves by drawing at home to the Netherlands and losing horribly away to Norway. It meant we had to win away in Rotterdam to give ourselves a realistic chance of qualifying ahead of the Dutch, something we all feared was too tall an order.

In England's sad catalogue of humiliating failures since 1966, that match is up there with the worst of them, all chronicled in *An Impossible Job*. I can see it all now: Ronald Koeman fouling David Platt on the edge of, or possibly

inside, the Dutch penalty area; Taylor screaming for a penalty and a red card; the referee giving neither; the Dutch charging down the free kick; then a free kick to the Dutch on the edge of our box, which Koeman stroked effortlessly into the top corner of the net. 'To the death!' screamed Taylor at his players, as though he was Henry V in a blue tracksuit. But we all knew it was over already. Grim.

Taylor then went into a kind of psychological meltdown, sarcastically thanking the linesman and telling him to pass on the message to the referee that he'd just lost him his job. I never liked Taylor as a manager, and thought him out of his depth, but to see a decent guy utterly humiliated like that was horrible. He resigned shortly afterwards.

That match took place in October 1993, just six weeks after my arrival in London. England had hit rock bottom, failing to qualify for the World Cup for the first time in 16 years, and my life too, as though taking its cue, descended into its own pit. I was already beginning to have nagging doubts about my career choice, and was sinking into something that felt close to depression. Just 18 months earlier, I'd been a regular on Sri Lankan TV, living happily and comfortably in the vibrant colours of the Tropics. And now here I was in a grey bit of London, in a one-bedroom flat with a view over a building site, doing a job that was no more suited to me than the job of a dentist would be to someone with a phobia of open mouths.

To cap it all, the girl I'd started dating in Watford, and who'd also moved to London, dumped me on New Year's Eve of that year, deciding, with good reason, I have to admit, that this other guy she'd met was a better bet.

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The period that followed, from January to May 1994, was the worst of my life. It was only four months, but in London's grey winter I felt out of place, confused and wondering if

I could do something, anything, to turn things round. I couldn't. Only time would heal things. Bit by bit, day by day, and as winter turned slowly to spring, I slowly climbed out of despair.

England football followed my lead, pulling out of the pit of Graham Taylor-induced despondency. And at last, the FA made a sensible choice for manager: the people's choice, Terry Venables. It says something for my healing process that when Venables' first match came around, in early March 1994, a friendly against Denmark, I felt well enough not just to take an interest, but to actually go to Wembley and see it for myself with a couple of mates: Jon, my economist friend from Oxford, and his flat-mate Steve, who later became a regular footy-watching buddy of mine. It was possibly the first time I'd felt able to enjoy something since New Year's Eve.

Our seats were high up in the same stand as the Royal Box, and all eyes, and photographers' lenses, were on Venables himself, as he walked purposefully from the tunnel to the bench, as if to the manor born. If Taylor had made the job look impossible, Venables showed how it should be done. He had a huge personality with natural charisma, and he positively filled the position, owning the stage and giving us England fans, and me in particular, hope, optimism and even expectation. He was only in the job for two and a half years, but in my lifetime, he's right up there in my top four England managers (Eriksson, Capello and Southgate are the other three, though the competition is pretty awful).

This, my second trip to Wembley in a matter of a few months, produced a second win, a David Platt goal, after which he ran towards the crowd, performing a celebratory somersault. It was a friendly match, but there was delight in the stadium, and it really did have that new-beginning feel. Thank God Taylor is out, we all sighed with relief. Thank God Terry is in. And for me, reflecting on the match with

Jon and Steve over a post-match pint or two, I could feel my own despondency finally letting in some light.

* * *

Having failed to qualify for the 1994 World Cup, England's next major tournament wouldn't be until the 1996 Euros. And because England, as hosts, were guaranteed a place in the finals, we had no need to go through the normal qualifying campaign. Venables was free to experiment and shape a new team, without the normal jeopardy that other England managers face in just about every match.

One by one, the great side that had so nearly tasted glory in 1990 was almost entirely dismantled. Waddle, Barnes, Lineker, Beardsley, Butcher, Wright and Walker all left the stage. Platt, Pearce and Gascoigne remained, and were joined by several new faces: Alan Shearer, Teddy Sheringham, Darren Anderton, Paul Ince, Steve McManaman, Gareth Southgate and the Neville brothers. Tony Adams, whom Bobby Robson hadn't even selected for the 1990 World Cup, became captain.

But they all had to sit out the 1994 World Cup in the USA. Actually, 'sitting it out' is a pretty apt expression for my own attitude that summer. A World Cup without England, to me, is like a hamburger without beef. I kept a bored half-hearted eye on it, but if there was an excuse to be somewhere else, I'd take it. I was aware of Maradona's drugs disgrace, the Republic of Ireland's successes in Jack Charlton's final tournament, Germany's woes and, finally, Brazil's penalty shoot-out triumph. But I'm not sure I watched a single match end to end. Not even the final.

I'd somehow managed to escape Burson-Marsteller's healthcare department, where I was neither wanted nor liked, and instead wormed my way into the 'corporate' team instead, where our job was to improve the reputation of major companies like Gardner Merchant (catering) and

Motorola (telecoms). I enjoyed it to a limited extent, and spent a lot of time travelling around the country organising photoshoots showing off Gardner Merchant's catering presence at various events. That took me to places as far flung as the Shetlands, the Inner Hebrides and the Isle of Wight. But frankly, I added nothing in terms of insight or creativity. At best, I was a safe pair of hands.

A year's stint at another London PR company, Scope Communications, followed, where, again, I achieved little, and then in May 1996 I decided I was done with London and applied for a job in Manchester, still wondering, and still doubting, if I had what it took to succeed in PR.

I arrived in Manchester in early June 1996, just a few days before the Euros opener: England v Switzerland. Hope, as ever, was in the air. The sun was shining. And each Friday night, I drove the few hundred miles from Manchester to Newquay to surf with a few of my London friends, whose own journey was only a little less arduous. It was there, in Newquay, that I saw England beat Scotland with Gazza's epic goal, and there, exactly a week later, and in exactly the same pub, saw the victory over Spain on penalties – England's first shoot-out win, and the last for an incredible 22 years.

That took us into the semi-final. Against Germany. Surely, at Wembley, we'd get our revenge for Turin six years earlier?

1992 Euros

- Manager: Graham Taylor
- How far England got: group stage (Sweden and Denmark qualified for the semi-finals)
- Pain factor: 3/10
- 'What if' factor: 3/10
- Unluckiness factor: 3/10
- How well England played: 3/10
- Top villain: Graham Taylor

1994 World Cup qualifying campaign

- Manager: Graham Taylor
- How far England got: did not qualify (the Netherlands topped the group)
- Pain factor: 6/10
- 'What if' factor: 3/10
- Unluckiness factor: 8/10
- How well England played: 4/10
- Top villain: Ronald Koeman

6

1996–2001: Almighty cockups

ANYONE INTERESTED in English football would have found it pretty tough to pick themselves up after Euro 96. It was our time, our tournament, and Gazza had that open net in front of him. Somehow, still, we had found a way to lose. To the bloody Germans again.

The thing, though, about English football, is that however much despair we suffer, there's always another tournament, and new hope. Yes, nagging away in the back of my mind already, at the age of just 28, was that if England had failed to win Euro 96 at home, with all the advantage that entailed, they might indeed never win a major tournament again. But logically, I knew that fate didn't exist. That there was no pre-ordained reason why we couldn't do it. We just needed it to go our way. One day it surely would.

And, fair play, the FA made the right choice of manager to replace Terry Venables, who'd gone off to defend himself in various legal disputes. In came Glenn Hoddle, my favourite player of the 80s, whom Bobby Robson had shamefully wasted as he pursued his obsession with the worthy but inferior Ray Wilkins. Hoddle had done great things with Swindon Town, where he was player-manager, then had a reasonable spell at Chelsea, and he was the obvious man for the job. He had tactical awareness and fresh ideas, inspired by his former boss Arsène Wenger at

Monaco in the late 80s, and while, as time went on, his man-management skills may have been lacking, England under Hoddle looked a whole lot better than any team put out by Graham Taylor just a few years before.

But while England were looking up, my professional life wasn't. For once, those two paths diverged. I loved living in Manchester, and vastly preferred it to London, a city I simply never warmed to. But my working life up north was fairly disastrous. I offered nothing of substance to my various clients, and frankly it's a miracle that the two PR agencies I worked for during my time there carried on paying me. Perhaps they just didn't notice I was there.

I worked to live, decidedly not the other way round. In the evenings I used to either spend time with my brother Stephen and his soon-to-be-wife Camilla – pub quizzes were our thing – or played badminton at a local club. At weekends, I'd shoot down the M6 and M5 to Devon and Cornwall, or head north to the Lake District for a weekend of hill walking.

It couldn't last, of course. Nobody can take a pretty nice salary for very long and fail to deliver. I saw out a year at one company before the whole office closed, and just six months at the next before, in December 1997, wangling my way into an in-house job at ICO, a satellite communications company in London. Yes, it meant being back in the capital, a place that never suited me. But even that was better than facing the daily grind of going into a dreadful little office in Manchester where I wasn't wanted or needed.

By the time I arrived back in the big smoke, Hoddle's England had actually qualified, *ahead of Italy*, for the 1998 World Cup in France. I put that in italics because it is so incredibly rare in my half century of watching England for us to get the better of one of the world's very top footballing nations: Brazil, Argentina, Germany, Spain, France and, yes, the Italians. We even managed to do so despite losing

to them at Wembley in February 97, after Matt Le Tissier had, much to Hoddle's disgust, let on to a mate, who'd let on to the media, that he was in the starting line-up. The element of surprise was therefore lost, as was the match. A beautiful Gianfranco Zola goal was the difference.

But other results went England's way, and come October of that year just as I was packing up in Manchester and moving south, we required only a draw in Rome to qualify at the top of our group. That match must rate among England's best in my lifetime. And yes, it's sad that a 0-0 draw in a mere qualifying match should count among England's best. But that just shows how slim have been our pickings. Compare that with Germany, who've won three World Cups since 1966, as well as three European championships. They don't get too worked up about a draw in a qualifying match.

But England were magnificent that night in Rome's febrile atmosphere. Gascoigne was at his best, supported by Paul Ince and a young David Beckham. Our defence never looked like being breached, until the very last moment when Italy broke up field and sent a header just an inch or so wide of David Seaman's right-hand post. The home fans were already jumping for joy at the prospect of the English net bulging, and my heart missed at least a beat. But, for once, the gods were on our side. The ref blew his whistle, it was all over, and we'd done it in Italy. Hoddle and his coaching team danced with delight, and back in Birmingham, where I'd gone for the weekend, I punched the air in customary fashion, and even rugby-obsessed Mum, who was watching with me, looked rather pleased.

Beating Italy to the top of our qualifying group was a real statement of intent from Hoddle's team, and it meant we went into the 98 finals with genuine expectation (where have you heard that before?). From my point of view, we had as good a team as at any stage in the 20 years since I'd

first started watching. Gazza was going strong, Shearer up front was potent, supported by Sheringham, Beckham was a rising star, and our defence was solid. The tournament itself was going to take place just across the Channel in France, which could hardly be more convenient. And, though I never voted for Tony Blair, and despite Princess Diana's tragic death, there was an undoubtedly fresh cool-Britannia feel in the air. Everything felt hopeful and positive. It was a great time to be alive.

I settled back into my flat in London, which I'd been renting out for the 20 months I'd been in Manchester, and blasted through my 30th birthday with a big celebratory bash at yet another surfing weekend, this time in Croyde, North Devon. It was boozy, hedonistic, physical, and all rather marvellous.

As for work, I found that while I was still no natural at PR, the in-house life, as opposed to the agency world, suited me a bit better. I was billeted into a small team of 'communicators' at ICO, led by the wonderful Michael Johnson, still a great friend, who'd been raised in rural Indiana but then spent his entire working life in Europe, first as an intrepid journalist and then as a PR guy. Despite regarding 'soccer' as 'a game of chance', he did his best to understand its appeal to the rest of us, and has carried on doing so. Now in his late 80s he never fails to send me emails, which purport to be consoling, seconds after England get knocked out of a major tournament.

Also in our little team was my fellow Brummie, Brendan Gallagher, or 'Badger' as we all called him. Badger had Irish heritage and was the spitting image of Saint Patrick, but was as patriotic an Englishman as they come. The trouble was, he was *so* patriotic that he kept promising his young son Ciaran that England would win the World Cup, exasperating the rest of us, who'd ask 'What the hell did you tell him that for?' Badger also invented the phrase

'premature eJOCKulation' to describe the tendency among England and Scotland fans to celebrate too early during matches against each other. Pretty clever, I thought.

Then there was Richard Cheeseman, a West Ham fan, a former journalist from Kent and a phlegmatic, grounded, down-to-earth fellow who kept us all on an even emotional keel as ICO found itself pitched into rough financial waters. He was 'a straight arrow', as Badger called him approvingly, except with football. He told us he'd chain-smoked cigars throughout the 1990 semi-final and felt sick for a week, but wasn't sure if the cause was the cigars or the Germans.

The four of us accompanied each other through the 1997–2000 period, including the 1998 World Cup and 2000 Euros, while riding the dot-com bubble, which finally burst all over us – as did our England dreams.

It was good while it lasted, though. The job took me all over the world, and Michael and I, in particular, were for ever on and off planes to, among other places, Oman, Dubai, Johannesburg, Washington, DC and points throughout Europe. Money was sloshing around at the start, though God knows how these things work, so I always travelled in business class and got accustomed to the taxi-airport-flight-taxi-hotel rhythm. I don't recall doing much meaningful work but then, in the first decade of my working life, that wasn't unusual for me. If I hadn't done anything at all, and frankly, that's not far off what happened anyway, the organisations I worked for wouldn't have been any worse off. But that didn't trouble my conscience at the time.

Come the 1998 World Cup finals, I was starting to realise that my childhood assumption that I'd eventually grow out of my obsession with England was wide of the mark. And when Hoddle left Gascoigne out of the squad on the eve of the tournament, I despaired. Not because Hoddle was wrong (Gazza was obviously not fit enough in body or mind) but because I reckoned that England without

a fit Gazza were far, far less likely to trouble the engravers – whatever Badger had promised Ciaran. Gazza was the star of English teams in the 1990s, as Wayne Rooney would be a decade later. But neither lived up to their huge promise.

So, Paul Scholes took Gazza's place, and I have to admit he played a stonkingly good game, and scored a beauty, in our first match of the tournament, a Friday lunchtime kick-off against Tunisia. Famously, the first words out of the lips of the Beeb's presenter Des Lynam to the viewers that day were 'Shouldn't you be at work?' He said it with a naughtily admonishing air, and it felt as though he was addressing me personally. Because I should have been at work with the rest of the guys. But I'd decided to take the day off and hopped on to the train down to Bournemouth to watch the match, and spend the weekend, with Jon, my economist friend from Oxford, who by now had a lovely flat overlooking the Channel. And when Scholes's shot from the edge of the penalty area curled into the corner of the Tunisian net, I did my normal thing: stood up, punched the air, never mind the beer in my hand, and screeched 'Yes!' (though Jon was spared the hug). It hasn't changed since 1976, minus the beer in those more innocent days.

England were off to a flier. But the trouble is that, in stark contrast to the Germans, for instance, there is no England performance so good that the next match can't be a shocker. And it was. Hoddle again left Beckham out, and a miserable performance saw us lose to Romania. That in turn meant that even a victory against Colombia in our last match (which we duly achieved with a fabulous Beckham free kick) left us second in our group and a far more difficult route through the draw. In fact, it meant a match against a giant: Argentina.

It's a proud record of mine that I have never, in half a century of watching England at major tournaments, missed a knockout match (with one exception, which, in 1998, was

23 years away, and even then, I saw the second half). It is quite simply unthinkable. I couldn't. It's my absolute dread that I might be invited to the wedding of a close friend or family member on the crucial day. It hasn't happened yet, thank God. If it did, I'd just have to make myself very unpopular. England comes first.

So, you can imagine my reaction when Michael asked me to travel to Washington for the week of the second-round ties and cover for a colleague who was away on vacation. His request wasn't made out of ignorance, still less malice. He knew how much the World Cup meant to Badger, Richard and particularly me. In fact, he was trying hard to understand my obsession. But there was simply no alternative – someone had to go to DC, and that someone had to be me.

The trouble was that not only did that mean being away from England when the match took place, but far worse, the kick-off would be at 3pm Eastern time, bang in the middle of the Washington working day.

How did I manage to get back to my hotel room for kick-off? I begged the office MD, and the anguished look in my eyes convinced her that if I was that desperate over some soccer match or other I'd be next to useless hanging around the office. Which I would have been. So, she gave me her blessing, and off I rushed, plonking myself in front of the box in an anonymous hotel room just as the anthems were being sung.

In retrospect, it might have been better had I stayed at work. That match was pure torture from start to finish, not helped by the inane American TV commentary. When I watch my national team, I want the commentator to be English and as horribly one-eyed as I am. I want them to be as desperate for an England victory. I want them to feel the elation of a win and, more often, tragically, the misery of defeat. Back home, Brian Moore was commentating for

ITV. He was perfect. As would have been Motty on the Beeb. But neither were available to me. It was like listening to your favourite Beatles song performed by a karaoke singer, or eating a birthday cake made by a toddler with dirty fingers.

The facts of the match are only too well known. Argentina's early opener. England's equaliser. Owen's stunning solo effort to put us in front. Scholes's horrible miss just before half-time. Argentina's second. Beckham's moment of madness, flicking out his foot at Diego Simeone, whose pantomime collapse to the ground shamed football. The red card. The backs-to-the-wall effort from the English boys, taking the match to penalties. And then, of course, the same old horrible story.

It was late afternoon in Washington when I emerged hollow-eyed and blinking from my torture chamber. Life in the hotel was continuing as though nothing had happened. People were chatting in the corridors; the staff were helping people with their luggage; and coffee was being served – you know, the normal type of hotel activity. I looked at it all with a kind of incredulity. Don't you realise what's just happened? How can you just stand around and chat?

I was utterly alone in my grief. There was nobody to share it with. No consoling beer with friends who felt as I did, like Irena, Steve or Jon, or colleagues like Richard and Badger, or even game-of-chance Michael. No sense of the collective. No WhatsApp to message people. I embarked on a huge hike around the streets and monuments of Washington, playing the key moments – the 'if only' moments – again and again in my mind. Unlike in 1996, when Maradona was clearly capable of beating England on his own, this match was there to be won. But, as usual against the bigger footballing nations, England just didn't have it. Was it a lack of guile? Or killer instinct? Or luck? Whatever, it was 32 years of hurt, and counting.

* * *

The writing was on the wall for Glenn Hoddle. He soldiered on for a few months, and navigated the first few qualifying matches for Euro 2000, including a horrible scoreless draw at Wembley against Bulgaria, which Badger, Ciaran and I were there to see – my third visit to the old stadium. But it felt like the powers that be had him in their sights, and he gave them the perfect excuse when he was quoted on the front page of *The Times* suggesting that disabled people were paying the price for sins committed in a former life. Nice one, Glenn. He resigned in something approaching disgrace.

I felt for him, though. Although his religious views appeared extraordinary (all that faith healing stuff too), he was a good England manager, and had been brought down by a rather sneaky journalistic trick of reporting things that he clearly thought were off the record. Ever since then, I've always told my clients never to make that mistake, and to assume that anything you say to a journalist could be the headline the next day. A quarter of a century on from Hoddle's sad demise, I still use him as a media training case study.

* * *

Kevin Keegan got the England job almost by fluke. He was managing Fulham at the time, and agreed to step in on a purely temporary basis while the FA looked for a permanent successor to Hoddle. But there are few things more intoxicating than power. And Keegan, who had once proclaimed he wanted to be prime minister, got a taste for it, won a couple of games, and agreed to stay on.

The trouble is he wasn't ever up to it, and admitted as much when he resigned 19 months later, having bombed at Euro 2000 and immediately after a horrible loss to the Germans in a World Cup qualifier in the old Wembley's final match, early in 2001.

It's a silly comparison, but I know how it feels to be in a job for which you're not suited. In fact, I was in such a job while Keegan was toiling away to no great effect. At least he had passion, albeit little in the way of tactical nous. I couldn't even claim that. I was average, at best, at my job at ICO, but had no desire to be any good. I just wanted to get by, enjoy the absurd luxury travel and not disgrace myself. It's not so easy for an England football manager, whose every mistake (and by God, Keegan made a few) is picked over endlessly.

But Keegan did give us one wonderful moment, beating the Germans in the group stage of Euro 2000. A late, looping Alan Shearer header settled it. OK, it was a terribly poor German side, with Lothar Matthäus playing one tournament too many, but it was actually our first competitive win over the Germans since 1966.

I'd invited a whole bunch of mates to watch the match in my flat in Hammersmith, and as the clock ticked down, Andrew, my non-footie-following historian friend from Oxford, who joined in that day, decided to play 'Zadok the Priest' at full blast as soon as the referee blew for full time. So, while the rest of England was partying to Oasis, we alone celebrated by singing lustily to lyrics composed by George Frideric Handel in 1727.

But any glory was all terribly short-lived. A few days later, England and Germany both were out. In England's case, we suffered a humiliating defeat for the second time in two tournaments to Romania, caused by an awful Phil Neville clanger. And in Stoke Newington, where I'd watched with Irena, Steve and our friend Suzi, we were unsparing in our complete condemnation of Keegan and his tactics.

Never has a north London curry house heard such foul language in connection with the 4-4-2 formation. Bobby Robson in his later years, Terry Venables and now Hoddle had moved England on from the dark ages and that

straitjacket. And now here was Keegan plonking us right back into them. Goodness knows what he'd have done if he'd ever achieved his dream and become prime minister. I suppose he'd now have Keir Starmer and Angela Rayner as his hapless deputies, with free Brut and bubble perms on the NHS, and endless Green Cross Code public safety films being shown to school children.

Well, the more we drank, the more irate Steve and I became, much to Suzi's and Irena's more sanguine amusement. Beer softened the pain, but morning always brings it back. That loss to Romania counts as one of England's worst in my lifetime – not quite as bad at Iceland 2016, but not far off. Normally, England go out to one of the giants. But Romania? Even now, Steve and I still shake our heads.

* * *

Keegan was on borrowed time after that, and only lasted for a few more months. I, too, was on borrowed time at ICO, and would only last until Christmas. The company was heading for bankruptcy having spent billions on its failed satellite system. The heady days of flying around the world in comfort were coming to an end. But that wasn't all. As we headed into autumn of that year, not only was I on the verge of losing my job, but also my relationship. I'd been dating a colleague who, looks-wise at least, was out of my league. In short, just as in late 1992 in Watford, I was heading for the rocks as the nights were drawing in.

In such circumstances, it's important to take cool-headed decisions. But I did no such thing. First, my job: I applied for and got the role of head of European PR for a tech company called InfoSpace, whose UK office was in Surrey. It was the worst possible job I could have gone for, in an industry (technology) in which I had almost zero interest, doing a job (PR) that I was still poor at, and in

a town (Guildford then Woking) with which I had no association and knew nobody. You'd have thought I'd have learned my lesson by now, that my PR career was going nowhere, propped up only by my ability to interview well and negotiate a good salary. But I hadn't.

So, in January 2001, I took the next step in my early working life, and embarked on the morning commute from Hammersmith to Surrey. At least I was going against the traffic.

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1998 World Cup finals

- Manager: Glenn Hoddle
- How far did England get: second round (beaten by Argentina)
- Pain factor: 8/10
- What if? factor: 5/10
- Unluckiness factor: 8/10
- How well did England play: 7/10
- Top villain: Diego Simeone

2000 Euros

- Manager: Kevin Keegan
- How far did England get: group stage (Portugal and Romania qualified for the knockouts)
- Pain factor: 5/10
- What if? factor: 2/10
- Unluckiness factor: 2/10
- How well did England play: 4/10
- Top villain: Phil Neville

7

2001–2006: Sven

ENGLAND, TOO, were going against the flow, with the FA departing from its normal habits by appointing a foreign coach. Now that Sven-Göran Eriksson has died, people are starting to be generous about him. But they certainly weren't 20 years ago. In fact, I often felt in a minority of one in backing him and respecting the job he was doing for us.

In my opinion, he is the second-best England manager of the last half-century, after Gareth Southgate. He qualified for every tournament (something that was beyond Don Revie, Bobby Robson, Graham Taylor, Steve McClaren and even, though I was too young to witness it, Alf Ramsey), got to the knockout stage in each and was only finished off in two of those three by the dreaded shoot-out. He was also desperately unlucky with injuries, though he's not alone in that, and finished with a better win ratio than everyone else who'd gone before. Not too shoddy. For a foreigner.

Most of all, Sven was a gentleman. He took all the abuse that was thrown his way by England fans and media with good grace, never once, to my recollection, firing back, and always expressed himself in that wonderfully refined and articulate manner, even though English wasn't his native tongue. I liked him from the start and have the fondest memories.

For some fans, however, his unforgivable sin was to be Swedish. The England manager should be English, they'd loudly declare. But why, I'd ask them. Why not just go for the best man for the job? OK, the players have to be English. Of course they do. It's not like we can sign up Zinedine Zidane. But why can't we just pay the best person, whatever their nationality, to manage them? Two decades later, when the English women's team, managed by the superb Dutch woman, Sarina Wiegman, won the European Championship twice and also got to the World Cup Final, nobody gave two hoots about her country of birth.

But even now parochialism resides just beneath the surface. When Thomas Tuchel became England boss in late 2024, his appointment provoked an immediate barrage of criticism, often from surprising sources, like Gary Lineker, who's hardly the definition of a Little Englander. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that wanting an Englishman for the England job is one of the few issues on which many people like Nigel Farage and Gary Lineker are often united. But, please, leave me out of it.

And if it's bad now you can imagine how much worse it was back in 2001 when Sven got the job. The media tried to undermine him in his very first press conference by asking him nasty gotcha questions, like, 'Who's Sunderland's left-back?' Of course, poor old Sven hadn't got a clue, and why should he? He'd never managed in England before and probably didn't know where Sunderland was. His ignorance on such matters was entirely forgivable, if you ask me, and the questioning all too typical of the way we English are happy to shoot ourselves in the foot by undermining the manager before the first ball has been kicked. No wonder we never win.

Anyhow, gentleman Sven shrugged it all off and quickly silenced the critics by being good at his job. Whereas Kevin

Keegan always looked like one defeat away from a nervous breakdown, Sven immediately brought confidence to the team, and throughout his time as boss there was a feeling among England supporters that we'd never really had post-66: that we could actually win something.

That feeling reached its zenith in Munich on 1 September 2001. If you ask England fans of my vintage for their five greatest England performances, the 5-1 victory over the Germans will always feature. It wasn't just the result, but the manner of it. We actually deserved that stupid scoreline. It was also a gorgeous, early autumn afternoon in London, and I watched the match with Irena, Suzi and my Kiwi friend and colleague Thurl in a fine, light and bright pub on Upper Street, Islington.

The latest generation of England fans – those born, say, after about 2005 – don't fear the Germans. That's because they haven't been hurt. They are too young to recall the trauma of 2010 and weren't alive for 1970, 1982, 1990 and 1996. Nor, unless they remember 2014, have they seen Germany win a trophy.

So, it's difficult to describe to them just how unexpected any victory was against the Germans in those days, let alone in a World Cup match away in Munich. We were so accustomed to losing that most of us would have bitten your hand off for a draw, especially when the Germans took an early lead. But from that moment on, England's young guns just blew them away. Michael Owen stole the headlines with his lethal hat-trick, but everyone played their part, and the midfield of Paul Scholes, Steven Gerrard and David Beckham looked world class.

For all the pain of following England since 1976, there are days that, while not quite making it all worthwhile, at least give huge temporary relief. Well, my cup of temporary relief was overflowing that afternoon. I didn't cry with the emotion of it all (I've only done that once with England,

and that was still 17 years away) but I was pretty delirious. As were two of my three mates in that Islington pub.

Thurl, being a Kiwi, joined in, without his heart being quite in it – he was, after all, quite used to the All Blacks winning just about every time they picked up an oval ball, and was a bit taken aback that England football fans regard beating a nation like Germany as something quite miraculous. But Suzi, Irena and I were beside ourselves with incredulity, more so as each goal went in, hugging, kissing, high-fiving strangers etc. The normal footie fan stuff, which only footie fans understand.

And there was Sven, sitting on the bench watching it all with an expression of cool satisfaction, as though the whole thing had panned out exactly as he'd expected. He really did have the Midas touch that day, and we wondered whether at long last the years of hurt – 35 years and counting – might finally be coming to an end. Sven was the man. It was glorious.

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We obsessive fans are, I hope, self-aware enough to appreciate that we can appear barmy to everyone else. Yes, to us, of course, the whole world revolves around the big match, on which we are 100 per cent focussed, living each moment, each thrust forward, each misdirected pass and, most of all, each goal. A bomb could go off, and we probably wouldn't blink. In fact, Irena had her phone nicked that very afternoon during the match, something that would drive many people potty, yet she just shrugged it off. But we must accept that other people are not just ambivalent, but, strange to say, often don't care at all. Some aren't even aware that a match might be happening. I know, weird, eh?

So it was that day. When Owen's third goal hit the back of the net, and the four of us were doing our little dance of celebration, with Thurl suddenly finding himself drenched

with beer from my glass (I'd suffered a momentary loss of motor control), I caught sight of a woman across the bar from us gazing in bemusement. She nudged her companion, nodded in our direction and raised a nostril that clearly said, 'Look at that lot. What the fuck?'

What indeed? How could a bit of leather hitting a net several hundred miles away in Munich transport us, in an Islington pub, into raptures of delight so intense that we were driven to perform an impromptu dance in public and spray beer over ourselves. It made no sense. Unless you were a fan. In which case it was the most obvious and natural thing that ever happened.

Sod her, I thought to myself. If she can't recognise the enormity of this moment, then more fool her. We've just thrashed the Germans in their own back yard. Deal with it.

* * *

There was a particular innocence to that day for another reason. Just a week and a half later our television sets showed two planes flying straight into the World Trade Center in Manhattan, and the whole world – not just the one occupied by England fans – rocked on its axis. For the previous decade we'd allowed ourselves to believe in the end of history, the victory of western values and a peaceful and ever-more prosperous world. How fitting that such a delusion should be ended just when England had smashed Germany.

Because the end of history and England's success against the Germans were both false dawns. To me, always one to link football to the wider zeitgeist (a useful German word), it felt like the gods were warning me not to get ahead of myself. Aha, they were telling me. You thought it was all a bed of roses now, didn't you? Well, think again sucker!

Think again we did. We had to, in every sense. On 9/11 we entered a new age of wars, terrorism and insecurity. Even

I, for whom even a general election played second fiddle to a World Cup qualifier against Greece, had to admit that for once football was overshadowed by much bigger things.

It was also the moment, from a British point of view, when Tony Blair's premiership reached its high point. Most people supported the west's intervention in Afghanistan in the months after 9/11, but Iraq was a whole different ball game and sowed the seeds of Blair's eventual downfall. The era of Cool Britannia, long since sickening, faded away with him.

In fact, Blair's and Eriksson's popularity followed a similar trajectory: initial all-conquering triumph followed by a slow decline to eventual ignominious exit. Germany 1 England 5 was Sven's high point. It was such a staggering result that nothing he could do afterwards, short of winning the World Cup, could come close to matching it. Inevitably then, those years from 2001 to 2006 followed a well-trodden path. For all their promise under Sven, and I write as a big fan, England never properly delivered.

But what the fans lost on the pitch, they gained in colourful reports of Eriksson's private life, recounted with relish by the tabloids, and lapped up by the public regardless of any interest in football. The average *Sun* reader may or may not have cared whether England lost another penalty shoot-out, but they were utterly engrossed in the news of the latest celebrity Eriksson had managed to bed.

Except me. I've more faults and failings than I care to mention, but I have never been remotely bothered by or interested in the private shenanigans of England managers or players. Eriksson could sleep with three different women each night, for all I cared. Perhaps he did. But as long as his team did the business on the pitch, his sexual predilections were of no concern to me whatsoever.

And that's remained my position. On the eve of the 2024 Euros a friend asked me whether I thought Kyle

Walker should be dumped from the England side because of his apparently unconventional private life. I had no idea what he was on about, and even when I did a quick Google search to find out, I still didn't care. I don't expect Walker, or any other player to be a paragon of probity and virtue. That's not what they're there for. Just sing the anthem and win.

But clearly, I'm in a minority. Because millions of people pay to read about the latest scandal involving players and, more often, managers. Bobby Robson came in for tonnes of abuse in the 80s for his extra-curricular activities. And, to his obvious dismay, exactly the same thing happened to Eriksson 20 years later.

Sven subsequently admitted that he was taken aback by this English fascination with his love life, especially as he wasn't married and obviously didn't care much about the woman who was considered his partner, Nancy Dell'Olio. Nobody worried about this in Italy, he wrote, which, to me, just makes Italy a more sensible, grown-up place.

Someone should have warned him that when you become England manager, all aspects of your life become fair game. Perhaps someone did, and he ignored it. Either way, his flings with Ulrika Jonsson and Faria Alam were splashed across the front pages. And looking back at Sven's tenure, I dare say that's what many people now remember. Not Ronaldinho's apparent mishit in 2002, which flew over David Seaman's despairing hand. Not Wayne Rooney breaking his metatarsal (which became the most famous bone in the human body for a while) in the 2004 Euros. And not Rooney being sent off in 2006, aided and abetted by the dastardly Cristiano Ronaldo.

No, most people don't remember any of that. But Sven bedding Ulrika? Cor, yes! And that would be followed by 'good on ya, Sven', 'you dirty old man' or 'what the hell was she thinking?' depending on your point of view.

* * *

Unlike Sven, I started sorting my life out. And I needed to, because by 2002 I'd come to the conclusion that I was going in the wrong direction. I was in the wrong relationship (another one), the wrong job and living in the wrong place. And I set out to change all three with a determination and lack of sentimentality that, looking back, I'm quite appalled by. But it worked. Over the next three years, I gave up my job in Woking, started my own business (communication training and editorial services, often working with Michael, Badger and Richard from ICO), fell in love and got married, and moved from my small maisonette in Hammersmith to a lovely but tatty old cottage in Kent.

Those decisions not only completely changed my life massively for the better, but laid the foundations for everything that's happened to me in the two decades since. I still run that business, still live in that cottage, a bit less tatty now, and am still in love with and married to that wonderful woman.

In short, perhaps a little belatedly, in my mid-30s, I got real. Of course, you might expect and even hope that I also stopped obsessing so much about the England football team. You'd expect me, better late than never to grow up a bit and start putting the game, however beautiful, into some sort of perspective. Whatever Bill Shankly said, football isn't, surely, quite that important. Not when compared with love and livelihood.

Yet, as any football fan knows, it's never that easy. We even reckon Shankly might have been right. And that's despite the fact that my business, which I set up in 2003, was far from an instant, rip-roaring success and needed my full attention. I've heard about people, damn them, who come up with a bright idea, set up a company to exploit it, and within about five years walk away with £50m.

Well, they are obviously the Lionel Messis of the business world. I'm more of a Carlton Palmer or a Gareth Barry. In those days, even with the considerable help of Michael, Badger and Richard, I had to flog my guts out to make a half-decent living, constantly buffeted, on the one hand, by having too much business, requiring me to work, literally, all night long, and on the other, not having nearly enough, when weeks would go by and I earned practically nothing. The former was intensely stressful, and the latter induced something akin to grief. When you're self-employed, the experience of going through a barren patch, sometimes lasting months, is hideous. Like England-losing-a-knockout hideous.

Thank goodness the global economy was generally in a healthy state during that period. The financial crash was still a few years away, and I managed, somehow or other, to ride the peaks and see off the troughs, and keep things going.

It was tough, though. Horrid at times. Yet, despite all that England football remained an object of focus every bit as crucial as making ends meet each month. And it might even have intruded into one of life's most crucial events if, by happy coincidence, I hadn't got married in an odd year, 2005, with no World Cup or Euros. The thought of a penalty shoot-out just as we were saying our vows still makes me shudder.

* * *

After Munich, England fans remained full of unwarranted positivity about impending glory through the rest of the year. Beckham's free kick against Greece at Old Trafford sealed first spot in the group, ahead of the Germans, and while in truth we were lucky to escape with a draw that afternoon, the orgasmic sensation as the ball hit the back of the net just as the match appeared to be drifting away was one of my all-time top England moments.

The World Cup the following summer felt doubly special and celebratory as it coincided with the Queen's Golden Jubilee. Those were still the days when the overwhelming majority of the British population not only supported the monarchy but adored it. So, all was sunny and tickety-boo, and England did their bit by getting through the group stage, including a fabulous victory against the disbelieving Argentinians, then a 3-0 thumping of the Danes in the first knockout round (I watched in the Queen's Head in Islington with Suzi and Irena, and fans were dancing on the bar at half-time with a cardboard cutout of the World Cup). The sun was shining, the world felt wonderful and for a couple of weeks, Britain was clearly the best country on earth.

Then the Brazilians brought it all crashing down on a frightful Friday. Talk about taking the air out of our sunny, summery balloon.

Kick-off was morning UK time, and it was my job, still employed at InfoSpace in Woking at that stage, to ensure that colleagues who wanted to see the match could do so in relative comfort in a pub in the centre of town. I may have achieved nothing else during my 30 months in that company, but I tackled that little project with energy, commitment, passion and, I have to say, no little success. Not only did I score two rows of seats right in front of the big screen, but said seats were in fact lovely armchairs with beer holders on each arm. Get in!

And for 40 minutes, it looked like England might reach their first World Cup semi-final for 12 years. I did my normal stand-up-punch-the-air-hug-my-neighbour routine when we took a first-half lead through Owen (Thurl, who got dragged into watching England play thanks only to his friendship with me, was spared the beer drenching this time). But, of course, it wasn't to be. It never was against the world's biggest teams. Brazil equalised on the stroke of half-

time. Beckham, who'd broken his metatarsal just before the tournament, started struggling. Then Ronaldinho ballooned one, surely by accident, over Seaman and into the net.

We all traipsed back to our office thoroughly demoralised, and my triumph at scoring those front-row seats didn't look too clever after all. 'We needed Churchill and instead got Iain Duncan-Smith,' remarked one nonplussed England player reflecting on Sven's half-time team talk.

Poor Sven. Less than a year after Munich and his Midas touch was well and truly gone. Brazil went on to lift their fifth World Cup, beating Germany in the final. Yes, for all England's heroics in that 5-1 victory, the Germans went two rounds further.

* * *

Well, there's always another tournament. And few players have created such excitement and expectation as Wayne Rooney, who burst on to the scene after 2002 and reignited our hopes – something always does, of course – in the run-up to the Euros in Portugal in 2004. The World Cup had ended in grief, but the team was playing well, we sauntered through the qualifying campaign and, as we approached the Euros, we felt we were a match for anyone. We had an inspirational captain in Beckham, some world-class players, including Rooney, and, for once, everyone was fit. Only the goalkeeper was a worry, with David Seaman having retired, replaced by the athletic but accident-prone David James. If not now, when? we asked, with some justification.

It started well. Inspired by Rooney, England eased past group-stage opponents Croatia and Switzerland, and took the lead in their first match against the fancied French, before Beckham missed a penalty and we blew ourselves up in the last few minutes, conceding twice. I watched

the whole tragedy unfurl with Irena, Suzi, Tracey and two Simons in a pub in Brook Green near Hammersmith.

Simon One, a fiercely intelligent computer programmer, had never seen a live football match before, but was swept along by it all and before half-time was already telling me why Eriksson's tactics needed to change. Incredibly, he ended up being right. Simon Two, a pub quiz enthusiast, also as bright as a button, tried to keep my spirits up later with some admittedly engaging footy trivia, like 'Did you know that Aston Villa and Southampton are the only teams in the Premiership whose name contains none of the letters from the word referee?' and 'Which Charlton Athletic player has a name made up of the names of two Thunderbird characters?' (Answer: Scott Parker.)

None of this, however, stopped me feeling physically ill, as I usually do after a big England loss. But it was nothing compared with the sheer horror of the quarter-final against hosts Portugal a week later (I was back in the same Brook Green pub with the same group of friends), a match we could, should and, I believe, would have won, if only Rooney hadn't broken his foot in the first half. Even Simon One couldn't have predicted that. Why then, Wayne? Why then?

Inevitably, it went to a penalty shoot-out. Fans of other countries, I'm told, go into those events assuming they have a 50-50 chance, as, in theory at least, they do. German supporters start opening the champagne. And English fans? A mix of desperation and fatalism overcomes us. It's like we know we need to throw a double six – not impossible, but still a long shot. 'Miss, miss, miss!' roared the fans around me, including both Simons, as each Portuguese player stepped up. One did. But so did two of ours. Once again, and to no one's surprise, but everyone's horror, we were out.

By now Sven was on borrowed time but was allowed one more tournament to bring home glory. The 2006 World Cup had been targeted for years by the FA and

everyone connected with the England team. But the gods of football care nothing for targets. Owen got injured playing for Newcastle and struggled even to reach the tournament. He never looked fit, and another freak injury halfway through a group game did it for him. Without him, England laboured and only just managed to get through to another quarter-final, again against Portugal, by now with Cristiano Ronaldo the star of the team. A moment of madness saw Rooney red-carded. An exhausted Beckham came off injured. Another penalty shoot-out, and another loss.

I watched in a pub just to the east of Upper Street, Islington, with Irena, Suzi and Steve. It's always crushing when England lose, but this one felt particularly grisly. The golden generation had reached its peak yet had been knocked out in the quarters again. Winning a penalty shoot-out any time soon seemed like an absurdity – a psychological brick wall that England were always destined to run straight into. As usual, we could feel cheated, this time by Ronaldo's sneaky part in Rooney's sending off, with the most infamous wink in sporting history.

And, worse, from my point of view, Sven was going. Not only that, but he was replaced by Steve McClaren, in whom I can't recall anyone having any faith. I certainly didn't. It felt like we were entering a dark age.

Returning on the train to Kent that night I grieved at another missed chance and felt a nagging fear, resignation even, that we mightn't have such an opportunity to reach the latter stage of a tournament for many years. Success at Euro 2008, with McClaren at the helm, seemed crushingly unlikely. The fact that some people were arguing violently with each other on the train, God only knows what about, made it even worse.

Meanwhile, building my own company, by then three years old, was taking it out of me, with breakthrough success

no more probable than England successfully converting five penalties. I too was working like mad only to get knocked out in my equivalent of the quarter-final. I loved my wife and loved living in Kent. But, as far as business was going, I was merely keeping my head above water.

* * *

2002 World Cup finals

- Manager: Sven-Göran Eriksson
- How far England got: quarter-final (beaten by Brazil)
- Pain factor: 8/10
- 'What if' factor: 5/10
- Unluckiness factor: 7/10
- How well England played: 7/10
- Top villain: Beckham's metatarsal

2004 Euros

- Manager: Sven-Göran Eriksson
- How far England got: quarter-final (beaten by Portugal)
- Pain factor: 7/10
- 'What if' factor: 5/10
- Unluckiness factor: 5/10
- How well England played: 7/10
- Top villain: Rooney's metatarsal

2006 World Cup finals

- Manager: Sven-Göran Eriksson
- How far England got: quarter-final (beaten by Portugal)
- Pain factor: 9/10

- 'What if' factor: 5/10
- Unluckiness factor: 5/10
- How well England played: 6/10
- Top villain: Cristiano Ronaldo

8

2006–2012: The FA messes up – twice

THERE HAVE been some mediocre England managers. Graham Taylor and Kevin Keegan spring to mind. But even they managed to qualify for a major tournament. Steve McClaren didn't. Tried once. Failed once. He's therefore right at the bottom of my league table of all England managers.

In truth, he should never have got the job in the first place, and only did so because the FA, after a brief flirtation with Portugal's manager Luiz Felipe Scolari, apparently decided they wanted an English, or at least British, manager, of whom there weren't any standout candidates. Personally, I thought Martin O'Neill (Northern Irish) was the best choice using that criterion, but it was reported that the FA weren't impressed by him at interview. And McClaren had the advantage that he knew the players, having been Sven-Göran Eriksson's number two.

Yet Eriksson didn't think his deputy up to the job, put off by what he saw as McClaren's arrogance in assuming that he could take the team further than he himself had. Unusually for such a gentleman, Sven included a cutting line about that in his autobiography. 'As if,' he wrote. Ouch.

McClaren did come across as arrogant. Just about the first thing he did was to drop David Beckham, not just from the captaincy but from the entire squad. He was clearly

intent on stamping his authority on the team, but there are better ways to do so than to demote a guy who was still not only the best crosser of a ball in world football, but utterly passionate about playing for and captaining his country. If you asked Beckham to choose between club and country, the latter would triumph every time. And, sadly, there aren't too many like that around.

We've all heard that being England manager is the 'impossible job'. Well, the incumbents could make it an awful lot easier by not taking such rank decisions. I mean, was there anyone else in the entire country who wanted Becks dropped? I thought it was mad, and reckon history vindicated me.

But Steve knew best. Or so he thought. And England embarked on a qualifying campaign without Beckham for the first time in a decade. It didn't take long for it all to start going wrong.

* * *

The latter half of the 2000s was a great period. My wife and I loved living in Kent, only had ourselves to worry about, and while business continued to be a rollercoaster ride, particularly once the economy started crashing in 2008, I look back at that period with nostalgic fondness. We were young. We were free. We were happy.

Actually, it would be truer to say that my wife was young, while I was approaching middle age, and hit 40 early in 2008. For someone who had worried how old he was getting at 23, this was clearly a major negative development.

And I was still to see a team of mine win a trophy. Imagine if I'd been born a Bayern Munich and Germany fan, with my first memory of football in 1974. By 2008, I'd have seen my club win a stonking 17 German championships, nine German Cups, four Champions Leagues/European Cups and one UEFA Cup. As for my national side, I'd have

witnessed my country winning two World Cups and two European Championships. What it amounts to is that by 2008, at the age of 40, my counterpart in Munich would have enjoyed seeing his teams win no fewer than 36 major trophies, more than one a year.

Me? Zero. Zip. Zilch. And as I write 18 years later, it still is, while the German guy has continued to rake in his winnings. It's not surprising, when put like that, first, I believe in football gods and secondly, they clearly have it in for me.

For anyone who thinks I might be talking garbage, consider this: my club side, West Brom, won six major trophies in the 90 years between their founding in 1878 and their last FA Cup win in the year I was born, 1968. That's a major trophy every 15 years. In the subsequent 58 years they've won precisely nothing.

See what I mean?

* * *

In the European Championship qualifiers of 2006 and 2007, England stuttered and underwhelmed, only managing dreadful draws against Macedonia at home and Israel away, and losing away against both the group's other bigger teams, Croatia and Russia.

Still, come our final group match, we were in the frame and favourites to advance to the finals in second place ahead of Russia. We just had to win. All right, it was against group leaders Croatia. But, surely, at Wembley, in front of close to 90,000 fans, we'd triumph.

In desperation and perhaps a belated admission that he'd got it wrong, McClaren had completed an almighty U-turn earlier that year by bringing Beckham back into the squad, but plonked him on the bench for the Croatia match and also put the inexperienced Scott Carson in goal. By half-time Carson had spilled one into the net, England

had conceded another and we were staring humiliation in the face. It was just like Poland in 73 all over again, a match, thank goodness, I was too young to see.

Better late than never, Beckham came on, and the former captain manufactured a recovery, with England scoring twice to level. But Croatia scored their third in the last few minutes, and with the rain pouring down, and England destined for defeat, McClaren stood forlornly on the sidelines underneath – wait for it – a red and blue umbrella.

To be fair to him, he'd have been pilloried whatever he'd done. But an umbrella was the very worst option. The next day, courtesy of the *Daily Mail*, he became the 'wally with the brolly', a tag that has stuck to him ever since.

So striking an image was this that anyone in the public eye has since chosen to get completely soaked than risk similar ridicule. When Rishi Sunak, a full 16 years later, stepped out of 10 Downing Street and strode towards a lectern in the torrential rain to fire the starting gun for the 2024 general election, he stood there unprotected, with water cascading down his face, rather than risk any association with McClaren's 2007 humiliation (at least, that's what I assume, as Sunak follows football). And he was right. Sunak made many errors during that campaign, not least asking a bunch of Welsh people if they were looking forward to the Euros, a tournament for which their team hadn't qualified, but refusing a brolly wasn't one of them.

I watched the Croatia match with growing despair and horror at home and later tuned into Radio 5 Live's *606* football phone-in show. For the first time I phoned in myself, intending to make the very sensible (I thought) point that McClaren's failure put Eriksson's record in a far better light, and that all those who'd been calling for the Swede's head just 18 months earlier should reflect and, in future, be careful what they wished for. But the switchboards were

jammed with thousands of irate fans, and I never got on air. Which somehow summed it all up.

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Might it actually have been a good thing for me, in retrospect, that McClaren's England failed to qualify? At the time I didn't think so. But it meant I could enjoy the next summer without the emotional turmoil of England getting knocked out of a major tournament. This had only happened to me three times before, in 1978, 1984 and 1994. And while that summer of 2008 lacked the excitement of the build-up, as well as the hope that England might finally win and the adrenaline surge that always accompanies a knockout match, it also meant I was saved from the eventual agony of defeat and the horrible grief that would follow.

My experience is that the further you go in a tournament, the higher you climb, the harder you fall and the more it hurts. Logically, I could therefore save myself a whole lot of heartache if England never qualified for a major tournament. Or never won a single match. But logic and obsession make poor bedfellows.

I can't recall a moment of the entire Euro 2008 finals. Who actually won in the end? I needed to look it up. Spain beat Germany 1-0 in the final, a match I'm pretty sure I didn't watch, and, if I did, have no recollection of. Which just goes to show that football itself doesn't interest me. If I have no skin in the game, I'm not that bothered. But if England are playing, nothing, and I really do mean that, matters more for those 90 minutes or so.

But while you could argue whether or not it was good for me, and other England fans, to miss out on the 2008 Euros, it was definitely terrific for the team. Because if you appoint a dud as manager, it's better to dump him as soon as possible. McClaren's failure to qualify (and he was sacked the day after the Croatia match) meant he was at the

helm for just 15 months. Other than Sam Allardyce, who lasted just one game, and one or two caretakers, his tenure is the shortest among all England managers ever. And thank goodness for that.

So, yes, England missed out on the Euros, which given the strength of English club football at that stage (Manchester United and Chelsea played each other in the final of the 2008 Champions League) was a colossal failure. But it forced the FA to look globally for a world-class manager without the self-defeating notion that the man must be English.

Step forward Fabio Capello.

It was more a relief than anything else. McClaren was, in my view, so out of his depth, with results to match, that to see a man become England manager who'd won seven league titles with AC Milan and Real Madrid, as well as a Champions League, and who'd managed some of the world's very best players, was just an almighty comfort.

Capello oozed presence, credibility, authority and charisma. He couldn't have been more different as a person than ice-cool Sven, but I liked him equally, right from the get-go. If our players needed a lift, all they had to do was to glance at the touchline and see that Italian colossus on their side, urging them on. I reckon he was worth a goal a game.

So, whereas McClaren lost his two qualifiers to Croatia home and away, Capello had no such problem against the same opposition, winning both ties with ease. In fact, England's qualifying record for the 2010 World Cup was played ten, won nine. That's what you get when you employ footballing royalty.

* * *

But while England the football team was cruising between 2008 and 2010 under Capello, England the country, as well as Britain as a whole, entered one of the deepest economic

recessions ever. The first sign of trouble was the run on Northern Rock the previous autumn. Then in September 2008 came the collapse of Lehman Brothers. That long period of end-of-history prosperity, starting in around 1992, was reaching its conclusion. Tony Blair had got out just in time, and it was now Gordon Brown's job to keep us all secure and, in his own unfortunate words, 'save the world'.

My little business was no more immune to the movement of these vast economic tectonic plates than anyone else's, and as we moved from 2008 into 2009, I could feel myself entering sticky territory. Despite the best efforts of Richard and Badger, with whom I was still collaborating, the summer of 2009 was awful, the kind of dry period that could well have sunk me had I not, since a young child, been a saver not a spender. And certainly not a gambler. Yes, that was never going to make me rich quick, but it saved me from being pitched into the red.

Which was a good job, as I was to become a father, bang in the middle of the World Cup in South Africa.

Now, I know what some might be thinking. How on earth could a football obsessive time the most major of life events so catastrophically badly? To which all I can say is I'm not absolutely sure. But it did at least mean that while business was pretty slow, and while the world was experiencing an economic heart attack, I not only had the World Cup to look forward to, but fatherhood. It doesn't get better than that. When England crashed out, as they undoubtedly would at some stage, I'd have the world's best consolation. So perhaps my timing wasn't so bad after all.

Anyway, England arrived in South Africa full of the normal excitement and hope, and I agreed to meet Irena in a pub in Farringdon for the first match, a late-afternoon kick-off against the USA. As any serious England fan knows, the US had, way back in 1950, inflicted on England its most humiliating defeat ever (until 2016), winning 1-0 against a

team including such luminaries as Alf Ramsey, Billy Wright and Tom Finney. Legend has it that some journalists back in England mistakenly assumed that a '1' had been missed off the scoreline and that it should have read that England had actually scored '10'. That may or may not be true – I frankly doubt it – but the result was, in any case, an almighty shock, and one that the England players of 2010 were no doubt aware of.

Nevertheless, in our Farringdon pub, Irena and I were in the best of spirits. I was training a client that afternoon, so arrived just after the match had begun, and was at the bar buying a drink for us both when Gerrard scored a beauty; 1-0 England. Surely, with all our quality players (Wayne Rooney, Frank Lampard, Ashley Cole and John Terry were also on the pitch) we were on our way to a comfortable victory.

But there is no 'surely' when it comes to England. And if anything can go horribly wrong, out of nowhere, it quite often does. I'm not sure I was even looking when Clint Dempsey hit a tame shot towards Rob Green in the England goal. Perhaps Green wasn't either, because somehow he allowed the ball to slip through his hands and roll slowly into the net, a howler he's never lived down. Nor should he. This was the World Cup, for God's sake.

'Agggghhh!' cried just about everyone around me. 'Agghhh! What the fuck's he's done? Green, you fuckwit! Fucking hell! Fuck, fuck, fuck! Agggh!' Feet were stamped. Glasses were smashed. The air was blue. Everyone was united in the view that Rob Green was the dumbest human being who ever did live. Me? I could do no more than glance at Irena and shake my head. We both felt the same way. It was awful, but also somehow not that surprising.

Green's calamity seemed to knock the stuffing out of his team-mates and England never looked like forcing a winner. It ended in a draw, and we were already up against it. The next match was just as bad – goalless with Algeria

amid loud boos from the fans, much to Wayne Rooney's disgust – before the team finally got the bit between its teeth and achieved a narrow win in the final group match against Slovenia.

So, we qualified for the knockout stages. But only behind the USA. And that meant a second-round winner-takes-all tie against, you guessed it, Germany.

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My wife was heavily pregnant, of course, so I was in no doubt that, however important the match, I should break my normal habit with knockouts and watch at home. No good being stuck in Farringdon drinking beer when the balloon went up. So I settled down in front of the TV with hope but, unlike my wife, little expectation. I'd been stung far too many times before.

In theory, England should have been a good match for the young Germans, still four years away from their peak. And to this day I believe that we could and perhaps would have won were it not for the second of two massive injustices in my lifetime. The first, and still the biggest, was of course Maradona's handball in 86, which might never be surpassed. But Lampard's disallowed goal, which would have tied the match at 2-2 going in at the interval, comes pretty close.

The ball was over the line not just by an inch, but by a foot. I saw it, the players saw it, the commentators saw it, the crowd in the stadium saw it, everyone saw it. Except, it seems, the referee. And who was he? A Uruguayan, Jorge Larrionda, who'd previously been suspended by his own football association for what were apparently unspecified irregularities amid rumours of corruption. Unbelievable. Realising with raw horror that the goal had been disallowed, I bellowed at the TV set and lashed out at the floor, slapping my hand so hard that I was bruised for weeks. My wife looked at me with helpless sympathy.

I'm no conspiracy theorist, and reckon the officials' failure to award Lampard his goal was merely profound incompetence. And FIFA seemed to agree, deciding not to select Larrionda and his two assistants for any other matches that tournament and starting the process to examine and eventually introduce goal-line technology. It was all too late for Lampard and England, though. The Germans scored twice in the second half as we chased the game, running out 4-1 winners. That remains, in my lifetime, the only time England have lost a knockout match by more than a single goal. But it made it no easier to take.

* * *

The first week after an England knockout defeat, particularly at the hands of the Germans, is hell on earth. I don't sleep properly. I can't work properly. I can socialise properly only with fellow mourning obsessives, of whom there are precious few in my league. Several days in, and I'm still running key events over and over in a ghastly loop.

Moving on within such a timeframe is usually not just difficult, but impossible, and of course I know that makes me massively weird. Normal people don't behave like that. Football fans I meet in business are able to discuss the match with an air of detachment and even humour just a day later. Even the players seem to shrug it all off. Lampard, for example, was pictured a couple of days later smiling away at a birthday bash in London for the tennis star, Boris Becker. That's the *German* tennis star, Boris Becker. It was as though nothing had happened. Well done, Frank. You're clearly a more grounded, rounded man than I am. Not difficult, I admit.

What's needed, of course, is a major distraction. And it couldn't get much more major than becoming a father, less than a fortnight after the match. It was of course the best thing that had ever happened to me, bar none (after

all, I've never seen England lift a trophy). But it also had the happy effect of diluting the memory of Lampard's disallowed goal.

So, whereas I still, to this day, agonise over Keegan's miss in 82, Maradona's cheating in 86, Gazza's yellow card in 90 and so on, the Lampard injustice has faded, as though muffled by painkillers or far too much booze. Yes, it was horrific and a disgrace to world football. But its timing, for me at least, was fortuitous.

Fatherhood took priority by a mile, and just as in 1990 to 1992, when I was in Sri Lanka, the 2010 to 2012 period was one where England came second. Having kids is the best, but by heavens it was exhausting. I sometimes turned up for a day of communication training having had no sleep at all. Keeping the business going and the money coming in while supporting my wife, who was awesome, as best I could, and doing all I could to be a hands-on dad left almost no time for anything else. Not even football. Not even England.

I did, though, watch the final few matches of Capello's reign, and our successful qualification for Euro 2012. There were few alarms, and I still supported him, seeing him as completely blameless for the German defeat. But I wasn't gripped by the whole thing with quite my usual intense compulsion. I became, if you like, more normal.

As a result, I wasn't as aware as I would typically be that Capello's reign was in danger of coming to an abrupt end. It took me completely by surprise. Yes, I knew about the kerfuffle over John Terry, our captain, and the alleged racially abusive language he'd used towards Anton Ferdinand, brother of his England colleague Rio. I knew that Terry's position as captain was in danger. But it never occurred to me that the FA might actually force Capello's hand. Quite rightly, Capello regarded any decisions over the captaincy to be his alone. But the FA had made its mind

up, and Capello resigned in protest, with just four months to go to the start of the Euros. Nice work, FA.

How far might England have got in those Euros with Capello in charge and several world-class players still at his disposal? We'll never know. But for anyone who might still be sniffy about his reign, get this: he left with a win ratio of nearly 67 per cent. That's better than any England manager before or since (Allardyce doesn't count). Not even Alf did as well. Nor Sven. Nor Gareth. But the FA made him resign.

Thanks Fabio. We were lucky to have you.

* * *

2008 Euros qualifying campaign

- Manager: Steve McClaren
- How far England got: did not qualify (Russia and Croatia went through to the finals)
- Pain factor: 6/10
- 'What if' factor: 3/10
- Unluckiness factor: 2/10
- How well England played: 3/10
- Top villain: the wally with the brolly

2010 World Cup finals

- Manager: Fabio Capello
- How far England got: second round (beaten by Germany)
- Pain factor: 6/10
- 'What if' factor: 9/10
- Unluckiness factor: 7/10
- How well England played: 6/10
- Top villain: Jorge Larrionda

9

2012–2016: Darkest hour

THE FORTUNES of West Brom and England had never once intertwined in nearly 40 years. They were like parallel lines in my life, albeit the England one had become much thicker and bolder as the years went by. But towards the end of the 2011/12 season, after decades of separation, those two lines suddenly clashed. To the surprise of West Brom fans everywhere, including me, the FA decided they wanted our manager, Roy Hodgson, to succeed Capello.

Leaving aside the obvious thought that if West Brom were now being called upon to supply the manager, then England really must be in trouble, there was actually a certain logic to it. Hodgson had not only performed well at The Hawthorns, taking the team to a creditable tenth place in the Premier League, but had also had a distinguished career managing clubs like Inter Milan and, though much less successfully, Liverpool, as well as national sides such as Finland and Switzerland. His experience of taking nations to major tournaments had, it seems, particularly attracted the FA, which was reasonable enough.

From West Brom's perspective, though, it was terrible, and all too typical of the club's sorry history since 1968. The club goes through managers like hot dinners (a stonking 37 of them in my 57 years on this planet, nearly all of them sacked), but part of the problem is that any time we get anyone remotely good, some bigger team comes along and

nicks him. It happened with Ron Atkinson twice in the 80s, then Ossie Ardiles in 93 and Tony Mowbray in 2009. And now it was happening again, this time with Hodgson and England.

Did this transaction work out for either side? Well, West Brom had one more good season, finishing eighth under Hodgson's successor, Steve Clarke, then began a long bumpy descent that continues to this day.

As for England, Hodgson's reign began well enough but ended four years later with the most horrific defeat in the country's long footballing history. I'm still getting over it.

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By the summer of 2012, and with that huge global recession behind us, my business was starting to flourish. Whereas from 2003 to 2010 it was all about editorial services, like writing speeches and reports, from then on it was increasingly about communication training, and particularly media training (coaching businesspeople and occasionally politicians to carry out effective interviews with journalists), which tended to command higher fees. It also required far more travel, and over the next few years I found myself flying off to places as far flung as China, Malaysia, India, Saudi Arabia, Ghana, South Africa, the USA, Brazil and even, on four occasions, the Falklands.

This was great as far as air miles went, not bad at all for the bank balance, and could at times be exciting and glamorous. But it was awful from a family point of view. Waving goodbye to young kids for up to two weeks at a time, occasionally longer, was emotionally draining, and like other parents with jobs that involve hopping on and off planes, I wonder if I got it right.

Of course, an intense travel agenda also means the constant danger of being across the other side of the world for a crucial England match. In theory, that shouldn't be

a huge problem, given that World Cups and European Championships are broadcast almost everywhere.

But does an obsessive fan want to watch an England-Germany knockout match with a Spanish commentator? Nope. And if you manage to log on to ITV or BBC, are you happy with the 30-second delay, which means you get WhatsApp messages from your friends commenting on various incidents, including goals, before you've actually seen them? Nope again. And most of all, are you happy watching in a lonely hotel room with nobody around who understands your obsession and nobody to share your celebration or heartache? Nope, nope and nope.

But sometimes you just have to get on with it. And since 2012 I've watched matches in places ranging from Georgia to Bahrain and Finland. When we win, it feels like I've missed out on communal celebrations. When we lose it's isolating and awful, like in Washington, DC in 98.

* * *

Hodgson got pretty much a free ride in the 2012 Euros. Everyone knew he'd only had about a month to get ready for the tournament, so even if England utterly bombed, he'd get the chance to lead them to the World Cup in Brazil in 2014. Perhaps that released the pressure, and England actually performed reasonably well in the group stage, drawing with France, then beating Sweden in a corker before finishing with a narrow win over Ukraine and qualifying for the knockout stage in first place ahead of the French. Well done, Roy.

The match with Sweden was unusual for me. Almost unique. Because I didn't see it. At least not live. It is, as I've said, one of the biggest fears of the obsessive that a big match will clash with some other commitment, like a wedding, funeral or business function. I've generally been spectacularly lucky on that score, or horrendously unlucky,

depending on your point of view. As far as knockouts go, I've seen almost every minute of each one of the 29 England have played in my lifetime. Give or take, that's nearly 3,000 minutes of raw agony.

Group-stage matches, however, are a little more problematic. I've seen nearly all of them, and bust an absolute gut to make sure I do. But there are exceptions, and Sweden in the 2012 Euros was one of them. Although the 2008–2010 economic crash was behind us, I was taking nothing for granted business-wise, and invested plenty of time and money in networking and business development. So, on the evening of 15 June 2012, I was not where I should have been, bang in front of the TV, but attempting to drum up business at a swish black-tie event organised by the Guild of Public Relations Practitioners in central London.

As a result, I missed one of England's most dramatic group games ever, with the team taking the lead, then falling behind, before recovering to win with two late goals including Danny Welbeck's back-heeled gem.

And how did I hear what was going on? Through the event compere, clearly not a footie fan, who announced each goal as though he was telling us where to find the sausage rolls. It was appalling. I was on a table of people who obviously knew nothing about football, and when they discovered I did (it's impossible to conceal) started asking inane questions like 'Who are England playing?' and 'What's the tournament?' Give me a break. I suppose it was my own fault for agreeing to go in the first place, and had to make do with watching a repeat of the entire match, from start to finish, as soon as I got home. Crikey, of all the matches to miss.

Anyway, England progressed and were perhaps unfortunate to come up against the mighty Italians in the quarters. I wasn't going to make the same mistake again, and made sure that this time I was firmly in front of the

box, with the kids tucked up in bed. Unusually, my partner in crime, for the first time since 1986, was my father (as ever, much more of a West Brom fan), who'd come with my mother (still much more of a rugby fan) to stay with us for the weekend.

My wife took Mum out for dinner, leaving me and Dad to endure a simply dominant Italian display, orchestrated by the peerless Andrea Pirlo in midfield. A bamboozled England were completely outplayed, unable to string more than about two consecutive passes together – Pirlo just rang rings around us – and were lucky to get to extra time and penalties. Ashley Young and Ashley Cole both missed theirs, and the Italians, to nobody's surprise, went through.

For once, there was no hard-luck story. There was no hand of a cheat, no refereeing howler and no Ronaldo wink. Yes, it went to a shoot-out, but ultimately the better team won. Which made it absolutely no easier to take, and I embarked on my normal grieving period, much to my father's bemusement.

* * *

Though we didn't know it then, and even though England got deservedly booted out before the business end, Euro 2012 was the peak of Hodgson's time as manager. It was downhill from that point on, though none of us could have predicted just how low we would eventually sink.

For my little family, though, they were golden years, a time I look back on with huge fondness. Business continued to flourish too, and the barren spells that had characterised the decade before were now few and far between. All the hard work, investment, sleepless nights and worry were beginning at last to pay off.

But I was away an awful lot, and as England approached the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, having qualified comfortably, I realised to my horror that I would be on a plane to Bahrain

just when the final group match against Costa Rica kicked off. And yet, when it came to it, it really didn't matter. Because England had been outplayed and beaten in their first two matches, first by Italy, then by Uruguay, and by the time they kicked off against the Costa Ricans they had already been eliminated.

It was the only time in my life that England had failed to get out of their group at the World Cup finals. And we never really threatened to. Rooney, Gerrard and Lampard were all getting past their prime, and the stalwarts in defence, John Terry, Rio Ferdinand and Ashley Cole, had all retired from the international game (Cole only after being dropped by Hodgson). England went with a new look, and got nowhere. It was a sorry tournament all round.

Not that it stopped fans with rose-tinted spectacles declaring, as they always do, that 'with all those talented young players, we'll win it next time'. To which my depressing rejoinder, fed by decades of bitter experience, is that the future never arrives. Or, at least, it hasn't yet.

To this day, I haven't seen a single moment of that Costa Rica bore draw. I've never been remotely tempted to watch the highlights, making it unique among all England major-tournament games in my lifetime. When I got to Bahrain, my first visit to that country, I looked up the result on my BBC app and left it at that. After all, if there's one place on earth that's pretty good for escaping footballing mania, it's a small island in the Persian Gulf with summer temperatures of about 40°C. There was no grieving period, because there was nothing to grieve.

* * *

The trouble is with running a business that you end up doing really stupid things just to keep the show on the road. Like travelling to fulfil client commitments when

you're really far too ill. I once did a day of training near Paddington, central London, suffering from severe food poisoning, which meant dashing out of the training room several times to projectile-vomit in the gents' loos. Ghastly. A couple of years later I carried out a crisis simulation for a customer near Heathrow with a horrific fever, and only got through it by overdosing on paracetamol.

But in early February 2015 I pushed the boat out way too far. Suffering from another, this time much more intense fever (full-on influenza) I insisted on travelling into London on successive days in icy conditions to fulfil commitments in Whitehall and then Liverpool Street. Just 48 hours later I was in hospital with double pneumonia, unable to sleep, eat or walk, though I could just about crawl. Breathing was a struggle.

After about 36 hours of shaking uncontrollably with the fever, as you do with pneumonia, the medics pumped me with enough painkillers to allow me to be taken for a chest X-ray a few floors down from my ward. I was wheeled in and plonked alongside a bunch of other patients, all of whom looked the wrong side of 80 and whose next stop looked as though it would have to be the morgue. I looked at the guy next to me, and thought to myself, blimey, he's on his way out, surely. He was a wizened, bony little thing, with a few white whiskers on his chin, and he had to heave his shoulders to breathe. So concerned was I that he might conk out at any moment that I looked around me to see if there was some medic who I could beckon over to help him. But just then this skeleton in pyjamas glanced at me and croaked, 'You look terrible, mate.' Oh Christ.

He was right. I was in a really bad way, in pain and now with pleurisy. I was losing weight, and the fever refused to leave me. I've been ill before, but not *that* ill. I really did wonder if I was dying, and I was right to fear for my life. I now know that of every ten patients admitted to hospital

with double pneumonia, only six or seven survive. All right, many of those are very elderly, but even so.

Things then slowly started to get better, and ten days after I'd been admitted to hospital, and with the fever finally receding, I was able to think straight. And I vowed, if I ever got a high temperature again, to go to bed and stay there. Never again, I promised myself, would I kid myself I'd be able to soldier through it. And you know what? I've actually followed that advice. In 2022, I felt a bit off-colour, tested positive for Covid and cancelled a lucrative trip to Strasbourg. I'd learned my lesson. But why did I have to nearly die first?

Incidentally, if anyone thinks that the 'long' version of Covid is somehow unique to that virus, think again. Long influenza is just as bad. It took me six months to recover fully during the spring and summer of 2015, and the mental scars remain.

It also put things in perspective, which isn't surprising. Fearing that you might die before your kids reach the age of five certainly makes you worry less about hitting your monthly business targets, or delivering a training course that not everyone says was marvellous, or writing a speech that a client considers a tad mediocre. Frankly, I rejoiced that I was able to stand up, hug the children, move around and contemplate eating. For a few weeks I just loved being alive and thoroughly appreciated feeling a bit better as each day went by.

And football? Surely that too would now be viewed in a more rounded fashion. After all, did it really matter, in the grand scheme of things, that I'd never seen my team win a trophy? Was that such a great loss? Couldn't I be satisfied with all the other great things I'd been blessed with?

Dream on. We're talking about an obsession here. And that doesn't just disappear, however ill you are. Until my dying breath, I will always be yearning for that elusive first

trophy. And even when England are so-so, bordering on poor, as they were during the Hodgson years, you always retain that spark of hope, that belief that it could just happen. It just could be our year.

* * *

And so it was as we approached the 2016 Euros. Once again, we managed to qualify comfortably enough, as we should have done in a group containing Switzerland, Slovenia, Estonia, Lithuania and San Marino, and as ever we went to the tournament thinking that this time it might be different. OK, only an ageing Rooney and Gerrard remained from the golden generation, but there were some impressive new kids on the block, like Harry Kane, Raheem Sterling, Marcus Rashford, Kyle Walker and John Stones.

There's nothing quite like being drawn against one of the other UK nations to get the juices flowing, and this time we found ourselves in the same group as Wales. That's the Wales of Gareth Bale, who was undoubtedly one of the best players in the world at the time. But being world-class at football doesn't necessarily make you more than entry level at psychology, and Bale made the dumb mistake of riling the England players before a ball had been kicked.

I could have told Bale myself what to say before an England match. Talk up your opponents. Tell them how great they are. Say that Wales had no chance. Because, as we were to find out only a few days later, complacency is England's greatest weakness.

Instead of which Bale, the numpty, told a crowded press conference that Wales, as a nation, had more 'pride and passion' than England. Even if it's true, which it isn't, that was possibly the most self-defeating thing he could have said on the eve of the match, and pretty much wrote Hodgson's pre-match dressing room speech for him. There was only going to be one winner after that.

To be fair to Bale, his first-half goal saw Wales take the lead (I missed it as I was hurrying home from a training session), but England equalised, then scored a glorious solo winner through Daniel Sturridge at the death. Bloody hell, that was sweet, and England's celebrations showed Bale just how wide of the mark his silly comments had been. Back home in Kent I roared with delight and triumph, and raced around the room punching the air, eyes bulging, much to the alarm of the kids who feared that their father had gone completely bonkers. 'I want to have your babies, Daniel Sturridge!' I screeched, before swiftly regretting it. It was a goal that went straight into my all-time top ten.

That was our only victory in the group stage, but we squeaked through to the knockout phase in second place to the Welsh, who won their other two. But that was OK, because we'd been gifted a really simple second-round tie against Iceland.

* * *

Back in the UK, another team was going into a big match-up full of certainty and expectation: the Remain camp. And they were right to be confident, with the bookies giving them something near an 80 per cent chance of success on referendum day. Even Leave voters assumed that we'd ultimately decide to stay in the EU. To misquote Gary Lineker, referendums involve hundreds of politicians arguing with each other for several months, and at the end the pro-EU side always wins.

I was a seven-out-of-ten Leaver, voted accordingly, and decided to stay up to around midnight to see the first sets of results before heading to bed. Fat chance. A few hours later, still wide awake, engrossed and staring at the TV, I was as stunned as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove appeared to be by what the nation had just done.

It's long been understood that football can have an impact on politics. Many commentators suspect that Harold Wilson lost the 1970 election to Ted Heath, against all the odds, because West Germany had equally unexpectedly just knocked England out of the World Cup. More than half a century later, Boris Johnson disobeyed Wembley's Royal Box regulations by pulling on an England shirt for the final of Euro 2020 to show just how committed he was to the national cause. Keir Starmer's honeymoon period lasted for just nine days, ending when Spain beat England in the final of Euro 2024. And it's not just in Britain. Emmanuel Macron gained no end of kudos by hugging and dancing with the players after France's 2018 World Cup triumph.

But can it work the other way? Can politics have an impact on football? Consider this. Britain voted to leave the EU on Thursday, 23 June, with the nation, both Leavers and Remainers, in a state of shock throughout the weekend. Then on Monday, 27 June England took on Iceland in the second round of the Euros and played like they were half-pissed.

I've been watching England for half a century, and in all that time I have never seen the team play with such utter and complete ineptitude. Iceland weren't lucky. They thoroughly deserved it. England were beyond shocking.

So, can it be no coincidence at all that our worst performance and most humiliating defeat ever came immediately after a political event that, for better or worse, had sent shockwaves through the nation? I may be reading too much into it. Perhaps the players were totally unaffected. Perhaps they didn't care at all about the referendum. Perhaps. But I can't help wondering.

I watched the match in my room in a small B&B in Grantham, a town I visited many times during those years to conduct media training for one of the local charities. After England scored early, I texted Irena, 'Great start.

Now let's go on and smash them.' Blimey, talk about being delusional.

If losing to the USA in 1950 was horrific, this was far worse and far more humiliating, given the hundreds of millions watching on TV. Unless they were English, they were also sniggering. The Welsh? They were literally dancing with joy. And I don't mean the fans, but the players. A video subsequently released, or leaked, showed the Welsh squad celebrating Iceland's victory like they'd just won the tournament themselves.

A lot of England fans shrug that kind of thing off, and even supported the Welsh as they marched on to the semi-final. I won't, can't and didn't. I always used to support the Welsh at football, unless they were playing us, of course, but since that nasty episode I've despised them, and back their opponents in every match. I'm not proud of it. But, yes, I hold a grudge.

* * *

2012 Euros

- Manager: Roy Hodgson
- How far England got: quarter-final (beaten by Italy)
- Pain factor: 7/10
- 'What if' factor: 4/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10
- How well England played: 6/10
- Top villain: the FA

2014 World Cup finals

- Manager: Roy Hodgson
- How far England got: group stage (Uruguay and Costa Rica qualified for the knockouts)

- Pain factor: 2/10
- What if? factor: 1/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10
- How well England played: 4/10
- Top villain: n/a

2016 Euros

- Manager: Roy Hodgson
- How far England got: second round (beaten by Iceland)
- Pain factor: 7/10
- 'What if' factor: 1/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10
- How well England played: 2/10
- Top villain: Welsh squad

10

2016–2018: In love with Gareth Southgate

LATE IN the evening of 27 June 2016, as the shock of the Iceland match was sinking in, I wrote an email to Suzi and Irena, saying, 'I'm giving up on England. I've given them 40 years, and that's quite enough. Even supporting West Brom brings greater rewards, and that really is saying something. Oh, and while I'm at it, I think I'll also give up on Britain – at least for the time being. The last few days (racist attacks, political vacuum, friends and family falling out with each other over how they voted, crap weather etc etc) has been the most depressing I can remember. It's a terrible time to be British. Really terrible.'

It was a fair point, and I meant it. Though quite how I intended to give up on Britain I'm not sure. With the kids at school and a business to run it wasn't as though we could all up sticks for Patagonia. Perhaps I meant give up as in resign myself. If so, none of that fatalism lasted very long. Not when it came to Britain as a whole. Yes, the country tried to tear itself apart in the next few years, but whenever I travel anywhere else it's clear they all have their own different but equally intractable challenges. That's life.

England football was a different matter, though. We'd hit rock bottom. I had indeed given exactly 40 years to it, and had not only seen my team fail to win anything at all, in contrast, say, to Denmark and Greece (hardly

giants of the international game) but had now sat through a defeat to Iceland so unexpected, inexplicable, miserable and mortifying that we'd become an utter laughingstock. The Welsh players might have danced with delight, but the Germans, French and Italians would presumably have shaken their heads with amusement and pity. Football's coming home? Ha! Not anytime soon, it ain't.

I really did, for a few months, remove myself from the obsession. It was a case of self-preservation. Yes, in my four decades of supporting the team there had been some great moments: Gary Lineker's hat-trick against the Poles; David Platt's winner against the Belgians; the Euro 96 thrashing of the Dutch; Michael Owen's worldie against the Argentinians; and David Beckham's late zinger against Greece. All of those had given me and my fellow obsessives great joy and satisfaction, all the sweeter for being shared.

But I also had to admit that, overall, the ledger tilted towards misery. Every two years England had competed in a major tournament and had failed to win any. If they had triumphed in just one, it would have made it all worthwhile. But they hadn't. And now they'd lost to Iceland, a country with fewer people than Bristol.

So, yes, in that summer of 2016 I thought it was all over. I took little interest in the appointment of Roy Hodgson's successor, Sam Allardyce; kept only half an eye on his one match in charge, a victory against Slovakia; and barely raised an eyebrow at his resignation following an undercover sting.

That whole Allardyce business was so typically England, and I wanted nothing to do with it, like I'd finally, belatedly, and only after being repeatedly abused, run out of patience with a bad lover. I vowed to concentrate all my efforts on family and business. 'England,' I said, 'I'm done with you.'

* * *

But as anyone who's ever had a bad lover will know, they always return, claiming to be a reformed character, begging for forgiveness and pleading for another chance. They're clever like that. They never accept a no. They always see it as a maybe. It's always a 'you know you want me really'.

That's what England did. It begged, it pleaded and it presented as evidence of its reformation none other than the appointment of Gareth Southgate as manager, a man who conveyed such thoughtfulness, patriotism, decency and integrity that even I, who had just decided that I could only survive and thrive if I gave up on the national team, and who had only recently demanded that England 'walk out the door, turn around now, you're not welcome any more', found my head being turned again. The bad lover was winning me back.

I have to admit, though, that I didn't foresee just how good Gareth would be, and just how far he'd take us. He'd been a loyal servant of England football as a player in the late 90s, without ever being a great. The only club side he'd managed was Middlesbrough, who ended up firing him, and he'd later been England under-21 boss, without setting the world alight.

So, when he got the England manager's role on a caretaker basis, as Lee Carsley would do eight years later, I assumed he'd keep the seat warm for a few games before someone else with more impressive credentials came along. That's what the FA thought too. Everyone did.

But Gareth has a depth to him that makes him stand out. And great likability. Of all the England managers I'd seen before him, from Revie to Allardyce, he was the one I warmed to most, not just as a manager, but as a human being. I reckon he and I would get on. We could be friends. When not talking about football, we'd discuss novels, trade ideas about politics and even debate the meaning of life.

We'd share a couple of beers, but never too many. We'd have dinner parties with our wives, and perhaps go on short holidays, all of us together. That sort of thing.

All right, all right, I'll stop. I've never met the guy, and if he ever reads this he almost certainly won't want to. But all I can report is that I've been hugely impressed and remained so even after he left the big job. Early in 2025, Gareth became the first footballer to give the Richard Dimbleby Lecture, about how society is failing boys and young men, and did so with such remarkable grace, sensitivity and eloquence that some of us wondered whether he had a future in some kind of senior government-appointed position. Or, I don't know, at the UN or something. Perhaps he does.

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Gareth set out, to use a phrase which has since become devalued by political misuse, to fix the foundations. And to change the culture. To develop an England football identity. To create an atmosphere that the players were happy to belong to and thrive in. Ultimately, of course, he wanted to win a major tournament. And he so very nearly did.

So, while the country was tearing itself apart over Brexit, with more divisions than the Football League, Gareth was quietly, determinedly getting on with the business of dragging England out of the blackness.

At first, he did so unspectacularly, befitting a caretaker. But it soon became obvious that he was not only suited to the role, but enjoyed it, and with England playing well again the FA made his position permanent. Gareth repaid their faith by winning eight of England's qualifiers for the 2018 World Cup, drawing the other two. Harry Kane was beginning to score for fun, and the team actually looked like they wanted it.

Nevertheless, England travelled to Russia with less expectation than ever. Fans, young and old, had been stung

once too often. Iceland was still fresh in the memory, as was the ignominy of 2014. You had to be middle-aged, like me, to remember England reaching a semi-final, and pretty old to recall the boys of 66.

Kane was the nearest, but none of our players would have been considered world class, especially now Wayne Rooney had retired. And Belgium were the seeded team in our group, boasting players of the calibre of Thibaut Courtois, Vincent Kompany, Kevin De Bruyne, Eden Hazard and Romelu Lukaku. No one thought we were in that league. We hoped to qualify for the knockout stages, but that was about it. For once, our expectations were on the pessimistic side.

That summer, my travel schedule was pretty packed, and as England kicked off their first match against Tunisia, on Monday, 18 June, I was about to land at Heathrow on a flight from Geneva. By the time the game was in full swing, I was on the M25 heading back home, but with a taxi driver as keen as I was to know what was going on, so we listened to the radio commentary.

Approaching full time, and with the score at 1-1, we left the M25 and joined the long curved slip road on to the southbound A21. Halfway round it, in the 91st minute, Kane headed England's winner. Oh, my goodness. They'd done it. It was the first time we'd won an opening match in the World Cup finals since 2006. Phew. Relief. Whenever I've driven around that slip road since then, which I often have, I've pictured Harry's header.

Six days later, I was at home to see us play Panama and score five first-half goals against opponents who did their country's reputation no end of harm by trying to kick our players off the pitch. 'Blimey,' said Gary Lineker in the BBC studio at half-time, stunned by the scoreline. Indeed. My feelings precisely. And we went on to win 6-1, a great result that confirmed our qualification for the knockout

stage even before the final group match against Belgium the following Thursday.

Only once before, in 1982, had England qualified from a group at a World Cup so quickly, after only two games. What a contrast with the disaster of 2014. It was great news for all of us, but particularly for me. Because by the time England played Belgium I was in Tbilisi, Georgia, media training some of that fine country's political leaders and staying at a rather swanky city centre hotel. If it had been a match that actually mattered, I'd have been as livid as I was two decades earlier when I had to watch the knockout against Argentina in a lonely hotel room in Washington, DC.

But this one really didn't matter, so it was all OK. I was quite happy to order a glass of wine or two from the bar, go up to my room, tune into the coverage and start messaging fellow footie fans back in England, like Irena and Simon Two. It was like a free hit, with none of the stress that normally accompanies big England matches.

Actually, when I say this match didn't matter that much, it did in a roundabout sort of way. The winners would finish top of the group but would then face a far more difficult draw. The losers, on the other hand, would paradoxically get an easier ride.

It felt a bit like a slow bicycle race, and there was a debate as to whether England should actively try to lose. Some were firmly against the idea of plotting any sort of preferred route through the tournament. 'How can we be so arrogant?' declared Alan Shearer in a BBC column. 'With our record at major tournaments, how on earth can we be so arrogant to look ahead like that or think we will roll anyone over?'

I disagreed. It was precisely the reverse, in my view. It was precisely *because* England had such a poor record in major tournaments that we felt the need to pick the easier

route. It was actually the opposite of arrogance. It was a sense of inferiority. If you're Germany or Spain, you'd be happy to take on anyone. But for the likes of England an easier route was crucial. Who wants to win and be pitched into the tougher half of the draw, with Brazil the likely opponents in the quarter-final, when you can lose and play Sweden instead? I love Big Al, and respect him hugely as a player and pundit, but I reckon he got that one wrong.

So, did England actually set out to lose? Nobody would ever admit it. But Southgate did change his side almost completely, which he wouldn't have done if he'd been desperate to win. Personally, I was perfectly happy with the result, a 1-0 win for the Belgians, and reckon most of the squad were too. Gary Neville, with whom I agree on football but not much else, said he respected Southgate even more following the defeat and the route through the tournament it then offered. Like me, Neville saw England's prospects as better served by losing and entering the easier half of the draw.

That said, there's no easy knockout match. And we certainly weren't so arrogant that we'd take it for granted. We knew that from 2016. This time it was Colombia. They'd be no pushover.

* * *

I might have reached the age of 50 without ever seeing my team win a trophy or even get to a final. And I might have suffered monstrously and unfairly on several occasions. But football had never yet brought me to actual tears. Not even as a kid, when I saw Ipswich, big underdogs, beat West Brom in the FA Cup semi-final at Highbury, as I looked forlornly on from the North Bank with Dad and Stephen. Not even when Gazza missed by about a millimetre in the semi-final in 96, breaking English hearts. And not even when the players slumped to the ground after losing to

Iceland in 2016. Simply, I've never been great at releasing emotion. If I get hurt, I tend to keep it inside, which I understand, psychologically, is a bad idea. Best to let it all out, they say.

Well, I sure did let it all out with England's knockout match against Colombia in 2018. In fact, it came flooding out, and the rest of the family looked on wondering what on earth was going on.

It was a typical rollercoaster England knockout match. Obsessives like me don't need to look up the details, because we recall each moment like it happened last night. We take the lead through a Kane penalty, hold that lead and look for all the world like we've done it, only to concede an at-the-death equaliser. Maradona is in the stands leading the loud cheering for Colombia (what a complete bastard), and the neutrals all get behind the South Americans, despite their filthy gamesmanship, some of the worst and most blatant I've ever seen on a football pitch. We maintain our cool but can't force a winner. Inevitably, it goes to penalties. Oh no, not again. Already I feel the familiar pain of defeat.

I have a brief WhatsApp exchange with my friend Jo. 'I know how this story always ends,' I write. Indeed, I do. I've seen seven shoot-outs, with England only winning one. I can be forgiven for fatalism. Remember that definition of madness. I steel myself for the worst.

Both sides score their first two penalties. Then, catastrophe. Jordan Henderson misses. We're staring down the barrel. Yet again. Next, salvation. Miraculously, Colombia miss their next two. One's fired over and one's saved well from Jordan Pickford, diving to his right. He punches the air with delight. I do the same. Incredibly, it's suddenly match point England, with Eric Dier striding purposely forward for our fifth. If he scores, we've done it. We've actually done it.

At home in Kent, I'm on my knees in front of the telly, fists gripped, hardly daring to breathe, yet trying to explain to the kids that this could be it, at last. Dier places the ball, walks back a few paces, looks far too relaxed, and pauses for what seems like about half an hour, but is actually 12 seconds. 'Come on Eric,' I gasp. 'You can do it. You can do it. Come on lad. Just this.' Eric strides forward – and plants the ball into the bottom left-hand corner. He's done it. He's bloody done it.

What happened next is a blur. The noise of the crowd, the commentators and 'Three Lions' blaring out in the stadium, merge into one. The kids are cheering and hugging me. But I find myself, still on my knees, head in hands against the floor. I'm sobbing my guts out. Big heaving blubbing. For the first time in 50 years, football has made me not just cry but bawl. But not with sorrow or despair. With shock, relief and disbelief. I'm out of control. Four decades of hurt cascade on to the floor. The memories of those six penalty shoot-out losses come back. The Germans in 1990 and 1996. Argentina in 1998. Portugal in 2004 and 2006. Italy in 2012. After each one, I'd been numbed and shattered. Each one was still with me, going back decades. But here, now, was a sort of absurd yet gigantic redemption, and I'm in emotional meltdown.

England had finally done it. We'd won a penalty shoot-out. It was the best footballing thing I'd ever experienced. The small puddles on the floor in front of me were half a century of grief leaving me. It had finally all come out.

* * *

Later that evening, with the sweet knowledge of victory, I watched the entire match again. I deserve this, I thought to myself. I bloody do. If anyone has ever earned the right to bask in victory, it's me. I'm going to revel in it, glory in every moment, stick my finger up at Maradona, loudly curse every

bit of dirty Colombian cheating, and celebrate the shoot-out again, this time watching every last detail, like Gareth and his coaches hugging each other, the players racing over to pile on top of Dier and the fans in the stadium punching the air and joyfully singing our song.

Six times I'd watched other countries celebrate like that at our expense. And now, finally, it was our turn. Only two years earlier, England had been humiliatingly booted out of the Euros at this same second-round stage, by Iceland. Now, here we were winning a World Cup penalty shoot-out for the first time, and only the second time in tournament football.

Approaching 2am, I finally went upstairs to bed. Sleep wouldn't come, but, for once, for all the right reasons. It was the best sleepless night I've ever had.

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I only have one regret. My friend Suzi, with whom, along with Irena, I'd shared so many big England matches over the previous two decades, triumphs and disasters alike, didn't live to see it. She died of cancer at the age of 57, just four months earlier.

11

2018–2021: Within a whisker

FOLLOWING THE catharsis of the win against Colombia, England beat Sweden in the quarter-final on a gorgeous, sunny Saturday, then moved on to a semi against Croatia the following Wednesday. Irena had booked seats for a few of us in a Stoke Newington pub, and I arrived just before kick-off, having been training in Whitehall. Of course, we all desperately wanted it, but it was a game too far. We took the lead through a super Kieran Trippier free kick, still led at half-time, but then slowly got pegged back as Luka Modrić, one of my favourite players, took control, just like Andrea Pirlo in 2012. Croatia were better. We were out.

It is fractionally easier to get over a big loss when you are simply outplayed, which we were, especially as the match went on. But fractions don't count for much. Not for obsessives. I was devastated, and when we met up for dinner after the match with some non-footie-watching friends of Irena's, I was embarrassingly silent and incapable of conversation. God only knows what they must have thought, with this sullen-looking bloke at the end of the table, as they merrily chatted away about things like jobs, houses and holidays. I must have looked like a moody teenager, liable to snap at any moment and giving off aggressive 'don't even think of talking to me' vibes. Now, I'm ashamed. But at the time I just couldn't help it.

In hindsight, however, we'd achieved much more from the 2018 World Cup than we thought possible. We'd won our second shoot-out, our first since the Euros in 1996, and our first in a World Cup. It was our first semi-final appearance since 1996, and the first in the World Cup since 1990. Kane won the Golden Boot. And most importantly, the fans had fallen back in love with the team. Iceland was now firmly behind us.

So, we were all feeling positive as we looked forward to the 2020 Euros. And where would that tournament take place? Well, all over the place. But many of the matches, including semi-finals and final, would be at Wembley. What a huge opportunity for our boys, if we could just recreate the spirit of 1996.

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Only two international tournaments had ever mattered as far as Europe went: the World Cup and the Euros. But in 2018/19 they were joined by a third, the UEFA Nations League, with qualifying matches in the autumn of 2018, and the semi-finals and final the following June. England did really well, reached the last four, losing the semi to the Netherlands after extra time, then winning a penalty shoot-out against Switzerland in the third-place play-off. It was our best finish since 1966.

So why don't I make more of it? Because the Nations League was such small fry compared with the big two tournaments. The qualification rules seemed odd, the weird link to the World Cup and Euros too complicated to work out (I've never bothered trying), and the whole thing was squeezed into the four-year cycle like an unwanted and unsatisfying extra course at a fine restaurant.

Since that first iteration, I admit, the tournament has grown in stature, and the 2025 final between Spain and Portugal felt like a proper big match. But back in 2019,

it just didn't. Yes, I watched that semi-final and threw my hands up in horror at our wretched defending, which gifted the game to the Dutch. But there was no post-match grieving. I shrugged it off.

And the play-off penalty shoot-out? Forget it. It was a pale imitation of a Euros or World Cup knockout version, and I've never included it in England's overall win-loss shoot-out record. I wasn't even watching, though I did listen to the last few minutes on the radio, like it was the 80s all over again.

In fact, I've always thought that third-place play-offs are a waste of time and should be abolished. I didn't pay much attention to the two World Cup ones involving England, against Italy in 1990 and Belgium in 2018 (we lost both). As for the Euros, there very sensibly isn't one. So, I wasn't going to get all worked up about such an inconsequential match in a new tournament that, at that stage at least, nobody gave two hoots about.

What mattered far more was qualification for the Euros, which took place during the rest of 2019. England made quick work of that, as we had done ever since the McClaren era, winning seven out of eight and qualifying in first place.

* * *

But while England football calmly progressed, Britain as a whole was incapable of progressing anywhere, least of all calmly. We were stuck in a quagmire of indecision, with politicians debating endlessly about how to Brexit, or whether to Brexit at all.

Everyone in the country seemed to have a passionate view, and surveys showed that loyalty towards the Remain or Leave camps was by a distance more important than loyalty to a particular political party. The country was divided straight down the middle, with everything viewed

through the Brexit lens. The rest of the world looked on with fascination, as though peering at wild animals in a zoo, and wherever I travelled to I got asked, first, what I thought would happen and secondly, what I wanted to happen.

The second was easier to answer. As a Leaver (albeit of the seven-out-of-ten variety), I wanted us to respect the decision of the electorate to exit the EU, and wrote so in occasional columns for *The Telegraph*, something I'd started doing by then. As for what I thought would happen, I had no blooming idea. Just like everyone else.

So I got on with the business of trying to earn money for the family. It was a manic period of travel, particularly in 2019, taking me to the Falklands again, India, points throughout the Middle East, Georgia again, Ukraine again (to train officials in President Zelensky's team, though not the great man himself) and lots of European cities. I was away for about a quarter of the year.

Most of it was interesting and trouble-free. But in October, I arrived in Beirut only to find the car's route from the airport to my hotel blocked by anti-government protesters. Unbeknownst to me, major civil unrest had broken out while I was on the flight from London, and the protesters were creating havoc, not least on the main roads to and from the airport.

A braver man than I, my driver simply drove on through them, weaving at tremendous speed past the barriers they'd erected, and ignoring their violent bangs on the window and screams of abuse. Did they have guns? I'm not sure. I didn't dare look. But it was dicey. 'Nobody stops me travelling around my own city,' declared my driver, as cool as a cucumber. 'Oh right,' I croaked, wondering whether he might have discussed it with me first. I was relieved to get back to the airport the following evening without incident and fly off to the relative safety of Dubai.

My final flight of the year, to Lucerne, was on 12 December, which happened to be the date of the general election. I was the first person into our local polling station at 7am, voted for the 'Get Brexit Done' Conservatives while expecting a hung parliament and more purgatory, then headed off to Heathrow. Later that evening, I tuned into the BBC's coverage, found myself gripped by it, stayed up all night to watch, and as a result performed pretty wretchedly the next day.

I may be wrong about this, but I think even some Remain voters, while not exactly enamoured with Boris Johnson as prime minister for another few years, were relieved that we at least now had some certainty. The nation settled down to Christmas, assuming that 2020 would be a little more normal. And, of course, for the football fans among us, we had the Euros to look forward to.

* * *

Which just goes to show that you shouldn't assume anything. Because 2020 was the most abnormal of years, and the Euros didn't happen.

I first heard about Covid, or coronavirus as we called it then, in early February. But it wasn't until early March that the seriousness dawned on me, and by the middle of that month I was handling email after email from client after client cancelling training sessions that were due to take place over the next two months, many of them overseas. In a matter of a few days, I went from having a packed diary for that spring to a completely empty one. There would be no money coming in, and people like me, running our own businesses, got no government support at all.

Yet, strange to say, I loved that first lockdown. Not because I agreed with it philosophically. I didn't, and made my views clear in various columns. But because I was able to spend a prolonged period with the family for the

first time since the kids were born, something I took full advantage of. It was a gorgeous spring, and we made great use of our small garden, aware that many people weren't so fortunate.

It was as though the world had ground to a halt. The planes that normally fly over us en route to Gatwick disappeared. The schools were shut. On our daily walk, we hardly saw anyone. And for a few weeks, I not only had no work, but no emails to answer either. I read a lot. I wrote a lot. I listened to a lot of music. I played with the kids.

England football? There wasn't any, and it quickly became apparent that there wouldn't be any that summer, with the Euros delayed by a year. Even that, however, just added to the peacefulness. I was just loving the zen.

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By the time the Euros finally took place in the summer of 2021, life, if not quite normal, was starting to get there. The last national lockdown had ended in March, people were gathering again, albeit, in the case of some, a little nervously, and most importantly the kids were back at school.

As for me, I'd become quite used to conducting training sessions over Zoom, Teams, Webex, Google, BlueJeans, you name it, and found that it worked pretty much as well as the face-to-face variety. From the family point of view, it was actually far better, because I'd finish a session at, say 5pm, and be downstairs two minutes later. Compare that to the 90-minute commute back from London, or five-hour journey, door to door, from Geneva or Zurich.

So things were looking good, light was at the end of the tunnel, and we actually had a tournament to look forward to, in which England were expected to do well. And after a slow start, we did, qualifying in first place in our group after two wins and a draw, meaning a second-round match at Wembley against, big gulp, Germany.

I'd seen every minute of every England knockout match since my first in 1986. But that Germany tie broke the streak. Kick-off was 5pm, but I had a long-standing training commitment, over Zoom thank heavens, which wouldn't finish until three quarters of an hour later. Try though I might to hint to the client that they might like to rearrange, or finish early, they were having none of it. There was no way out. So, when this utterly crunch match started, I was simulating media interviews on some gobsmackingly tedious subject or other like GDPR regulations, insurance premiums or artificial intelligence. Thank God I didn't miss any goals.

England were playing at home in front of their own supporters (though because of Covid regulations Wembley was only half full), had a good and, by now, experienced side and were just about favourites.

Yet any obsessive fan was only too familiar with our diabolical knockout record against the world's biggest nations. Since 1966, England had played 11 knockout matches against those leading teams (I'm not counting the two-legged Euros quarter-final in 1968) winning just one, against Spain in Euro 96. Our record against Germany was particularly miserable: played four, lost four (1970, 1990, 1996, 2010).

So, when I rushed downstairs and plonked myself in front of the TV about 25 seconds after waving goodbye to my delegates, I was ready for the worst. Because the worst was what I'd always experienced. I was preparing myself for the grieving period.

Well, it was edgy. It was even. It was touch and go. Then suddenly, the miracles. On 75 minutes, Raheem Sterling slotted past Manuel Neuer. Moments later, Thomas Müller was through with just Jordan Pickford to beat, yet somehow pulled his shot wide. Finally, on 86, Jack Grealish crossed for Harry Kane who headed home to seal it for England, and I leapt up and roared with such wild,

involuntary abandon that my voice didn't function properly for several days.

At the final whistle, 'Sweet Caroline' boomed around Wembley, the players did a lap of honour and fans were literally throwing themselves in celebration over the banners that covered some of the closed-off seating areas. Nobody, me included, could quite believe it.

That victory immediately shot to the top of my list of England's greatest in my lifetime, where it remained for three years. It had all the ingredients. It was a knockout. It wasn't against just any major nation, but Germany. It was deserved, convincing and profoundly satisfying. For once, the Germans were going home while we marched on. It was something that hadn't ever happened to me before. I absolutely revelled in it.

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The draw was opening up for England, and my son and I decided to watch the remaining matches with family friends. We hosted at our house for the convincing quarter-final against Ukraine, which was so stress-free that I did the unthinkable and missed England's fourth goal, a Jordan Henderson header, as I was texting Irena. Then for the semi-final against Denmark, my friend Alex, the erudite shipping lawyer from Hull, and his family had us round to their house, about a mile or so from ours.

The term 'semi-final' always filled me with dread. At that stage, I'd watched teams of mine compete in six of the blighters: three FA Cups (West Brom in 1978, 1982 and 2008), two World Cups (1990 and 2018) and one Euros (1996). We'd lost the lot. Played six, lost six. I was still, at the age of 53, waiting to break my semi-final duck. Waiting to see my team in a final.

So, if we'd lost that semi against Denmark, with all the advantage of playing in front of our own fans at a packed

Wembley, I reckon I'd have had it with the footballing gods. I see your game, I'd have told them. I know what you're about now. You're just toying with me. Well, no more.

And at first it did seem like I might have to do just that, as Denmark took the lead with a fabulous free kick. But we managed to equalise, and during an appallingly tense extra-time period, Sterling convinced the ref he'd been fouled in the penalty area (the whole of Denmark thought otherwise and I'm kind of with them), and Kane, having had his spot-kick saved by Kasper Schmeichel, then slotted home the rebound.

We were in a final at last, and I experienced a deep, warming satisfaction, of the sort you might get when you finally, after months and even years of hard work, pass a life-defining exam but can't quite believe it's actually happened. It was somehow tough to accept. 'We're there!' I kept having to tell myself. 'We really are! No, no, you'd better believe it, we actually are!'

Yes, we were. Against Italy.

* * *

Before the final, a small minority tried to ruin the sense of unity, joy and purpose. Some of them stirred up Brexit divisions by sharing all over social media a map of Europe covered in the Italian flag, with just tiny England in the red and white of St George. The message? Everyone hates you. You're on your own. You asked for it with Brexit. The rest of the continent is backing Italy. And so, for good measure, are Scotland, Wales and Ireland (we were used to that bit, of course).

Others, on the opposite side of the spectrum, took offence at the way England 'took the knee' before each match in support of Black Lives Matter, with one or two wishing defeat on the team as a result, or just simply refusing to watch. It was all so childish and self-defeating.

But fortunately, the vast, sensible majority of English people, regardless of whether they were bothered about football or not, at least understood the significance of the game and got firmly behind the players. Southgate's England united the nation in a way that I hadn't experienced since 1996. As the manager wrote in his touching Dear England message before the tournament had begun, 'When England play, it's not a few thousand – or even a few million – watching on subscription. You are representing more than 50 million people.'

It certainly felt like that. The country was united in common purpose. As for me and my fellow obsessives, it was overwhelming. I had a bit of work to do, and end-of-year school functions to attend, but I could think of little else than the match. Could this really be our time? Could it? It kept going round and round my head on a loop.

Some good friends had invited us, and several other families, to their house for the final, and had gone to magnificent efforts, turning their small living room into a sort of cinema, with a big screen, a seating area for the children just in front of it, then three rows of chairs for the adults. Food and copious amounts of drink were on offer right next door in the kitchen, and the garden was available for the kids to play in.

My little family arrived indecently early, which was entirely at my instigation. Put simply, I was determined to bag a front-row seat, my obsession easily trumping any 'after you' English reserve, and the thought of missing a last-minute winner because someone had stood up to get another vol-au-vent was just too awful to contemplate. I played a blinder and my view of the screen was perfect.

The trouble was, however, that in a gathering of around 40 people (roughly 20 adults and 20 children), only about four of us were obsessives, with me out front in a league all of my own. Of the remaining adults, I reckon there were

three or four blokes who cared a bit, along with a couple of the women. That left around ten adults and the majority of the children, who, and I'm not blaming them, regarded the event as a social occasion with a bit of football going on in the background.

How on earth is an obsessive meant to behave in such circumstances? I'd waited my whole life for this. It was what I'd dreamed about, longed for, prayed for. England in a final. I could no more treat this as a social occasion than I could a heart bypass. And here were all these friends who, I trust, had hitherto regarded me as a reasonably grounded sort of chap, about to see me in the grip of an obsession about which they had not the slightest idea and would no doubt fail to comprehend even if they did.

And, good God, what about their children, some of whom were as young as five? What if I lost it completely mid-match, and started thumping the ground like a maniac, as I had in 2010? What if I swore loudly at the referee? What if our opponents indulged in some gamesmanship, and I found myself pointing violently at the screen and bellowing, 'Piss off, you fucking eyetie!'

In other words, what would happen if I behaved as I would if nobody else was there? Just the thought of all these awful possibilities had me physically sweating. I had to pull myself together, and to commit to dignity, whatever the provocation.

But at the same time, I was not just keen for England to win. I didn't just yearn for it. I was utterly desperate.

* * *

Alex the erudite shipping lawyer unwisely sat next to me, and when Luke Shaw scored after only two minutes, he became the latest victim of my hug-the-person-nearest-to-me routine. Fortunately, everyone else was busy looking at the screen and I don't think they noticed. (In any case, Alex

was used to physical pain when watching England, having broken his knuckle on the air conditioner above his head when Gary Lineker scored against West Germany in 1990.)

But, from that moment on, it was like Croatia 2018 all over again, with the Italians gaining a foothold then passing the ball around with more and more authority, and pushing England further and further back. It was only a matter of time, and on 67 minutes they equalised through Leonardo Bonucci. It was all-square at full time after the 90 minutes closed with Giorgio Chiellini committing a terrible foul on Bukayo Saka, for which he should have been sent off but only received a yellow, and again after a typically gut-wrenching extra period.

For the ninth occasion in my life, it was going to a shoot-out.

Did we assume the worst? For once, no. The last shoot-out we contested, against Colombia three years earlier, we'd won. Of the two we'd played at Wembley, both in Euro 96, we'd won one and lost one. So, there was hope, but even so, in Kent, three obsessives were consumed with tension. The one mega-obsessive was struggling to breathe.

Of all the knockout shoot-outs they'd played, England had only taken the lead in two – 1996 (when we beat Spain) and 2012 (the loss to Italy). In 1998, Argentina missed their second penalty, but then England, through Paul Ince, immediately did so too. In the other five, England blinked first: Pearce in 1990, Southgate in 1996, Beckham in 2004, Lampard in 2006 and Henderson in 2018.

So, when Andrea Belotti missed Italy's second, I really did, for the first time since jumping two feet in the air in that Manchester pub in 1996, believe, really believe, that it was actually going to happen. I punched upwards with crazed venom and gave Alex the erudite shipping lawyer another hug, this time so hard that the poor bloke could easily have slipped a disc.

When Harry Maguire then coolly slotted home, I was even more certain. The excitement was off the scale. The anticipation, incredible. England were leading 2-1 after two penalties for each side. Even after Bonucci dispatched Italy's next to make it 2-2, we still had one in hand. It was to be Marcus Rashford, who'd scored in the shoot-out against Colombia three years earlier. Come on Marcus, I urged and begged, you can do this. We really are about to win the Euros.

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If Gazza's oh-so-near lunge against the Germans in 96 is right at the top of my 'what if' list, and probably always will be, Rashford's penalty in 2021 comes a very close second.

I remain convinced that if he'd scored, England would have won, and the years of hurt would be consigned to history. Consider the situation: England would have led 3-2 with both teams having just two penalties left. The pressure would be all on the Italians, knowing that if just one of their takers failed it would almost certainly be over.

Yes, we'd have won had Rashford scored. And how would Wembley have reacted? How about our gathering in Kent? And what about me personally? If beating Colombia in 2018, in a mere second-round shoot-out, had driven me to weep, then goodness only knows what this would have been like. Out-of-body ecstasy, I imagine.

I've never watched Rashford's penalty again. I can't bear to. Not even now. All I know is that he failed to score, and the pressure, which was all on the Italians, switched instantly back to us. It was too much. Jadon Sancho missed England's fourth and Saka the fifth. For the seventh time in my life, England had lost in the cruellest of all possible ways, this time in front of our own fans at Wembley.

The rest of the evening was a numbness. The three other obsessives were somehow able, full credit to them,

to make pleasant conversation, and I was aware of chit-chat and small talk going on in the kitchen. The occasional 'they were so close', 'bad luck England' and 'never mind' reached my ears, along with 'so where are you going on your holidays?' and 'how's the kitchen extension going?'

I just sat there, where I'd been all evening, with the boy trying his best to console me. England had come as close as they ever have in my lifetime to winning a major tournament. We were within a whisker. A single penalty. If only, if only. But it wasn't to be.

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2018 World Cup

- Manager: Gareth Southgate
- How far England got: semi-final (beaten by Croatia)
- Pain factor: 8/10
- 'What if' factor: 4/10
- Unluckiness factor: 1/10
- How well England played: 8/10
- Top villain: Maradona

2020 Euros

- Manager: Gareth Southgate
- How far England got: final (beaten by Italy)
- Pain factor: 10/10
- 'What if' factor: 10/10
- Unluckiness factor: 3/10
- How well England played: 8/10
- Top villain: Giorgio Chiellini

12

2021–2024: Best-ever moment

EARLY IN September 2021, I took the boy to Wembley for a World Cup qualifier against Andorra. It was a gorgeous, late-summer afternoon, and the stadium was at its best – colourful, welcoming, safe and positive – quite a contrast to two months earlier, when fan disorder compounded England's misery in defeat and shamed us all.

We had a lovely time, with the team winning 4-0. Even better, we saw Jude Bellingham, aged 19 then, whom we already recognised as a great talent but whom we couldn't have known would be starring for Real Madrid within two years and being described as the best young player in world football.

That match released the disappointment of the Euros final, and while I couldn't call it a fresh start (I'd experienced 22 of those, and they'd always ended the same way) it was the first time I'd been able to think about football, in any positive sense, since that horrible loss against Italy. Even better, because the Euros had been delayed by a year, we had only 15 months to wait until the World Cup in Qatar.

It was time to look forward. Some wag once said that the trouble with England was that they play like lions in the autumn, but donkeys by the summer. The long, arduous English season always takes its toll on the players, meaning they are, as often as not, exhausted or injured by the time the big international tournaments arrive. Worse, injury

often afflicts our most important players. In contrast, the Germans, to take just one example, always have a two-week winter break. Go figure why their players are fresher than ours in June and ready to win.

But the 2022 World Cup would be different and would play to England's strengths. For the first time ever, it would be in November and December. The England players would be fit and raring to go.

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To everyone's relief, 2022, in many senses, felt normal. The schools were open and functioning as they always had until March 2020 (even during the Blitz), people were finally ditching those horrible face masks, and business had bounced back, as had my crazy travel schedule.

But in other ways we were still wedded to chaos and upheaval, and whereas in 2019 it was all about Brexit, this time we argued ourselves silly about whether Boris Johnson had broken his own lockdown rules. Cake and wine seemed to be involved. Eventually, he was forced to walk the plank, declaring, philosophically enough, 'them's the breaks', but even that didn't straighten things out. The Tory members decided to replace him with Liz Truss, who lasted the same length of time as Brian Clough at Leeds in 1974: just 44 days.

And the Queen died. I was in the Middle East when it happened, having dinner. We already knew she was seriously ill, but I suddenly became conscious that everyone else in the restaurant was staring over my head at the big screen behind me showing the Union Flag at half-mast. All of us, from whichever part of the world, recognised the enormity of that moment.

Meanwhile, Russia invaded Ukraine, murdering thousands of innocent people in the process, and pitching the world straight back into the kind of crisis from which,

after Covid, it had only just recovered. Whereas Russia hosted the 2018 World Cup, it was banned from the 2022 tournament. Good riddance.

England, though, were there, having won eight and drawn two in their qualifying group. And the team had got stronger since the Euros, with Bellingham by now a fixture in midfield.

Drawn in our group in Qatar were Wales, meaning that we had a great chance to get revenge after their gloating, raucous celebrations when we lost to Iceland in 2016. The obsessives among us hadn't forgotten nor forgiven in those six years, and the subject came up in the BBC pre-match coverage, with former Wales player Ashley Williams (born and bred in the Midlands, like me) claiming implausibly that the Welsh squad, of whom he was one, was actually celebrating Iceland's success rather than England's failure. Well, we weren't born yesterday, and Alan Shearer spoke for many when he declared that the England players would be using that grubby video as motivation. Too damn right.

And it worked a treat. Normally, England matches against the home nations are pretty tight. But we absolutely demolished the Welsh that day, and the 3-0 scoreline didn't flatter us. When we win that comfortably, I often feel some sympathy for our opponents. But not this time. The grudge was still raw, and I was delighted not only that we'd won, but that Wales were going home. What goes around comes around, boys.

As for us, we progressed to a second-round tie against Senegal, again winning 3-0, then on to what we all knew would be an epic quarter-final with France.

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For all England's heroics in getting to the final of the Euros, and so nearly winning, our record against major nations in knockout matches was still appalling. One statistic

summed it up: England had never beaten a major nation in a knockout away from home. Played nine, lost nine. If you include Uruguay, whom we played way back in the 1954 World Cup quarter-finals, it was played ten, lost ten.

So England went into that match against the French trying to change history. Not only that, but it was a French side who were defending their title, with the world-class talents of Antoine Griezmann, Olivier Giroud and Kylian Mbappé. It was a tough, tough ask for England, and there was little doubt we were the underdogs.

My son was by now my main football-watching chum, and he and I watched the match at home together, on that cold December evening. I followed Irena's pre-match WhatsApp instructions to have another glass of wine, or two, and settled in, bang in front of the screen, as ever hopeful but fearing the worst.

Yet, I was thrilled by our performance. We belied our underdog status and played beautifully, despite getting no favours from the referee, Brazil's Wilton Sampaio, who missed a clear foul on Bukayo Saka in the build-up to France's opener. Harry Kane equalised from the spot, and even though a brilliant Giroud header gave France the lead again, we came bouncing back and fully deserved to be awarded another penalty with just six minutes of normal time remaining.

Kane, the world's greatest penalty taker, was bound to score. He already had that very afternoon, his 17th penalty for us, not including those in shoot-outs. And he'd only missed three for England in total, the last of which, against Denmark in the semi-final of Euro 2020, didn't stay missed for long as he slotted home the rebound. So, he hadn't *properly* missed for England since 2019 in a routine game that was won anyway. As for Tottenham, Kane had successfully converted 40 penalties and failed with only seven.

By any standards, this conversion rate was world class. If there was one player you'd bet several mortgages on, anywhere in the world, any time, even under extreme pressure, it was Harry. I knew he'd deliver.

Yet against France in the World Cup quarter-final, with just six minutes remaining, he ballooned it. And in Kent I snatched off my glasses and cried out in what felt like physical pain.

That awful moment comes in at number three in my 'what if' list, fractionally behind Gazza and Rashford. Yes, if he'd scored, we would only have been level, but the momentum was all with us. We would have triumphed, I'm sure. And who would we have faced in the semi? Morocco. We'd have been big favourites to get to the final. Instead, we followed the Welsh home. Perhaps the Welsh players danced with joy.

People tell me that the France-Argentina final was the best in history. Real end-to-end stuff, Messi versus Mbappé, culminating in a shoot-out victory for the South Americans. I couldn't have cared less. Call it childish, which it is, but once my team is out, I have no interest whatsoever. While that shoot-out was happening, I was with the whole family – Mum, Dad and Stephen included – in a hotel bar in Winchester starting our Christmas celebrations and still, in my case, trying to blank out the events of the week before.

Oh, and since that day, as I write, Kane has successfully converted 30 more penalties for club and country. How many has he missed? Zero.

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After a few days to think it over, Gareth Southgate took a deep breath and roused himself for one last big effort, and a crack at the 2024 Euros in Germany. I was delighted. The FA were too, as it would have been a big old task to find a worthy successor mid-season.

And, in any case, Southgate deserved it. OK, he'd lost those three knockout matches against Croatia, Italy and France, but he'd also won six knockouts in total, more than Hodgson, Capello, McClaren, Eriksson, Keegan, Hoddle, Venables and Taylor put together. His team had triumphed in a penalty shoot-out, their first for years, and he'd taken us to a final for the first time since 66. His record, by English standards, was outstanding.

He was also honourable in both victory and defeat. If I'd been in his position after beating Wales 3-0, I'd have been strutting in front of the Welsh bench flicking V signs, blowing raspberries and singing dirty songs at them. But Gareth, a better man than I by far, was pure dignity. That's one of the many reasons he was exactly the right person to lead England. And one of the many reasons I admire him.

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So, we began yet another qualifying campaign, this time for the 2024 Euros, and won our group again. Normally, that would be unremarkable. But this time we had to contend with Italy. That's the Italy that had sent us home from the 2012 Euros and had crushed our hopes in the Wembley final in 2021. The Italy that had won four World Cups and two European Championships, and was undoubtedly one of the four most successful nations ever, along with Brazil, Argentina and Germany. The Italy that England hadn't beaten in a competitive match since my next-door neighbour Mark and I had celebrated ecstatically way back in 1977.

So, for England to beat Italy in Rome in the first match of the qualifying campaign in March 2023 was, by our own standards, momentous. And it was no fluke. We thoroughly deserved it. In fact, if anything, the scoreline flattered our opponents. OK, it wasn't quite so eye-catching as Munich in 2001, but it was every bit as impressive.

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Yet, these were the performances and results that we'd come to expect from Gareth's team. Was it just that he was blessed with great players, like Harry Kane, Jude Bellingham, Declan Rice, Bukayo Saka, John Stones and Kyle Walker? I don't think so. Eriksson and McClaren had the golden generation. Bobby Robson had Gary Lineker, Bryan Robson, Glenn Hoddle, John Barnes, Peter Shilton, Gazza and Chris Waddle. Ron Greenwood had Kevin Keegan, Trevor Brooking, Steve Coppell, Shilton and Kenny Sansom. We've always had top players.

No, what Southgate's team had over all others in my lifetime was the mental fortitude and togetherness to win the big moments. Take penalty shoot-outs. Before Southgate, it had pretty much been hit and hope. Hoddle's England, we were told, didn't even practise penalties – Glenn believing it impossible to replicate the pressure of the real occasion (it pains me to write that, as I'm a big fan of Hoddle as both player and manager). One of Eriksson's biggest regrets is that he didn't employ a psychologist to help the players deal with the unique pressure of that situation. Not surprisingly, we kept losing.

In fact, here's how one former player described his thought process as he waited to take a penalty in a knockout that England lost, 'One-nil. One-one. I'm not a regular penalty taker with a process to fall back on. Two-one. Two-two. But never mind, David Seaman saved one last weekend so we'll be OK. Three-two, and actually Dave this would be a really good moment to save one. Three-three. What happens if I miss? My brain has now entered the arena of what might go wrong. And now I'm in trouble. Four-four. Five-five. Now, in front of 90,000 people and millions watching at home, let me tell you that 30-yard walk from the centre circle to the penalty spot feels like you've walked from Land's End to John o'Groats. And that's basically how

my legs felt when I got there as well. It was as much as I could do to hit the target – forget placement or power. The keeper duly saves and we're out.'

That man, of course, was Gareth Southgate. The match? The semi-final of Euro 96. It wasn't his fault. He hadn't been given the tools to convert that penalty. He'd been set up to fail. But, as a manager, he wasn't going to make the same mistake with his own players. And when, in 2018, that knockout against Colombia went to penalties, they were ready. This is how Gareth described it in his Richard Dimbleby Lecture:

'I can imagine most of the country was hiding behind the sofa. Meanwhile I was actually pretty confident … Failing in 1996 helped me to understand what was required now. The decisive penalty fell to Eric Dier. Not one of our superstars, or a regular penalty taker, but a brilliant team man. This was his moment. And as my eyes followed him on that long lonely walk to the penalty spot, I hoped, maybe prayed a little, that he would help us write a new chapter in English football history. Because this time it felt different, and this time it *was* different. If you look at the photos of my reaction, you can probably see the decades of pain. For me personally that moment wasn't just relief, but a small step of redemption. More importantly, something in the English football mindset had changed. By instilling a belief and resilience in our players, we'd broken down one more barrier to winning. In 1996, I'd walked 30 yards to the penalty spot believing I would miss. In 2018, Eric had walked those same 30 yards believing he would score.'

Belief. It's so important. And it wasn't just about penalties. It was about all England's other mental blocks that had given the team the worst record at international level of all major footballing nations, if we can still describe ourselves as that. We had always struggled in knockouts. We had always lost against the biggest teams, and against

the world's top players. We never believed. Until Gareth. He gave us belief.

That's why we beat Italy, becoming the first England team to do so in a competitive match for a stonking 46 years. And we did it in Rome.

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Come the Euro finals in 2024, our belief was tested like never before. Bang on schedule, our injury jinx came back to haunt us, and, as ever, it hit our very best players, Kane and Bellingham. I'm convinced that neither were properly fit. Meanwhile, other stalwarts of Southgate's 2022 squad were either struggling with fitness or form. Luke Shaw wasn't ready for the group stage, and Jack Grealish, Marcus Rashford, Harry Maguire, Raheem Sterling, Mason Mount and Kalvin Phillips didn't even make it on to the plane. Perhaps that's why we looked so disjointed, and though we managed to top our group it was unconvincing and nobody was taking the second-round tie against Slovakia for granted. We all remembered 2016.

We were right to be wary, because England were beyond shocking against the Slovaks. Of all the big matches I saw England play under Southgate, this was by far the worst. It was like a throwback to the bad old days and, yes, to Iceland. Slovakia took the lead and, to mine and the boy's growing horror, held on to it. They still led as the second half reached its conclusion, and still as the match was deep into injury time. For all the world it looked like Southgate's last game for England would be a defeat every bit as ghastly as Hodgson's.

But the belief Southgate had instilled in his team was for moments like this. Cometh the hour, cometh the man: Jude Bellingham. As he said himself, who else? It was England's final throw of the dice. It was the 95th minute. We threw in from the right, straight into the penalty area.

Kobbie Mainoo headed on. And there was Jude to bicycle-kick it into the net with supreme skill, athleticism and resilience. Only the best can do that.

How many other times have England rescued themselves right at the death in such a crucial match? Beckham against Greece in 2001 springs to mind, but that wasn't a knockout. Bellingham's goal is therefore in a league of its own for drama and importance. At home in Kent, already resigned to defeat, I leapt to my feet, cried out a triumphant 'yes!', then felt a heady mix of relief and euphoria and had to sit right back down again.

It also took the stuffing out of the Slovaks, and England went on to win in extra time, which took us through to Southgate's fourth successive quarter-final, this time against Switzerland. It was a pretty dour match once again. Kane, to my eyes clearly unfit, was subbed before the end, and it eventually went to penalties. It was my tenth knockout shoot-out. Of the nine I'd already seen, we'd won two and lost seven – an appalling ratio. But under Gareth it was so much better: won one, lost one.

And there was another factor that wasn't wasted on me. Of all those nine shoot-outs, only one (the 2018 victory over Colombia) was against a non-major nation. All the others were against the top sides: Germany twice, Spain, Argentina, Portugal twice and Italy. Statistically the higher-ranked side more often than not wins a shoot-out. Maybe that shouldn't be surprising, given that the better teams have, almost by definition, better players. But it does puncture the theory that shoot-outs are a lottery or a toss of a coin. Just ask the Germans about that.

Well, against Switzerland, England were the higher-ranked side by far. And even with Kane off the pitch, we still had the better players. Perhaps that accounts for the weird calmness the boy and I felt. For the first time ever, I watched a shoot-out almost knowing we'd win. So,

when Pickford, sneakily following the instructions that were taped to his water bottle, flung himself leftwards to save Switzerland's first from Manuel Akanji, I didn't even get out of my seat. I was that cool. Nor did I roar with delight or punch the air. Incredibly, I was just enjoying it. Cole Palmer, Bellingham, Saka and Ivan Toney (the last without looking at the ball, for God's sake) all nervelessly tucked theirs away, leaving Trent Alexander-Arnold to stride up for our fifth. If he scored, we'd win. And score he did, with such conviction and certainty that, as the BBC's Guy Mowbray said, he almost took the net off.

'Pressure? What pressure. Pressure is for tyres!' That post-match line from an exultant Alan Shearer, TV summariser that day, encapsulated how Southgate's team had shrugged off the mental frailties of previous generations. England planned how they were going to win that shoot-out, down to the last details, not least Pickford's water bottle instructions. They expected to win it. And they therefore did.

At home in Kent, there were no tears of joy and relief this time. No crazed hugging. No mad roar that made me lose my voice. The boy and I high-fived, and that was that, before heading off for a celebratory burger and fries.

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I like to watch England football in England. Particularly the big matches. If I'm in a pub, as I always was with Suzi and Irena, I like to be surrounded by fellow fans all wanting it as much as I did. If I'm at home, as I typically was after the kids were born, I want to watch the entire build-up, to be comfortable in my favourite armchair, to have a drink at my side and mobile phone at the ready for messaging fellow fans.

But for the semi-final of Euro 2024 I was, for family reasons, in Finland. As it happens, I really love Finland. It's

the most wonderful country. If you haven't been there, try it, particularly in the summer. Compared with the UK, it feels safe, welcoming, clean and prosperous. As for Lahti, which is where we were, an hour north from Helsinki, it's blessed with a superb natural environment, a gorgeous lake and one of the world's major ski jumping centres. You have to get in an elevator to get to the top of the biggest of the three jumps, and once there, you need a strong head for heights to look down. To all those ski jumpers out there, respect.

However, Finland would not be my first choice for watching England in a semi-final, and the boy and I were faced with a familiar dilemma. Do we watch on local TV, with Finnish commentary? Or do we watch the UK broadcast, but put up with a tiny laptop screen and the 30-second delay? There were no easy options. In the end, we went for a hybrid. We watched the build-up on British TV, then the match itself on Finnish TV, while switching back to the UK for the half-time and full-time analysis.

I have to say it worked a treat, and we pretty much provided our own commentary anyway. After all, it's not like we need to be told who the players are. Not the English ones, anyway.

Nor did we need to be reminded that, if England were to win, they would, yet again under Gareth, have to achieve something that no other English team *in history* had ever done before: win a knockout match against a major nation away from home. Yes, we'd beaten Spain in Euro 1996 and Germany in Euro 2020, but both of those had been in front of our own fans at Wembley. This would be different. And the Dutch were well up for it.

England played fabulously. It was like they'd been waiting for big opposition to show just what they were made of. The first half, in particular, was great, and although we went behind against the run of play (a super Dutch goal) we deserved to get the rub of the green when VAR told the

referee that Kane had been fouled in the box. Harry stepped up and made no mistake.

The second half was more even and edgy, and both sides had chances, but it looked certain to go to extra time. And then, out of nowhere, came my all-time top England moment. Better than Platt in 1990? Yup. Better than Bellingham's bicycle kick at the death? Yup. Better than the Colombia shoot-out win in 2018? Yup, even better than all of them.

I've seen it so many times on YouTube that I can visualise it effortlessly. It's the 90th minute. England are pressing. Rice passes to Palmer on the right, inside the Dutch half. Palmer turns, sizes up his options, and feeds Ollie Watkins, who is racing into the right-hand corner of the Dutch penalty area. Watkins receives, takes one touch, then instinctively turns and fires across the goal past the keeper and, gloriously, into the bottom-left corner of the net.

England's players leap up in celebration. Danny Murphy, BBC summariser, has no words and just goes 'AAAAHHHH!' Watkins cannot believe it. He's racing towards the corner flag, open-mouthed, perhaps also crying AAAAHHHH, frantically gesturing to the rest of the team and the bench to join him, and they oblige, jigging and hugging with joy. The Dutch players hold their heads. England's fans are delirious. We know it's all over. There are only seconds remaining. It is the most crucial and dramatic goal, bar none, in England's entire footballing history, including 66.

In Lahti, a thousand miles away from the action, the boy and I are on our feet shouting, cheering and feeling utterly gobsmacked. This sort of moment just doesn't happen to England. But somehow it has. God only knows what the neighbours think about these mad English people going crazy late on a Wednesday night. But who cares? England have won in the most dramatic of all circumstances. We've

finally beaten a major nation in a knockout, a semi-final no less, away from Wembley. And with a stunning last-minute goal. I have to physically pinch myself.

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As any football fan knows, when your team loses, you feel personally diminished, like it's somehow a judgment on your character. And when it's your national side, and when you care as much as I do, you feel a sense of communal shame and unworthiness – even, on some occasions, like after Iceland, disgrace and humiliation.

But when you win, on the other hand, you feel bigger, stronger, taller, more impressive. If you're in another country, you can walk into a business meeting, or a cafe, restaurant or hotel with pride and an illogical feeling that people will be impressed once they hear your English accent. There must be no better time to go out on a date than when your team has just won a big match.

The night after the Dutch game, and with the final against Spain still safely three days away, my family and I went to a big birthday bash. There were about 60 people there. I'm not that great at large gatherings, generally preferring something smaller and more intimate. But that night I had an absolute ball. Oh, it was super. I was gregarious, chatty, full of bonhomie, happy to talk to people I'd never met before and to try out my embarrassingly few words of Finnish. I fluttered around like I was at least a foot taller than I actually am and with an air of social confidence I've always lacked.

I cannot be the only England fan, ultra obsessive though I am, who reacted like that. That must surely be how millions of us felt: more capable, more positive, better looking, more joyful and more alive. If the government, of whatever stripe, wants our country to be happier and more successful, with stronger economic growth, higher

living standards and a stronger, more cohesive society, then that's how you do it. Get England winning major knockout matches. Do whatever it takes to make that happen, with investment in schools, playgrounds and youth clubs, and whatever else. Make it a national priority. The rewards will be more spectacular than any of us might imagine.

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Gareth had done it again. Another final. We'd beaten Slovakia when we looked down and out. We'd triumphed in another shoot-out, this time with an impressive degree of comfort. And we'd won a semi-final against the Dutch with a gorgeous winner in the very last minute. The timing of Watkins's goal? Eighty-nine minutes and 59 seconds.

Whatever agonies awaited in the final against Spain, Gareth had cemented himself as England's most successful and most inspiring manager of my lifetime. And for obsessives like me, used to misery, he'd brought a joy that we never thought possible.

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2022 World Cup finals

- Manager: Gareth Southgate
- How far England got: quarter-final (beaten by France)
- Pain factor: 9/10
- 'What if' factor: 10/10
- Unluckiness factor: 6/10
- How well England played: 9/10
- Top villain: Wilton Sampaio

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July 2024: Gareth's final match

IT HAD worked brilliantly for the semi, so the boy and I did the same again for the final: we watched the Beeb for the build-up and half-time, but the match itself on Finnish TV.

Unlike the Netherlands game, however, it was absolutely miserable, and like against Croatia in 2018 and Italy in 2021 (though not France in 2022) Spain were just better, despite losing one of the world's greatest players, Rodri, at half-time. As for England, an unfit Harry Kane was subbed again during the second half and Jude Bellingham, though still our best, looked shattered.

Could it have been different? Yes, it could, damn it. Spain registered their first on 47 minutes, but Cole Palmer scored a beauty on 73 after a Bellingham pull-back. The momentum briefly switched, and in Lahti I felt that familiar sensation of daring to dream and edged forward on my seat. It was England's moment to press on, and to throw everything at the Spaniards. Not to die wondering. I was urging them forward.

Instead, we chose to retreat. Was it exhaustion? Or innate caution? Whatever. And one brief passage of play, just two minutes after England scored, sums it up. We got a throw on the right, deep inside the Spanish half, in a similar position to the last moments against Slovakia. The crowd was roaring us on, sensing a gear shift. Jordan Pickford,

back in the England penalty area, was urging the English fans to rouse their team for one last big push. Surely this was the moment to launch one into the box. To attack. Kyle Walker, one of our greatest ever defenders, had the ball in his hands. He sized up the options. England's players were moving in front of him, wanting the ball. Ollie Watkins, in particular, was like a human dynamo, full of energy. So was Bukayo Saka. So was Palmer. But Walker ignored them – and threw 25 yards back to John Stones. We were back in our own half.

The opportunity had gone. The bubble was burst. We'd let Spain off the hook, and a few minutes later they scored the winner. Once again, it was all over.

It was midnight in Finland, two hours ahead of the UK, and we were in no mood to watch the post-match analysis. Just as with the final against the Italians three years earlier, I've never seen the medal ceremony or our opponents lifting the trophy. Nor Gareth's post-match interview. Nor the reaction of Gary Lineker and co in the TV studios.

Instead, the boy and I went for a long walk up past the athletics track and on to the ridge that overlooks Lahti. It was a completely still, noiseless night. By the time we got back, it was 2am, and dawn (the sun doesn't properly set at that time of the year in Finland) was nearly upon us.

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The following afternoon I was on Talk TV, via Zoom from Lahti, with presenter Nick de Bois. I'd been doing these slots on Talk for quite a few months by then, reviewing the news stories of the day off the back of my columns for *The Telegraph* and others. Pretty much all Nick wanted to talk about was the match, and that's a good job, because I wasn't in the mood to think about much else. Normally, I prepare what I want to say about a particular story, so I'm ready to go with some zingers. But not this time. I just spoke from the heart.

Nick asked me about Gareth's future, and I said that even though I was his biggest fan, I felt now was the time to go. He'd taken over when we were at rock bottom, when the world was sniggering at us, and in eight years had performed something close to a sporting miracle. When he started, England were ranked 13 in world football. When he left, we were fourth, and we had so nearly won that major trophy we'd craved since 66.

But four tournaments are enough, and it was time for a change. Gareth clearly felt the same, and just a day later he resigned.

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2024 Euros

- Manager: Gareth Southgate
- How far England got: final (beaten by Spain)
- Pain factor: 9/10
- 'What if' factor: 7/10
- Unluckiness factor: 3/10
- How well England played: 7/10
- Top villain: injury curse

PART TWO

Introduction

THE SECOND part of this book examines some of the themes I've considered while following England down the years, from my all-time best 11, to the best and worst managers, the Lionesses, the supporters, and whether 1966 can really matter that much to fans who weren't alive then. I don't expect everyone to agree with me. But this is my honest take on the topics that have mattered to me most as an obsessive England fan.

My all-time best England team

IT'S WHAT all obsessive fans of all teams love to do: pick the best side from all the players they've seen during their lifetime. It's ultimately meaningless, but still fascinating. It's fun but not easy. There are some really tough choices and agonising decisions. You have to leave out some heroes.

Inevitably, I have a bias towards players I saw from the early and mid-80s onwards. I mean no disrespect to the greats of the second half of the 70s, like Emlyn Hughes, Phil Neal, Mick Channon and Phil Thompson. But when I was around ten years old, I just didn't have a good enough football brain (I flatter myself that I do now) to judge who was top and who a mere good average.

With that caveat, here goes, with a 4-3-3 formation.

Goalkeeper

There are three standout candidates. Peter Shilton was England's number one and had a claim to be the world's best for much of my childhood, and was still going strong all the way up to his eventual retirement in 1990, when I was at university. To be doing the business when you're 40 is quite some achievement.

Then there's David Seaman, hero of the 1996 shoot-out win against Spain, and still producing a world-class save against the Germans in that stonking 5-1 victory in 2001. And finally, Jordan Pickford, who has been between the posts since Southgate took over in 2016, has never let England down, produced some fabulous saves, and was as

responsible as anyone for the two shoot-out victories in 2018 and 2024. But I have to go with the guy who was so good for so long and a fixture throughout my formative years.

My choice: Peter Shilton

Right-back

Do I go for the solidity, passion and determination of Gary Neville, who was irreplaceable for around ten years? Or the pace, skill and aggression of Kyle Walker, who gave Kylian Mbappé a run for his money and was in the England starting 11 for all of Southgate's biggest games? I'd be happy with either, but for his pace alone Walker has to have the edge.

My choice: Kyle Walker

Centre-back pair

There are so many to choose from here, with Terry Butcher a snarling, battle-hardened presence throughout the 80s, then Tony Adams in the 90s, the golden generation's Sol Campbell, John Terry and Rio Ferdinand in the 2000s and John Stones throughout the Southgate era. For me, the golden generation has the edge. When England got knocked out in 2004 and 2006, defensive frailties weren't the issue. We looked as solid as ever in that period.

My choice: John Terry and Rio Ferdinand

Left-back

Kenny Sansom, then Stuart Pearce then Ashley Cole. Those three players took England through the entire period from 1979 to 2012 – an incredible 33 years – winning 271 caps between them. It's painful to leave any of them out of my all-time team, but I have again to go for the representative from the golden generation, and the world's best left-back in his era.

My choice: Ashley Cole

Holding midfielder

This hasn't been a great position for England over the years. In the age of 4-4-2, a formation that Bobby Robson tended to use in the 80s, as did Sven-Göran Eriksson in the 2000s, England midfielders were expected to be all-action, box-to-box dynamos, rather than a shield in front of the defence. And even when England have played three in the midfield, as they have done for most of the Southgate era, it's been tough to find a natural for this position.

So, who are the candidates? Kalvin Phillips performed well in Euro 2020, but then lost form and fitness. Paul Ince did the job for Terry Venables in Euro 96 to great effect, and continued under Glenn Hoddle. But Declan Rice has absolutely made the position his own in the last few years, despite often playing a more advanced role for Arsenal, and for me is one of the most important yet under-appreciated England players of my lifetime.

My choice: Declan Rice

Number eight

They might not always wear eight on their back, but this is the box-to-box man England has often excelled in producing. We had Bryan Robson throughout the 80s, David Platt in the 90s and Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard in the 2000s. Jude Bellingham could now easily do that job too (as could Declan Rice). How on earth do you choose between them? It's tough to leave out Gerrard, but Captain Marvel has to get the nod.

My choice: Bryan Robson (captain)

Number ten

Arguably, this is the most important player on the pitch – the creative fulcrum and playmaker. Yet England haven't always produced top quality in this position, and when they have, sometimes chose not to use him. There was Brooking

in the late 70s and early 80s, then Hoddle, when Bobby Robson trusted him, in the mid-to-late 80s, with Gascoigne throughout the 90s, fitness permitting, and the golden generation of Scholes, Lampard and Gerrard. Since 2022, Jude Bellingham has been in possession and could very well play for the next decade. In fact, if I were to select my team in 2028, Bellingham might very well get in. But for now, I have to go with England's most skilful and creative player I've ever seen, albeit woefully under-used by his manager.

My choice: Glenn Hoddle

Left-attack

John Barnes scored one of England's best-ever goals against Brazil in 1984, so nearly rescued the team in 1986 against Argentina, and was still playing in the early 90s under Graham Taylor. Left-attack was the one position that Eriksson never solved, and more recently Southgate used Phil Foden and Jack Grealish. It's been a position of weakness for England for many years, but there is one standout candidate.

My choice: John Barnes

Right-attack

Go back 45 years, and Steve Coppell was the man in possession. By 1990, Chris Waddle was the obvious choice. David Beckham dominated from 1997 for an entire decade, and in the last few years, it's been Bukayo Saka all the way. Just as with Bellingham, I might be selecting Saka come 2028. But for now, it's the one and only Golden Balls.

My choice: David Beckham

Striker

I hate this. How do I choose? There is a golden thread of top strikers from the 70s to the present day: Kevin Keegan. Gary Lineker. Alan Shearer. Michael Owen. Wayne

Rooney. Harry Kane. Between them they scored 265 goals, and Kane, we all hope, will score many more.

A central theme of this book is that England have underperformed compared with nations of a similar size and footballing pedigree. But where on earth would we be without the goals from these six? Keegan (twice) and Owen both won the Ballon d'Or. Kane and Lineker both won the World Cup Golden Boot. Rooney broke Bobby Charlton's record and became the first England player to score more than 50 goals. And Shearer had more mental strength and self-belief than any player I've ever seen – he was a man on whom you'd bet your life to score a crucial penalty.

All were world class, and any team would be better for their presence. This is so tough, but I'm going to have to go with England's record goalscorer.

My choice: Harry Kane

* * *

My all-time England 11

Shilton
Walker
Terry
Ferdinand
Cole
Rice
Robson (captain)
Hoddle
Barnes
Beckham
Kane

I could easily have selected an entirely different 11 and still have a fabulous side. For example, who could argue with this: Seaman; Neville, Campbell, Adams, Pearce;

Ince, Gerrard, Gascoigne; Waddle, Lineker, Coppell. Or this: Pickford; Neal, Stones, Butcher, Sansom; Scholes, Lampard, Bellingham; Foden, Shearer, Saka.

But decisions have to be made, and even though I say it myself, my goodness, what a team I've selected. A tournament-winning team. A world-beating team. There really are no weak links. From the 80s, I've got Shilton, Robson, Hoddle and Barnes. From the 2000s, Cole, Terry, Ferdinand and Beckham. And from the last decade, Walker, Rice and Kane.

Sadly, these great players never had the privilege of playing together. So, we can only fantasise what it would be like. But I can promise you, they'd have won the World Cup.

Most notorious villains

THERE HAVE, of course, been many occasions when England have been eliminated from a tournament simply because the other team was just better. The losses to Spain in 2024, Croatia in 2018 and Italy in 2012 spring readily to mind. Even Iceland in 2016. At other times, however, our exit has at least in part been caused by skulduggery, villainy or refereeing incompetence of some sort. And twice it's been accompanied by distasteful gloating from our opponents. Do we forgive and forget? No, we don't. (At least I don't.)

Here is a countdown of my top ten villains over the last 50 years.

10. Andreas Möller for Germany in 1996

He's just fired Germany's sixth shoot-out penalty past David Seaman in the semi-final of the Euros. England are out and Wembley is devastated. But instead of rushing towards his team-mates to celebrate, as victorious penalty-takers traditionally do, Möller thrusts his shoulders back, puts his hands on his hips, raises his chin and embarks on a haughty strut across the Wembley turf. It's a disgusting display of Germanic gloating.

9. Wilton Sampaio, Brazilian referee, in 2022

It's the 17th minute of the World Cup quarter-final. France are pre-match favourites, but England are on top and pressing. Walker feeds Saka just to the right of the French penalty area, where he is clearly fouled by the French

defender Dayot Upamecano. Inexplicably, Wilton Sampaio waves play on. France race up field and just 32 seconds after the foul on Saka, Aurélien Tchouaméni fires past Pickford to put France ahead. VAR does not intervene. France go on to win 2-1.

8. Giorgio Chiellini for Italy in 2021

The tension at Wembley is unbearable during stoppage time in the final of Euro 2020. One goal will settle it. Saka gets the ball on England's right, and like quicksilver bursts past the statuesque Italian defender, Giorgio Chiellini. Realising he's beaten, Chiellini commits the most obvious and cynical of professional fouls. He grabs Saka's collar and yanks him backwards off his feet and to the ground. It must be a red card. Not only is it a violent act of semi-strangulation, but Saka had a clear run towards the Italian penalty area. The Dutch referee Björn Kuipers brandishes only a yellow, and the Italians go on to win on penalties.

7. Ronald Koeman for the Netherlands in 1993

It's goalless in the second half of a match that England cannot lose if they are to stand a chance of qualifying for the 1994 World Cup. Out of nowhere, Andy Sinton angles a diagonal pass to David Platt, who's racing into the Dutch penalty area ahead of defender Ronald Koeman. Platt is about to unleash his shot when Koeman grabs his right shoulder and pulls him down. It's an utterly cynical foul and the most obvious of red-card offences. Arguably it should also be a penalty. The German referee, Karl-Josef Assenmacher, first points to the spot, then changes his mind, seemingly on the advice of his linesman, and gives a free kick on the edge of the area. He gives Koeman only a yellow card. The Dutch players illegally charge down England's strike on goal, but Assenmacher waves play on. Moments later, he awards the Dutch their own free kick on

the edge of England's area and Koeman, who should be off the pitch, scores. Minutes later, the Dutch score a second and England are out.

6. The Welsh squad in 2016

The referee blows the final whistle, and England are knocked out of the Euros by Iceland. It's the most humiliating result in their history. At their hotel, the Welsh players are filmed roaring in triumph, hugging each other and dancing with joy. It's like they've just won the World Cup. For about 20 seconds all you can hear is the players screeching and bellowing in raucous celebration, drowning out the sound of the TV commentary. Yet several of the squad, including captain Ashley Williams, were born and brought up in England, qualifying to represent Wales through parents or grandparents.

5. Thomas Berthold for West Germany in 1990

It's extra time in the World Cup semi-final. England went in as underdogs, but they're playing beautifully, and are pressing forward to find the winning goal. Gascoigne has the ball on halfway, jinks past a couple of players but then loses control and goes in for a 50-50 challenge with Thomas Berthold. If he does catch the German, it's marginal, and it certainly doesn't warrant Berthold's wildly exaggerated tumble, rolling around as though shot by a sniper. The referee produces a yellow, and Gazza knows that even if England progress he'll be out of the final. The Germans win on penalties.

4. Diego Simeone for Argentina in 1998

We've just started the second half of a pulsating second-round World Cup knockout tie with Argentina. Beckham receives the ball, and Diego Simeone clatters into him from behind, leaving him sprawling face down on the turf.

Beckham flicks out his right foot in frustration towards Simeone, and the two players' respective shins briefly connect. It's barely noticeable. Yet Simeone collapses to the ground as though felled by a heavyweight punch on the chin. The Argentinian players surround Kim Milton Nielsen, the Danish referee, demanding a red card. Nielsen obliges, and England are down to ten men. Argentina go on to win on penalties.

3. Cristiano Ronaldo for Portugal in 2006

The second half of the World Cup quarter-final is under way, and Wayne Rooney tangles with Portugal's Ricardo Carvalho near the halfway line. It's not clear what, if any, offence either player has committed, and the referee, Horacio Elizondo from Argentina, merely gives a free kick to Portugal. But the Portuguese players surround him. They're in his face, gesticulating and shouting. Ronaldo, who plays with Rooney at Manchester United, leads the histrionics, barging past his clubmate and insisting that Rooney be sent off. After a few seconds Elizondo changes his mind and shows Rooney red. Ronaldo then knowingly winks at Portugal's coaching staff, and later scores the winning penalty in the shoot-out.

2. Jorge Larrionda, Uruguayan referee, in 2010

Nearing half-time, England are 2-1 down against a fine German side in the second round of the World Cup. But we're pressing hard for an equaliser. The ball comes to Frank Lampard on the edge of the German penalty area and he unleashes a fierce shot that crashes against the bar, then down and over the goal line by a good foot before bouncing back into the goalkeeper's hands. The players, coaching staff and fans celebrate, knowing that England have scored at a vital moment just before the interval. But no, Jorge Larrionda waves play on. The linesman fails to

intervene. The decision is inexplicable and is one of the greatest injustices in World Cup history. But there's no turning back. Germany run out 4-1 winners.

1. Maradona for Argentina in 1986

It's the second half of the World Cup quarter-final and England are playing well against the tournament favourites. Argentina attack, and in trying to clear under pressure Steve Hodge slices the ball up and back towards his own goal. Shilton and Maradona race to get to it. Shilton has the height advantage and goes to punch with his right hand, but just as his fist is about to connect, Maradona uses his own left hand to flick the ball past him and into the net. It's just about the most obvious handball imaginable, and deserves a yellow card. But astonishingly, the Tunisian referee, Ali Ben Nasser, allows the goal to stand. Maradona wheels away in shameless celebration. He later claims that it was the 'Hand of God'. Nasser never referees a World Cup match again, but years later, in 2015, Maradona presents him with an Argentinian shirt, and calls him an 'eternal friend'. The pair are pictured hugging and embracing.

Best England moments

FOR ALL the grief that watching England has brought me over 50 years, there have been a few standout goals, and one save, providing moments of such sweet joy that I'm almost, but not quite, ready to say that it was all worthwhile. Of course, as any England fan knows, these moments have been easily outnumbered by the crushing blows. But still, they were wonderful to experience and even now are equally fabulous to re-live on YouTube.

The best ever? Well, I can't include goals in matches that England lost. So, while they were stunning efforts, Michael Owen's against Argentina in 1998, Kieran Trippier's free kick versus Croatia in 2018 and Cole Palmer's equaliser against Spain in 2024 do not feature here.

But these are the moments that were dramatic and fabulous because of their timing, the nature of the match or the class of opponent – and the fact that we went on to win.

13. John Barnes's solo effort against Brazil in 1984 (friendly)

Where I was viewing: at home in Birmingham with the family
Having failed to qualify for the Euros, Bobby Robson takes the team to Brazil where they stun everyone by winning 2-0. Mark Hateley scores a cracking header, but Barnes's dribbling solo effort is simply a stunner, and every bit as good as Maradona's in the World Cup quarter-final two years later. Barnes receives the ball on the left, then weaves his way past several defenders before slotting home. For

sheer quality, though not importance, it ranks as the best England goal I've ever seen, better even than Owen's against Argentina 14 years later.

12. Bryan Robson's opener against France in 1982 (World Cup group stage)

Where I was viewing: n/a

This is the only moment on this list I don't see live. Instead, I hear it on my father's car radio as we speed home after he picks me up from school. It is my first-ever England World Cup finals goal, scored within a minute of the start of the match. Steve Coppell throws in from the right, Butcher nods it on and an athletic Robbo thrusts out his left foot and hooks the ball into the French net. What a start.

11. Kevin Keegan's header against Italy in 1977 (World Cup qualifier)

Where I was viewing: with my next-door neighbour, Mark, in Birmingham

This was my first England tournament goal, giving it a special place in my heart. Brooking plays the ball into the Italian area, and there's Mighty Mouse, as the Hamburg supporters call him, to guide a gorgeous looping header past Dino Zoff. I have my first experience of jumping to my feet and hugging the person next to me. The first of many.

10. Paul Gascoigne's worldie against Scotland in 1996 (Euros group stage)

Where I was viewing: the Fort Inn, Newquay

It is a magical Saturday afternoon during a fabulous, sunny June. And it is against the Old Enemy. Shearer heads England's first, only for Scotland to be awarded a penalty. But Seaman saves from Gary McAllister after the ball seems to move of its own accord on the penalty spot. Then, moments later the ball is played through to Gazza on the

left-hand side of the Scottish penalty area. He flicks the ball over Colin Hendry then sensationally volleys into the net. In Newquay, I'm hugging my neighbour (my economist friend Jon) who looks a little put out.

9. David Beckham's late free kick against Greece in 2001 (World Cup qualifier)

Where I was viewing: with my girlfriend's mother at her house near Chichester

For all their earlier heroics in Munich, England have to at least draw with Greece at Old Trafford to qualify automatically ahead of Germany for the 2002 World Cup. But Greece have played out of their skin, and as we approach full time England are losing by a single goal. We get a free kick on the edge of the Greek area, and Beckham powerfully curls the ball into the top-left corner of the net. He's rescued England in the nick of time. My girlfriend's mother is spared the hug.

8. Marcus Rashford's free kick against Wales in 2022 (World Cup group stage)

Where I was viewing: at home in Kent with the boy

For all their first-half dominance, England go into the interval at 0-0. But five minutes into the second half, Rashford fires a magnificent free kick past the flailing Welsh goalie and the ball smacks the back of the net. I'm on my feet bellowing with approval and admiration. There's no way back for Wales, and England go on to win 3-0 to send our opponents out of the tournament. It's payback for that gloating 2016 video.

7. David Seaman's save in the penalty shoot-out against Spain in 1996 (Euros quarter-final)

Where I was viewing: the Fort Inn, Newquay

Spain have been unlucky, with a legitimate goal ruled out

for offside. It's been a nerve-shredding, edgy affair, and it goes to penalties. England score their first four, including a beauty from Stuart Pearce – redemption for his 1990 miss in Turin. Spain have already missed one, then Miguel Ángel Nadal steps up to take Spain's fifth, but Seaman dives to his left and parries it away. In Newquay, the pub erupts, and Jon and I embark on the first of several celebratory pints.

6. Jude Bellingham's bicycle kick against Slovakia in 2024 (Euros second-round knockout)

Where I was viewing: at home in Kent with the boy

We've all given up. It is just too like 2016 and Iceland to have a different ending. But this time we have Bellingham in the side, and when the ball is nodded on to him just outside the box, he attempts an extraordinary bicycle kick that finds the corner of the net. He runs to the camera shouting, 'Who else?' Yes, it's arrogant, but that's what the world's greatest players often are. Kane scores the winner in extra time, and England are through.

5. Daniel Sturridge's at-the-death winner against Wales in 2016 (Euros group stage)

Where I was viewing: at home in Kent with the family

England have started the tournament poorly, only drawing with Russia. As we approach full time against the Welsh, the score is still 1-1. But Sturridge finds himself with the ball at the left-hand side of the Welsh penalty area, slips past a couple of defenders then toe-pokes the ball past the keeper and into the net. The Welsh are stunned and the England players celebrate with abandon, giving the lie to Gareth Bale's pre-match comment that Wales have more pride and passion. At home in Kent, I literally run around the living room declaring my love for Sturridge, leaving the kids wondering what on earth has happened to their father.

4. Harry Kane's header against Germany in 2021 (Euro 2020 second-round knockout)

Where I was viewing: at home in Kent with the family

England haven't knocked Germany out of a tournament in my lifetime, but have been eliminated by them on four occasions. Deep into the second half it's still goalless. Then Sterling slots home, Müller misses a sitter, and finally Kane's header sends Wembley into raptures. My involuntary bellow is so loud and relentless that my voice doesn't work properly for several days. The Germans are knocked out and England march on.

3. David Platt's last-minute winner against Belgium in 1990 (World Cup second-round knockout)

Where I was viewing: Oriel College, Oxford

England are expected to win, but the Belgians have been the better side, and are unlucky not to be ahead. It's nearing the end of extra time, and in Oriel College about 100 footie-watching students are packed into a small function room, bracing themselves for England's first penalty shoot-out. Then Gascoigne plays a free kick into the Belgian area, it goes over David Platt's shoulder, but somehow he hooks the ball into the net. It's desperately cruel on the Belgians, but England are dramatically through.

2. Eric Dier's penalty in the shoot-out against Colombia in 2018 (World Cup second-round knockout)

Where I was viewing: at home in Kent with the family

The Colombians have just missed their fourth and fifth penalties, hitting the bar with one followed by a fabulous save by Pickford. It's match point to England. If Eric Dier scores, England have their second shoot-out win and their first for 22 years. At home, I'm on my knees in front of the screen, begging the ball to go into the net, urging Dier on.

After a horrible delay, he steps up and fires low and right past the goalie. The tears flow. But they're not Dier's. Not even Southgate's. They're mine.

1. Ollie Watkins's stunning winner against the Netherlands in 2024 (Euros semi-final)

Where I was viewing: Lahti, Finland

England have never reached a final away from home, and it's 1-1 as we approach full time. Palmer finds space on the right and plays the ball into Watkins in the Dutch area. Watkins takes one touch, turns and fires across the goalie and gloriously into the net. It is so unexpected and so unlike England that I can hardly believe it's happened. I'm on my feet, wide-eyed, as though trying to convince myself that I really have just seen it. It is the single best England moment I've ever experienced, and the most dramatic goal in England's football history.

Ranking the managers

I WAS too young to properly appreciate Don Revie's strengths and weaknesses, and it's too early to judge Thomas Tuchel. So this is my ranking of the 11 other permanent managers I've seen, from Ron Greenwood to Gareth Southgate, excluding Sam Allardyce, who was in charge for just one match.

11. Steve McClaren

Few Englishmen feel able to turn down the England manager's job, so I don't blame McClaren for accepting a role that in my opinion he wasn't up to. I blame the FA for giving it to him. But I wonder whether McClaren regrets it now, given that he left literally under a rain cloud, and will always be remembered, unkindly, as the 'wally with the brolly'. For England to fail to qualify for Euro 2008, finishing third behind Croatia and Russia, was an unacceptable embarrassment. His selection policy was bizarre, particularly in that final crucial match against Croatia.

10. Graham Taylor

He was another who shouldn't have got the job, as many commentators said at the time. He'd been successful with Watford, but that in no way prepared him for the demands of playing France, the Netherlands and others in crucial international matches in front of a global audience. He qualified for the 1992 Euros, but then bombed at the

tournament itself. And his humiliating failure to get to the 1994 World Cup in the USA was all chronicled in the TV documentary *An Impossible Job*. Sadly, Taylor did indeed make it look impossible.

9. Kevin Keegan

He famously admitted that he simply didn't have 'that little bit of extra that I think you need at this level to find a winning formula' and that he hadn't been 'quite good enough', which was at least decent and honest of him. It's difficult to disagree with his assessment. He was a great motivator, and I'm sure his players wanted to succeed for him. But an England manager needs tactical nous to win the big moments. He didn't have enough of that. He got found out at Euro 2000, his team beaten in the group stage by Portugal and Romania, and the loss to Germany in the old Wembley's last match was the final depressing straw.

8. Roy Hodgson

He comes across as a very decent and intelligent man, and I warm to him, but the brutal truth is that England, after a good start, went downhill fast under his stewardship. He did OK in Euro 2012, having been given a hospital pass by the FA, and at least qualified for the 2014 World Cup before a pretty wretched group-stage exit. Sadly, he'll always be remembered for the nadir of Iceland in 2016, and he jumped before he was pushed.

7. Bobby Robson

We all loved Bobby. It felt impossible not to. And his passion for the job could not be surpassed. He was the victim of Maradona's absurd cheating in 1986, somehow missed by the referee, and was appallingly unlucky with injuries to his Captain Marvel, his namesake Bryan. Despite all that,

he was within a whisker of reaching the 1990 World Cup Final, denied only by penalties. But he failed to qualify for the 1984 Euros and stupidly wasted a generational talent in Glenn Hoddle. Had he played Hoddle in an advanced midfield role throughout the 80s, as he should, England could well have won a major tournament. No other country would have made such a mistake with such a star.

6. Glenn Hoddle

What a shame he self-destructed for something unrelated to football, because he was the right man for the job with huge tactical knowhow. His achievement in finishing above Italy in our qualifying group for the 1998 World Cup cannot be overestimated, and though he struggled with man-management, he was unlucky to lose that knockout against Argentina after Diego Simeone's silly gamesmanship and David Beckham's sending off. If he'd stayed, England could have challenged for Euro 2000.

5. Ron Greenwood

He steadied the ship after Don Revie deserted us for the Middle East, and qualified for two major tournaments out of two. He could easily have reached the 1982 World Cup semi-final, and even the final itself, if injuries to our two best players, Kevin Keegan and Trevor Brooking, hadn't derailed it all. OK, Brian Clough should have got the job ahead of him, but that's not his fault. He was a decent man who did a decent job and so nearly got there.

4. Terry Venables

Terry was the people's choice after the disastrous Graham Taylor regime, and was close to glory at home in Euro 96. If Gazza's boots were a size bigger, he would surely have won the entire tournament. He had the presence, charisma, tactical awareness and motivational skills for the job, and

gave us all a wonderful, unifying summer of football. A pity he only had the job for a couple of years.

3. Fabio Capello

Fabulous Fabio still boasts the highest win ratio of all England permanent managers (not including Sam Allardyce's one match). He was hampered by his language struggles and some players disliked his authoritarian management style, particularly at the 2010 World Cup finals. But he got the results, and can't be blamed for defeat to Germany given that we scored a perfectly good goal that was inexplicably ruled out by an incompetent set of match officials. Unbelievably, the FA then undermined him and forced his resignation over the John Terry row just weeks before Euro 2012.

2. Sven-Göran Eriksson

He was undervalued by too many fans, yet he got to three successive quarter-finals, which is more than any other manager achieved until Gareth Southgate. Yes, he was blessed with the golden generation of players, but England were poor before he arrived, and plummeted after he left. That alone shows what a good job he did. If he'd just been allowed to get on with it, he could well have achieved more. Instead, he was undermined by press intrusion and tabloid stings, all too typical of the way this country does things. If he'd employed a psychologist to tackle our penalty shoot-out phobia, something he subsequently said was his biggest regret, things might have been different. Under his stewardship, England were genuine contenders for Euro 2004 and the 2006 World Cup. But it wasn't to be.

1. Gareth Southgate

Remarkably, some deluded fans reckon Southgate failed, because England didn't quite win a trophy. Who are

they kidding? Just look at what he achieved for us. Two knockout shoot-out wins out of three. A first shoot-out win for almost a quarter of a century. More knockout wins than all his predecessors put together, going right back to Graham Taylor. A first knockout win since 1996 against a major nation (Germany in 2021). A first knockout win ever against a major nation away from home (the Netherlands in 2024). A first final since 1966. A first final ever away from home. The first England manager since Walter Winterbottom, Alf Ramsey's predecessor, to qualify for four successive tournaments, reaching the quarter-final or better in each.

Yes, he lost those four big knockout matches: Croatia in the World Cup semi-final of 2018; Italy in the final of Euro 2020; France in the World Cup quarter-final of 2022; and Spain in the final of Euro 2024. But in none of them were England overwhelmed; we didn't lose any by more than a goal, and on different days we could have won the lot.

Most of all, Southgate put the joy back into English football after its darkest hour, creating an environment in which the players could succeed and a spirit that fans and media could also buy into. He showed that the job wasn't impossible after all. We were lucky to have him. Thank goodness we did.

* * *

The ideal England manager would have the thoughtful analysis and understanding of Southgate; the calm belief of Eriksson; the presence of Capello; the tactical nous of Hoddle; the motivational skills of Venables; the diplomacy of Greenwood; and the passion of Robson and Keegan.

Well, no man can have everything, and it remains to be seen what we'll be saying about Thomas Tuchel when he leaves the job after the 2026 World Cup, as we understand he will.

But let's hope that the FA has finally learned the lessons of history, and has at last understood that appointing a manager because their face fits in the FA's corridors of power (Taylor in 1990) or because it's convenient (Keegan in 1999 and McClaren in 2006) is a recipe for disaster. Go for the best person for the job, whatever their nationality. Then let them get on with it.

Should there be more top-quality English managers out there, ready to take on the national team job? Of course there should, and it's absurd that when Newcastle won the EFL Cup in 2025, their manager, Eddie Howe, became the first Englishman since Harry Redknapp's 2008 FA Cup success with Portsmouth to win a major domestic trophy in England. But having to appoint a foreign manager of England is a symptom of our underachievement, not a cause of it.

Two outrageous flukes against us (and getting a tiny bit of our own back)

IT'S NOT always villainy and refereeing incompetence. Sometimes it's just sheer bad luck. And for those who don't believe in such a thing, I can only surmise that you're not an England fan.

Are we still paying for 1966? Is that what it's about? Have the footballing gods decided that Geoff Hurst's second goal wasn't over the line after all, and that, as a consequence, we must be made to suffer for the rest of time? It sure feels like it. Why else would not one, but two, stupendous flukes have since gone against us? And in knockout matches, for heaven's sake.

Well, if the footballing gods do have it in for us, and I can think of no other explanation that fits the facts, then they've surpassed themselves. They couldn't have conjured up two incidents any more odious, godawful and gobsmacking, and still to this day for the obsessive fan, viscerally grief-inducing, than those we endured in 1990 and 2002.

For those of a nervous disposition, look away now.

England versus West Germany in the World Cup semi-final, 1990

We all remember Gazza's tears after his yellow card. We all remember the shoot-out misery. Many will recall Lineker's

equaliser and even Waddle's shot in extra time that crashed against the post before flashing past the outstretched legs of the oncoming England forwards. But who remembers West Germany's goal to take the lead? Peter Shilton certainly does. So do I. I still can't believe it happened, least of all in England's biggest match since 1966.

It all starts innocuously enough, with the Germans awarded a free kick just outside the England area. It's in a threatening spot, but Shilton in goal gets himself in position and directs the troops in front of him. And he does his job well, because Andreas Brehme, having taken a short pass from a team-mate, slams his shot straight into the advancing Paul Parker.

But what happened next defies belief. Even 36 years on, it seems incredible. In fact, I reckon you could play for a thousand years non-stop and you still wouldn't be able to recreate it. Because instead of bouncing away to safety, as always happens when a shot is blocked that far out from goal, the ball takes a different turn altogether. It deflects up into the Turin night, and then, with the extreme topspin imparted when it hit Parker, thrusts unerringly towards England's goal.

Everything now feels like it's happening in slow motion. The players in the England wall crane their necks up and back, following the ball's absurd trajectory with curiosity then growing alarm. Shilton, who has positioned himself to deal with every eventuality apart from this one, finds himself stranded on the edge of his six-yard box, with the ball looping fiercely goalwards. He frantically backpedals, but the spin of the ball is working against him. He was once the world's best, but even the best can't prepare for this. Completely wrong-footed, it takes all his strength to reverse his forward momentum, and he embarks on a backwards stagger, not unlike that of a drunkard who's been given a light shove down a gentle incline. But the ball is agonisingly

out of reach, targeting with improbable perfection the very top of the England goal. He sticks out a final, despairing hand. But it's to no avail. He's beaten. He ends up in his own net along with the ball.

It's a one-in-a-million fluke. But they all count, and Germany are ahead. England later deservedly equalise, but it's not enough. We go out in a penalty shoot-out that continues to torment us to this day.

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Now you might think that lightning doesn't strike twice. And you'd be right. Except where England are concerned. Because, for the footballing gods, that 1990 absurdity still wasn't enough. Let's fast forward 12 years.

England versus Brazil in the World Cup quarter-final, 2002

England are holding their own against a strong Brazilian side as we go into the second half level at 1-1. Brazil get a free kick about 40 yards out on their right-hand side. Ronaldinho steps up to take it, surely intending to send a long curling delivery into the England area, where his forwards will hope to get a goalscoring chance.

But he seemingly miscues, and instead of bending it away from David Seaman and towards his oncoming attackers, he sends the ball flying straight towards the England goal. This should, of course, present Seaman with an easy take. Indeed, 99 times out of 100 it would. Yet, horrifyingly for England, the ball flies not just towards the goal, but towards the very top-left corner of the net.

Just like Shilton three World Cups earlier, Seaman is unprepared for such an unlikely eventuality. Just like Shilton, he starts backpedalling – an unnatural thing to do at the best of times. The ball zones in on its tiny target, as though Ronaldinho is using some kind of remote-control console

to direct its flight. It arcs above Seaman and beyond his despairing hands before nestling in the net. It's a stunning piece of good fortune for Brazil and comprehensively knocks the stuffing out of the English players. They can't recover, and Brazil hold on for a 2-1 victory.

To this day, Ronaldinho maintains he deliberately aimed for goal. Even when Sven-Göran Eriksson, England's manager at the time, later met him at some function or other, and asked him to come clean, Ronaldinho stuck to his story. But he always does so with that mischievous smile of his, and not all of us believe him. Sven certainly didn't, and nor do I. So, for me it became the second incredible fluke to hit England, and every bit as remarkable, unlikely and crushing as the first. He may have meant it, but it was still a fluke.

Have England themselves ever benefitted from such a thing in a knockout match? Not in my lifetime. Not to my recollection. So, the ledger reads two insane flukes against, and none for. The footballing gods really do have it in for us.

* * *

That said, it would be disingenuous of me not to admit that the rub of the green has occasionally gone our way. OK, we've never benefitted from the sort of fluke the gods conjured up for West Germany and Brazil. But I can readily think of three refereeing decisions (or to be more accurate, errors) that went in our favour in crucial matches, and without which we might well not have won.

First up, the 1996 Euros quarter-final against Spain, which English fans remember for the penalty shoot-out miracle, and which was of course fabulous. But if we're honest, the match shouldn't have gone that far, because the Spaniards had a perfectly good goal disallowed for offside and an excellent shout for a penalty in normal time turned down. In fact, it was more than just a good shout – it was a

cert. Those are the sorts of decisions that tend to go against the visitors, which Spain were that day. Even so, let's be honest, England got away with one.

Secondly, the 2024 Euros semi-final against the Netherlands. England played fantastically well in the first half, but went behind early against the run of play to a stunning long-range strike from Xavi Simons. Then, a little over ten minutes later, the ball came to Kane inside the box, who lashed a shot over the bar. But as he followed through, he caught the outstretched foot of a Dutch defender who was attempting a block, as any good defender must. It looked like a perfectly fair challenge. It certainly never looked like a penalty. Never in a million years. But to everyone's amazement, VAR asked the referee to take another look and he duly pointed to the spot. Kane did the rest. If I were a Dutch fan, I'd be as sore as hell.

Finally, a moment that shows that for all their reputation, richly deserved I reckon, for fair play, England can occasionally indulge in a bit of skulduggery themselves. Or so it appears. It was extra time in the semi-final of Euro 2020 at Wembley, and England pressed forward, searching for the winning goal. Sterling received the ball just outside the Danish penalty area. He jinked into the box, past a defender and then went down like a sack of potatoes.

Was he impeded? Was he fouled? We English like to think we're above the dirty act of diving that so shames the sport. That kind of disgrace is for the Germans, Argentinians and Colombians, not us. But I'm afraid, even to my very English eyes, it did look awfully like a simulation. Only Sterling knows the truth. Perhaps one day he'll reveal all. Perhaps he was caught, and decided to go down just like our opponents have been doing for decades. But for the moment the jury is out.

Here's a positive interpretation of that little episode: England's reputation for fair play has been cemented over

many years. In fact, we've won FIFA's World Cup Fair Play Trophy on two occasions (1990 and 1998). Was that in the back of the referee's mind when he pointed to the penalty spot? Did he think to himself 'This is the English; they never cheat; so, it must be a pen'? If so, there is a certain karma to it. But being English I can't help but feel a tad guilty. Sorry, Denmark.

Types of England fan that aggravate me

IT'S PRETTY obvious what kind of England fan I am: over the top, biased, intensely emotional and absurdly obsessive. The only way I could be even more obsessive is to fork out to actually go to all the matches all over the world. I have the utmost admiration for those who do, and whose level of support is therefore a few rungs above mine. Respect.

Anyway, when I watch the team play, particularly crucial matches, none more so than knockouts, I want to be with fans who are just as irrational as I am. Believe it or not, one or two just about are. I'm entirely comfortable in their presence, safe in the knowledge that however stupidly I behave if we win or lose, they'll be every bit as bad.

But you can't watch your team for half a century without encountering fans who have a different mentality altogether. It isn't their fault, and they don't intend to (apart from one type), but they really rile me.

Here are the groups they fall into, showing how they might typically react to England getting knocked out of a major tournament.

The intellectual

I know a few of these, and they can be lovely people, but, boy, I am not a fan of this approach. There is a growing trend and the overuse of analytics is taking much of the spontaneity and beauty out of the game. They are all about

head, never heart, and are always analysing things from an annoyingly mathematical point of view. So, they have no sense at all of the tragedy, or at least disappointment, of England getting knocked out, because they are too busy getting an intellectual buzz out of it.

Classics of this type, it seems to me, are the authors of the 2014 book *Why England Never Win*. The blurb on Amazon says that this book 'pioneers a new way of looking at soccer through meticulous, empirical analysis'. Yes, that's right lads, let's take all the passion out of it, and instead break it down into a few dry mathematical formulas.

If you want someone to share your grief after the match, don't even think about trying to get it from this type of fan. Ask them how they feel about England getting knocked out and they'll invariably start their answer with something like, 'It's actually quite interesting, because…'. Or 'Looking at it statistically…'.

The 'we'll win it next time' fan

This type of fan is for ever convinced that just one more heave will do it, and that England have a crop of young players who were a bit too callow this time, but will be ready to take on the world four years' hence and bring home the glory. They were convinced of it after the 1990 World Cup in Italy, convinced again after Euro 96 on home turf, and again after 2002 in Japan and South Korea. They probably were convinced a fourth time after 2018 in Russia, but I'd learned to block them out by then.

They never learn, these folk. In their keenness to move on to the next thing, they just can't get it into their heads that the future never arrives, and that all that matters is the here and now. Not surprisingly, this type always wants the manager to 'ditch the old guard' and 'give the youngsters a chance', never once considering that in four years' time those youngsters will themselves be the old guard.

The 'it's only a game' fan

Oh, this type is utterly infuriating. They endlessly try to keep things in some kind of upbeat perspective. So, as well as telling you 'it's only a game', they'll cheerfully pat you on the knee and say things like 'well, the other lot were just better', 'onwards and upwards', 'there's always next time' or the utterly inflaming 'chin up!' They make me seethe with resentment, these folk. They make me want to vomit. It's all very well for them to shrug it all off so easily and phlegmatically, but please, leave me to wallow in my misery.

The 'club football is so much better' fan

This type is probably the most common, endlessly aggravating those of us, a minority it appears, for whom England comes first. So, minutes after the final whistle, they'll be thinking about the start of the Premier League season, and declaring how much better it is anyway than international football. They'll analyse the match not from the point of view of the England team that's just been sent packing, but what it all means for Chelsea, Spurs, Manchester United and so on. They might even point to the member of the opposition who scored the winning goal thereby breaking English hearts, and start speculating with huge fascination about whether he might be bought by their team. For God's sake guys, his goal has just knocked us out! What are you even thinking about, you complete and actual sadist?

The lash-out-and-smash-a-pub fan

This is the type for whom I have the least sympathy. In fact, no sympathy. Thank goodness I don't know any personally, but I've seen plenty in action in pubs up and down the country. The final whistle is blown and England are out. I stare into space with a look of complete emptiness and despair. But not far from me one or two fans will be

smashing their pint glasses on the floor, swearing loudly and aggressively, kicking over bar stools and generally taking out their anger on any inanimate object, or even person, that happens to be in their way. The more they drink, the worse they get. Yes, unlike me, they get it all out straight away, which psychologists recommend. But they go way over the top, making the experience of seeing England lose even more horrible and shaming for the rest of us.

The 'Southgate should be sacked' fan

I find this type tough to comprehend. Any time we get a good manager, like Sven, Fabio and particularly Gareth, and we actually start getting good results, the expectations of this type go through the roof and they get it into their heads that if Gareth (or Sven or Fabio) has a couple of bad matches they are obviously not up to it and should be booted out. They are more commonly found in club football, for ever believing that their current manager has 'taken us as far as he can', but there are certainly a few in the international game too. They are best ignored, but it's difficult because they tend to give their views uninvited. They all wanted Sven out of course, only to find that his successor took England downhill fast.

The 'let's get back to work' fan

As any obsessive knows, you need time to grieve. You can't just flick a switch and start focusing on the day job, any more than you could flick a switch to heal a broken leg. You just have to go through the pain, and it takes a while. But the 'let's get back to work' fan has no sense of this at all. Just because they are able to compartmentalise so readily, or perhaps don't care enough, they assume everyone else should be able to do the same. So, just when you want to give yourself to your grief, they come over to your desk and start asking you technical questions about a customer

order or a new product being developed. This type was particularly aggravating in 2002, when England's quarter-final against Brazil finished mid-morning on a Friday and everyone trudged straight back to the office.

The 'players don't care enough' fan

This is the type who's convinced that it all comes down to player motivation, or lack of it. 'England players are paid far too much,' they'll bitterly declare, completely ignoring the fact that the Spanish or Italians or French who knocked us out are paid just the same. I might have wasted my life watching England play football, but it has at least given me an appreciation of whether or not the players want it. And I am 100 per cent convinced they always do. Desire has never been the issue. Yet the 'England players don't care enough' fan can never be persuaded otherwise, reckoning it's about money. Do they really believe that if Harry Kane was paid the minimum wage, he'd score more goals? That's the logic to their argument.

Why do England under-perform?

IF YOU listen to some people, you might get the impression that England haven't actually underperformed at all since 1966. You might get the impression that we win no more or no less than we should, and that there's a perfectly sound mathematical reason for our results.

Garbage. Balderdash. Gut rot.

I give you this: in the last 50 years, the European Championship has been won by Greece, Czechoslovakia (as was) and Denmark, but not England. It's been won by the Netherlands and Portugal, but not England. Are Greece, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Portugal and the Netherlands all 'bigger footballing nations' than England? Of course not. But unlike us, they found a way to win.

And look at the World Cup. In my lifetime, Germany (including West Germany) have won it three times, France twice, Italy twice and Spain once. England? We all know the answer to that one. Now, are Germany, France, Italy and Spain so massively bigger than England, football-wise, that they should collectively win the World Cup eight times while England haven't registered at all? Exactly. You get my point.

For learned mathematicians to come up with the idea that England only somehow get the results a country of our size and footballing pedigree deserves is, in my view, pigswill. We have underperformed. End of. We are probably the biggest underperformers in world football. And we have to admit that first before working out why it is.

Right, got that everyone? Good. So here is my analysis of the principal reasons for our failure.

Administrative incompetence

It's probably possible to write a whole book on this very issue. Who are we talking about? The FA? The Premier League? Let's just call them the administrators. And my goodness they've let us down. A few examples: their failure to provide a winter break despite apparently promising it to Sven-Göran Eriksson a good 20 years ago; the chronic over-scheduling of matches, meaning our players are thoroughly shattered come the summer tournaments; picking managers like Keegan, Taylor and McClaren who simply weren't up to it; and overlooking Brian Clough for the job, probably the greatest English manager in history. (See also the chapter on the Lionesses).

Lack of national identity

This is difficult if not impossible to measure, but England's national identity is often subsumed into the wider British identity. We don't even have our own national anthem to sing before matches, having to make do with the British one instead – something it's high time we put right. Perhaps, if we had our own anthem, the players might be more willing to belt it out just like the fans do, instead of waiting for enlightened managers like Southgate to remind them.

It took until Euro 96 before England flags, rather than Union flags, started to be waved by the fans in the stadium. When I had some friends round to my London pad for Kevin Keegan's first match in 1999, Irena unfurled a huge England flag underneath the telly (good on her) only to be told by one of our number to take it straight down again (she refused).

Does this rather nebulous sense of Englishness have an impact on performance? And what about the fact that

in our little crowded island, large sections of the Welsh and Scottish football support base actively want their bigger neighbour to lose? Like I say, it's tough to measure. But my feeling is that it all plays a part.

Club football comes first

Having spoken to several German football fans, they tell me that their club sides and the national team share equal top billing in their affections. In other words, a Bayern Munich supporter will probably want Germany to win the World Cup every bit as much as he or she wants Bayern to win yet another Bundesliga title. But in England, fans tend to put their club side first. Not all, but most. So, your average Manchester City fan, for example, cares far more about winning the Premier League than England winning the World Cup. Same goes for Chelsea, Arsenal and Liverpool fans etc.

That attitude feeds through to the clubs, who have often pulled their players out of international matches far too readily, and, as Manchester United famously did with Bryan Robson before the 1986 World Cup, refuse to let a key England player have a badly needed operation if it interferes with his club duties. It's not surprising then, that of the five top European leagues (England, France, Italy, Germany and Spain) the Premier League has the lowest percentage of domestic players and managers.

Some players, too, care far more about their club side. Jamie Carragher once famously admitted thinking, after missing a penalty in an England shoot-out loss, that 'at least it wasn't Liverpool'. Members of the golden generation of players (those who played under Sven-Göran Eriksson) have admitted not sharing with each other on England duty those defensive strategies, for example, that they used at their club, for fear of giving their domestic opponents an advantage.

Do German players have that same reticence when they play for their national team? I very much doubt it. And what about other countries? I'm not massively fond of Gareth Bale for reasons I've described, but when he celebrated a Welsh victory in 2019 with a flag that read, 'Wales. Golf. Madrid. In that order', I nodded my head in appreciation of the sentiment. I reckon Beckham and Kane would say the same about England, but I'm not sure how many others would.

Not wanting it badly enough

OK, I'm going to go cross over to a different code here. But when the All Blacks lose a rugby match, it's considered a national disgrace in New Zealand, and a cause for collective mourning (my Kiwi friend Thurl would testify for that). Losing is just not an option, and as a result, they generally just keep on winning. Only the South Africans have an equally strong, not just desire to win, but need to win – and they too have a fabulous rugby record. To me, England's appalling underperformance in football, a game we invented, should be a source of complete disgrace. As a nation we should be determined to put it right, just like New Zealand in rugby. But we don't. It just doesn't matter to us enough.

Opponents cheating

I've included a chapter in this book on top villains, but that's not the whole story. Other national teams have traditionally been more ready than we are to employ the dark arts – feigning injury, surrounding the referee to influence decisions, diving to win penalties etc. Colombia's tactics in the second-round knockout match in 2018 were particularly low, but because we won that one on a shoot-out the Colombians haven't entered our pantheon of villains. It's not that England are above skulduggery, but just that it is

not so engrained in our footballing culture. If, for example, Gary Lineker had done what Maradona did in 1986 he'd have come home as something of an embarrassment. What a contrast with the way Argentina to this day hero-worships Maradona, not least because of that particular goal.

Overcrowded island

England is just about the most overcrowded major country in Europe. For every one person per square mile in France, there are four in England. This has an impact on everything from the size of the homes we live in, to crowded roads, waiting lists for public services, tiny parking spaces, fewer green spaces and, yes, fewer playing fields. If kids don't have the space to play in, they are simply less likely to play football, less likely to develop their skills and less likely, eventually, to become top footballers. When was the last time England produced the world's best player in his era? Stanley Matthews perhaps? That's a heck of a long time ago.

The English press

Bobby Robson was a famous victim of the media's obsession with sex scandals. Sven-Göran Eriksson was shocked by it, saying that few journalists in Italy, where he managed for several years, would take the slightest bit of interest in his private life beyond the football pitch. Eriksson was also the victim of a tabloid sting by the 'fake Sheikh'.

Then the FA's initial chosen successor to him, Luiz Felipe Scolari, turned the job down specifically because of the intrusiveness of the English media, which meant that the job was given instead to Steve McClaren, who many, including me, considered not up to it. Glenn Hoddle too was brought down not by results on the pitch but by a horrible headline in *The Times* quoting him on his admittedly bizarre religious views. The FA chose Kevin Keegan to replace him, someone who said himself he didn't have what it took.

Too often in the past, though less so now, it seems that certain members of the press are happy to damage England's prospects so long as it sells more newspapers. This just doesn't happen in other countries to nearly the same extent.

Inability to take penalties

If England had won their fair share of penalty shoot-outs (let's say they'd won five out of their ten instead of just three out of ten) they would almost certainly have won a major tournament since 1966. The fact that Germany have won six out of seven shoot-outs in their history, for example, goes a long way to explaining why they've won so many trophies; let's not forget that they won the World Cup in 1990 and then Euro 96 after beating England on penalties in the semi-finals of both tournaments.

Until Gareth Southgate came along, England would fear shoot-outs without doing much if anything to prepare properly for them. No surprise then that we kept on losing. Once Gareth arrived, we started looking at the whole process, scientifically, from first principles. Hey presto, we've since won two out of three (or three out of four if you include the third-place play-off in the 2019 Nations League). Why didn't we do this after our first shoot-out loss in 1990? Beats me.

Bad luck

There's a whole chapter in this book on this very issue, focussing on two stupendous pieces of ill fortune in 1990 and 2002, both in knockout matches. So, there's no need to go back through it all here. Suffice to say that England haven't had the gods on their side, and if people point to that goal in 1966 and say that what goes around comes around, I snap back that even if that Geoff Hurst goal wasn't really over the line, and maybe it wasn't, that piece of good fortune doesn't help any fan who didn't witness it. Like me. Most

England fans of today weren't alive in 1966. You'd now have to be at least at the national retirement age to have seen our boys lift the trophy.

* * *

For those who look at this list and think to themselves 'Pah! What a load of nonsense!', I'd ask them to consider why they think England have underperformed compared with countries of a similar size and with a similar footballing pedigree. Why do they think that Germany (similar climate, similar level of prosperity, similar footballing pedigree etc) have won six major tournaments since 1966, while England have won a big fat zero. Saying 'well, the Germans are just better' doesn't cut it. The question is why are they better.

How much would you pay to see England win a trophy?

A FEW years ago, a fascinating hypothetical question was doing the rounds on X (or Twitter as it then was): would you rather find £50 in the street or see England win the World Cup?

Hmm. Interesting choice. Now, clearly, any dilemma here applies only to England fans. I mean, if you ask that question of your average Scotland football fan, they'd probably reply that they'd rather *lose* £50 in the street than see England win the World Cup. And many of my English friends are so uninterested in any form of football, regardless of whether it involves the national side or not, that they'd take that £50 note every time, before spending it on a good night out or popping it in the bank.

But for genuine England fans, ranging from those who care a bit to those, like me, who are compulsively obsessed, this question does indeed pose an interesting philosophical dilemma. Would we put football above a small financial windfall? And if we'd prefer to see England win the World Cup than find £50 in the street (and I'm one of those who definitely would) then just how much money would we need to find before we'd change our mind and consider keeping the cash instead?

Clearly, the answer to that question depends to a considerable extent on the relative wealth of the person being asked. For some people, £50 might make the difference between heating and eating. Such a person will

understandably take the cash. Whereas for a few lucky others, £50 is the amount they might carry around to tip taxi drivers, waiters and porters in posh hotels. For them, even if they only care slightly about England football, they'd probably punt for the World Cup.

So, perhaps rather than using a specific monetary amount in this hypothetical question, we should tweak it and ask this: would you rather find in the street an amount of money equivalent to two per cent of your monthly pre-tax income (including income from any capital you might have) or see England win the World Cup?

Even that's an imperfect question, because there are a whole bunch of people out there with considerable liabilities, while others might be completely debt-free. But it's the best question I can come up with in the absence of a learned economist to help me out.

So, let's think about it. Find two per cent of your monthly income in the street or see England win the World Cup? What do you reckon? Well, having seen a few replies to this question on Twitter (when it was based on the £50 figure, which is – very approximately – about two per cent of the UK's average monthly salary), I can report that quite a few folk would rather take the cash. Fair play to them. That's their choice, and two per cent of your monthly income is clearly a significant amount. I'm not making any judgment here.

But such people are almost certainly not obsessives. I'm sure of that. Because obsessives like me would scoff at such an unbalanced choice. Just two per cent? You must be joking. You've got to go much higher than that. Really? Yup, much higher before we even begin to find the choice the slightest bit agonising, and before it would even dignify the word 'dilemma'. Oh, right. Well in that case, how about five per cent? No, no, no, you're still not even in the right ballpark. OK, ten per cent? Still way too low. Keep going.

Blimey, all right, what about 25 per cent. Nope. 50 per cent? Well, OK, you're starting to get there. But the answer is still a resounding no. England still wins. Crikey! Are you sure? You're not taking the mickey? OK, well, here's a final offer: how about 100 per cent of your pre-tax monthly income or England win the World Cup?

Now, of course, even for an obsessive like me, there has to come a point where the money starts to get tempting. Or at least there comes a point where the choice in front of us makes us at least think about it. And 100 per cent of our monthly income might be that point. It is, after all, a heck of a lot for anyone.

But, there again, obsessives are obsessives for a reason. We spend our lives dreaming about our team winning a major tournament. We spend an unhealthy amount of time watching the team play, reading about it and discussing it. We fantasise about what it would be like if that ultimate victory ever finally came our way. We can visualise how we and everyone around us might react, and almost feel the collective outpouring of joy. We know we could die happy if it ever did happen. For many of us, it would be just about the best thing we could ever experience.

So, if I'm honest, even when offered the choice between a windfall equivalent of 100 per cent of my monthly income, I'd still go for England winning the World Cup, or the Euros for that matter. And I say that as someone for whom a financial windfall of that considerable amount would be a much needed and very lovely thing indeed.

Now, I know what some people might be asking themselves. If even that amount of money wouldn't turn an obsessive's head away from the national team, just how much would? In fact, is there *any* amount that would? And it's a very difficult question for an obsessive to answer. There might not even *be* an answer. Because I'd be forced to reword the question yet again and ask myself this: what

amount of money might I need to receive as a windfall to get the same amount of pleasure and fulfilment I'd get from England, for the first time in my 50 years of watching them with such longing, loyalty, hope and devotion, finally win a World Cup or European Championship?

The honest answer to that is that you'd need to get up towards my *annual* income before I'd even start to get interested. And even then, I might well still turn you down.

Do I have a screw loose? Probably. Am I certifiably insane? Possibly. I'm open to both of those. But this is the mindset of the obsessive, and I freely admit I'm up there with the worst of them. Logic doesn't figure.

* * *

Having said all of that, I really don't want anyone to get the impression that football comes before absolutely everything else without exception. It can't and won't. Ever. For example, the health and happiness of my family will always be my number one priority. No contest. Even England can't compete with that.

But if you base the question around money alone – even if you get right up to not just my monthly income but my annual income – I'd have to point you to the old adage that money doesn't make you happy. Whereas England winning the World Cup would give me deep, profound and lasting joy and satisfaction. An obsessive fan, of any team, knows full well what really counts. And money isn't it.

The Lionesses

OF THE many historical mistakes made by England's footballing administrators and authorities, surely none was more egregious than the determination to do everything possible, for an incredible five decades, to prevent women from playing the game.

For those who don't know, the facts are horrendous. Up until about a century ago, the women's game was in rude health, with matches sometimes attracting tens of thousands of spectators. But the FA then took the unconscionable decision, possibly born of jealousy, to ban women from playing football for the utterly spurious reason that it was 'not fitted' for them and was 'bad for their health'. It was crazy and arguably wicked, but there you go. Other countries followed suit.

Not surprisingly, many women's teams were forced to disband, and the women's game as a whole was effectively mothballed for many decades, right up until the early 70s when the FA was shamed into reversing its stance. But by that time, of course, the women were miles behind where they should have been.

What's more, this ridiculous prejudice, inexcusable even by the standards of the time, meant that your average football fan in this country, male or female, didn't see women's football, live or on TV, until the early part of the 21st century, and didn't start paying proper attention until a further decade had gone by. In fact, it was only when England had a great run at the 2015 World Cup, reaching

the semi-final, that they got the kind of media attention they'd always deserved.

But things then advanced at pace, which just shows how diabolical that FA decision in the early 1920s had been. In 2019, the Lionesses reached the World Cup semi-final again, getting knocked out by the USA, the eventual winners before then achieving a fabulous triumph on home soil in the 2022 Euros (I can still see Chloe Kelly's awesome shirt-waving celebration after scoring the winning goal against Germany in the final).

But that was just the start. They reached the World Cup Final in 2023 and then, in what must rank as English football's greatest single international achievement, retained their Euros title in 2025 in Switzerland. By any standards, that's an incredible run of success, and all the more remarkable considering the sorry history of the women's game in England and the fact that women had to play catch-up from a standing start in the early 70s.

In the last decade of watching them, the Lionesses have given me far more cause for joy and celebration than the Three Lions have in the whole of the last 50 years. They have, after all, actually lifted a trophy. Twice. And it is likely that a decade from now, perhaps sooner, the Lionesses will mean as much to me as the men's team. I look forward to that being so.

How can I be so sure they'll matter to that extent? Well, let's look at a sport where, unlike football, women have throughout my life shared equal billing with their male counterparts. Let's look at tennis. There is no doubt in my mind that the top female players over the last half century, like Serena Williams, Steffi Graf and Martina Navratilova, thanks largely to the efforts of Billie Jean King in the 1960s and 1970s, are recognised as every bit as 'big' in the sporting sense as Pete Sampras, Roger Federer, Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic. Nearly all of us would agree

that the women's final at Wimbledon is just as important and high-profile as the men's.

So, when Emma Raducanu won the 2021 US Open – the first Grand Slam triumph by an English player for nearly half a century – it gave me every bit as much pleasure as I'd get from an English man winning a Grand Slam tournament, something I'm yet to see (though I have of course watched the triumphs of Scotland's Andy Murray). Oh, and if anyone thinks that Raducanu, brought up in Kent from the age of two, is somehow not English, I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself.

As for football, the women's game is not yet seen, anywhere in the world, as quite as important as the men's. We must be honest about that. But it is catching up fast, and I reckon that the successes of the Lionesses will pretty soon obsess me every bit as much as the triumphs and tribulations of the men's team.

The only reason they don't already, or not quite, is simply because I have spent so much longer following the men, starting way back in 1976. I've invested an absurd amount of emotional energy on them. I've been through utter heartache on 24 separate occasions (that's the 24 major tournaments I've been around for), while occasionally experiencing the most gorgeous delight. The hope has built up over my entire life. That weight of history matters, and I don't apologise for it. If you want to blame someone for the men still mattering a bit more, point your finger at the 20th-century FA, not your average fan like me.

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But the Lionesses are getting me there, and already were by the time the US knocked them out of that 2019 World Cup. If we're honest, the US were just better than us in that match, and probably deserved their victory, which they followed up by winning the whole tournament just a few

days later. But their superiority in no way excused Alex Morgan's gloating celebration after she'd scored against us, pretending to sip a cup of tea, which was widely interpreted (and to my knowledge, she's never fully denied) as some kind of dig at the English. It certainly felt like it.

I have no idea what she was thinking. The US and UK are meant to be friends, so we must ask what happened to good sportsmanship not just in defeat, but in victory too. Is there ever a reason for such a rub-it-in-your-face mickey-take? Particularly from the US?

Well, Morgan's antics gave me my first experience with the Lionesses of the hurt I've felt with the men on so many occasions. To me, she stepped over the line. I can't imagine the Lionesses ever doing that. I can't imagine a Lioness scoring against the US and then pretending to eat a Big Mac as some kind of dig at the US's obesity crisis. We respect our opponents too much for that kind of behaviour. (Incidentally, when Morgan's USA got knocked out early in the 2023 World Cup, I was secretly very pleased.)

But Morgan did what she did, and it awakened in me a passion for our women's team. So, when we got to the final of the 2022 Euros at Wembley Stadium, I plonked myself in front of the TV alongside my friend Alex, the erudite shipping lawyer from Hull, and our wives, and was willing the Lionesses on with huge hope and desire, just as I did a year earlier with the men.

And when that moment of triumph came, and the referee blew her final whistle, with Sarina Wiegman and her coaching staff rushing on to the pitch in rapturous celebration, and 'Three Lions' blaring out on the loudspeakers, and the fans raucously leaping around, I really did feel that sense of delight and relief which I've yearned to experience for all these years with the men without fulfilment. And seeing the Lionesses actually lift

the Euros trophy in front of a huge Wembley crowd was utterly glorious.

Over the last few years, while I've been watching them, the Lionesses have achieved something, beyond just the small matter of winning trophies, which has historically eluded their male counterparts. They keep finding a way to win even when they look dead and buried. We've almost come to expect it.

To take the last Euros as an example, the Lionesses were outplayed by the Swedes in the quarter-final, and were 2-0 down approaching full time. But, somehow, their never-say-die attitude and belief in themselves meant that they were able to score two late goals.

And then despite missing numerous penalties in the eventual shoot-out, they still found a way to win, with Lucy Bronze's final spot-kick showing such powerful defiance that I was rendered speechless with admiration. Along with Trent Alexander-Arnold's penalty against the Swiss in the 2024 Euros, it was probably the most convincing, unsavable England shoot-out penalty I've ever seen. What a player Bronze is. We later discovered she'd played the entire tournament with a broken leg. You couldn't make it up.

It was the same story in the semi-final against Italy. By their own standards, the Lionesses played poorly and were deservedly behind. They were still behind deep in injury time, but yet again they found a way, with Michelle Agyemang equalising in the 96th minute. After that, there was only going to be one winner. A deflated Italy, so often our conquerors in the men's game, were bullied out of it, and we marched on.

The final was simply incredible for guts and strength of mind, all the more so for the fact that our most skilful player, Lauren James, clearly wasn't fit and had to be substituted before half-time. But we didn't allow that to derail us, and, watching the match in Finland, just like for the men's Euros

final a year earlier, I was staggered by the Lionesses' sheer bloody-minded determination to hang in there against a technically superior Spanish team. Chloe Kelly's last penalty in yet another shoot-out just never looked like missing. 'I'm so proud to be English,' she commented afterwards. Well said, Chloe.

It was England's third major international trophy at senior level, following 1966 and 2022, and our first on foreign soil. It must therefore rank as our most impressive football achievement ever, for either men or women.

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I like to think that the women and men can feed off each other. I like to think that the women's triumph in Euro 2022 gave the men greater belief, helping them get to the final of Euro 2024, and that the Lionesses' second trophy in 2025 will help the men believe at the World Cup of 2026. Likewise, I hope that the relative success (though no tournament victory, sadly) of the men under Gareth Southgate might have done a bit to help the women too. It's a virtuous circle, with success breeding success across the gender divide.

Most of all, I look forward to getting more and more emotionally caught up in the Lionesses as the years go by. Yes, that will present more risk of heartache. Of course it will. But judging by what I've seen over the last decade, it will also give me a far greater chance to experience more joy. Good on you Lionesses. You're the business.

Why I love VAR

FEW THINGS divide fans, pundits, players and managers more than VAR. Just the mention of it can get people all riled up and indignant, meaning that those, like me, who support it often find ourselves drowned out by a chorus of furious condemnation.

So, I'd better say first of all that I totally understand why so many despise this technology. It undoubtedly stops the flow of the game, with some delays for VAR checks lasting five minutes or more. Unlike in the old days, when your team scores a goal, you're never completely sure whether to celebrate or not, fearing someone might have strayed offside by a toenail. In contrast, for a few seconds after your team concedes, you're left desperately hoping that some nameless set of officials in a small, dark room somewhere (who are always just referred to as 'VAR') will find an obscure reason to overturn it. There's the inconsistency too, with VAR interfering in some instances and failing to do so in others. It can therefore be intensely frustrating. Grey areas abound.

But on balance I'm all in favour. The benefits outweigh the disadvantages. In fact, I love VAR, and I reckon it's no coincidence that the period since its first use at the 2018 World Cup has also been one of English revival. Simply, VAR makes the game fairer, which suits my team.

And my goodness, how the history of our football would have been so much happier and more glorious if we'd always had this technology. OK, Hurst's second goal in 1966 might

have been ruled out, but, given that I wasn't alive then, I can't say that would be too much skin off my nose.

Yet, how about this little lot:

- Maradona's ludicrous 1986 'Hand of God' goal would have been instantly overturned, and the silly man yellow-carded. England could well have gone on to win that match, and, if they had, they would have been big favourites to beat Belgium in the semi-final.
- Ronald Koeman would surely have been sent off for the most blatant of professional fouls on David Platt in that crucial World Cup qualifying match in 1993, and quite possibly England would have been awarded a penalty and taken the lead. Playing against ten men, we'd have then been favourites to get to the finals in the USA in 1994 ahead of the Dutch.
- VAR would, or at least could, have intervened to save David Beckham from a red card in the second-round World Cup knockout tie against Argentina in 1998, when his leg brushed Diego Simeone's shin. It would have been obvious to VAR that Simeone was play-acting with his farcical simulated dive to the ground as though he'd just suffered a massive heart attack. In fact, if there was any justice – always a difficult thing to achieve with FIFA in charge – Simeone would have been the one to get sent off and Beckham allowed to continue playing.
- With VAR advising the referee instead of the bullying Cristiano Ronaldo, it's likely that Wayne Rooney would have been given only a yellow

card, not a red, in the 2006 quarter-final against Portugal. With our best player still on the pitch, it's also entirely possible we'd have progressed to the semi-final. (How Rooney's ever forgiven his former Manchester United team-mate, I have no idea. I haven't.)

- Most incontrovertibly, Frank Lampard's thunderbolt goal against Germany in 2010 would have stood. It was, after all, about a foot over the line. We'd have gone in at 2-2 at the interval, with the momentum in our favour.

Now, admittedly, there would also have been occasions when VAR would have worked against us, notably in the Euro 96 quarter-final against Spain, when two crucial decisions went in our favour. But, on balance, England would have gained far more from VAR than we'd have lost, particularly in knockouts, if only the technology had been available from when I started watching in the mid-70s.

It's also obvious to me that VAR, horribly imperfect though it is, not only goes quite a way to prevent obvious injustices, but more importantly has helped clamp down on the outrageous cheating that has besmirched the game – and there's been way too much of that throughout my life.

Take the practice of diving either to win penalties or to get an opponent sent off. For obvious reasons, I felt no sympathy for Maradona's Argentina in the World Cup Final against West Germany in 1990, given their own history of blatant gamesmanship. In fact, I was delighted by the result, and only too pleased to see Maradona get a taste of his own hideous medicine. But it is also difficult to deny that Argentina had a player sent off because West Germany's star striker Jürgen Klinsmann preposterously exaggerated how badly he'd been fouled, rolling around and arching his back like he was in some kind of terminal

agony. Needless to say, he was fine to carry on playing just moments later.

And did Rudi Völler dive to win a penalty in the last few minutes of that match, gifting his side the only goal? It certainly looked like it, and if he feels that's unfair on him, he should point the finger of blame at his team-mates who had perfected the art of simulation, making us all so much more suspicious. In fact, it was a pretty grubby match all round, with Argentina behaving appallingly, which just encouraged the Germans to respond in kind. VAR would have made it a much fairer contest and a better spectacle.

And who can forget Rivaldo's disgraceful simulation in Brazil's 2002 World Cup win against Turkey? With Brazil leading 2-1 and full time approaching, the Turks were understandably keen to get on with things. Foolishly, one of their players, Hakan Ünsal, kicked the ball hard towards Rivaldo, who was by the touchline and in position to take a corner. The ball hit his thigh at the sort of pace that might make a child stumble backwards but would hardly inconvenience a grown man, let alone one of the world's best footballers. Yet it prompted him to collapse and writhe around, clasping, of all things, his face, convincing the hopelessly gullible referee to send Ünsal off. VAR could have intervened to prevent this.

Incidentally, in a just world (i.e. not the one inhabited by FIFA), Rivaldo would have received a lengthy ban. He certainly wouldn't have played again in that tournament, and wouldn't have lined up against England in the quarter-final, a match in which he scored his team's first goal. But despite admitting the day after the Turkish tie that he'd cheated, FIFA merely fined him about £5,000 (loose change to an international footballer) and allowed him to play on and eventually lift the trophy. What kind of message does that send out? That if you cheat, you prosper, of course.

But credit where it's due. After that Lampard disallowed goal in 2010, and after a half-hearted apology from Sepp Blatter, FIFA stepped up the process to introduce goal-line technology. Fast forward a decade and a half, and VAR is now so widely used that there is surely no going back. It's unthinkable that we'll return to the days of assistant referees, or linesmen as we used to call them, being the final arbiters of offside decisions, and it's unconscionable that we might revert to referees making the sort of clear and obvious errors that condemned England in 1986 and 2010 without recourse to technology.

VAR is here to stay, and we'd better get used to it. The game is better and fairer as a result. I, for one, rejoice.

England football as a unifying force

ONE OF my earliest England memories is celebrating Kevin Keegan's goal against Italy in the autumn of 1977 with my neighbour, Mark. He was an Aston Villa fan, as many of my friends in Birmingham were, and given his side's supremacy over West Brom, he nearly always had bragging rights. But that night against Italy, we were on the same side. It was great. Watching it together, and enjoying a famous England win in each other's company, made it so much more special.

Since then, down the years and decades, I've watched big England matches with fans of all sorts of different clubs, from Liverpool to Plymouth Argyle, from Arsenal to Tranmere Rovers, from Manchester United to Walsall. Yes, some are more passionate about England than others, but by and large we're all pulling in the same direction, keen for our national team to win, and it's a lovely thing to behold.

England football brings complete strangers together, too. In the 1990s, and living alone when I first got to London, I got into the habit of nipping down the road to one of my local pubs to watch the big matches, usually while nursing a pint. Without fail, and within minutes of getting there, I'd be chatting to fellow footie fans I'd never met before, and who afterwards, I'd never see again. We'd discuss everything that was going on, applauding things together, groaning at poor shots or misplaced passes and sharing our views on what the manager should do next. We'd be best buddies for a couple of hours, then, when

it was all over, wish each other luck, shake hands and say goodbye. Isn't that all rather beautiful?

And what else can unite tens of millions of people like England football does? Just look at the figures. No fewer than 31 million of us watched the Euro 2020 final against Italy on ordinary home TV sets, with millions more watching on big screens in pubs and clubs or through streaming services. Still others followed on the radio. Adding them together, it might not be too much a stretch to say that close to 40 million of us followed that Euro final, the overwhelming majority keen, or in my case desperate, for England to win (which of course we didn't).

Yes, there are some who show no interest at all. Like my brother Stephen, who is now a bookish academic and still vaguely supports West Brom but is completely uninterested in England and goes shopping in an always-deserted Tesco when they play big knockouts. Oh, and Irena's husband, Bernie, finds loyalty to a football team, club or country, totally unfathomable. He was there, in body at least, when Suzi and Irena watched the crunch 2007 game against Croatia in a Stoke Newington pub, the one that ended with the 'wally with the brolly' headlines. He was doing a series of sudoku puzzles throughout, and later asked Irena if it was an important match.

But Stephen and Bernie are in a minority when it comes to the really big matches. And football has no real rival in this respect. Other sports have a go, but they can't match its pulling power. For example, just under 13 million of us watched England against South Africa in the Rugby World Cup Final of 2019, and around five million saw the cricket World Cup Final between England and New Zealand that same year, a figure that admittedly would have been higher if Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic hadn't been playing out an epic Wimbledon final at exactly the same time. And

the Olympics? Well, the opening ceremony of London 2012 attracted a UK audience of 27 million, while 16 million saw Jessica Ennis win the heptathlon gold on 'Super Saturday'. Those figures are all hugely impressive, of course, but football's still ahead.

Outside sport, there are big royal occasions, yet even those don't have quite the same unifying qualities they used to possess. The funeral of Princess Diana attracted around 32 million viewers, and was a tremendously poignant communal occasion, but that was three decades ago now. Nearly 30 million of us watched the Queen's funeral in 2022, but that dropped down to under 19 million for the King's coronation, which is also remembered for all those 'Not My King' placards. Support for the royal family was once a given, but is now dropping fast.

The sad truth is that we are a more and more divided, fractured nation. We don't agree on much, and we're so often siloed off into little echo chambers on social media that people with different opinions are increasingly othered. The divisions over Brexit are legendary, but we also seem to despise, as never before, those who have other views from us across a whole range of economic, social and cultural issues. Far too many folk really do condemn, or even hate those who don't share their opinions. They write off their opponents as evil, heartless, brainless, backward and selfish. And sometimes even worse.

Yet when England play a big knockout match, particularly a semi-final or final (and there have been six of those since 2018 compared with only one between 1990 and 2016) we all forget our differences and find ourselves cheering for exactly the same thing. For two or three hours, nothing matters apart from the match. And even for a couple of days afterwards, win or lose, football dominates the national conversation, before rapidly fading away and leaving me and my fellow obsessives to carry on

the celebrations among ourselves or, more often I'm afraid, to wallow in sorrow.

My nearest and dearest footie-watching friends often have political opinions that are diametrically opposed to mine. When we're not talking about football, which does occasionally happen, we'll be, if not quite at each other's throats, certainly arguing and disagreeing colourfully. During Covid, for example, I often felt I was in a minority of one (which actually wasn't that far off the truth of the matter) in my scepticism about the wisdom of lockdown and finding it all to be overkill that did more harm than good.

Close friends thought I was barmy, and told me so. But come the Euro finals in 2021, we were all on the same side, and if we had any disagreements, they were entirely good-natured, and were about things like team formations and whether, for example, Jack Grealish should be in the starting line-up or come off the bench as an impact sub. Oh, and one of my chums was adamant that Southgate should be sacked after the fairly underwhelming group stage and a new manager installed before the second-round knockout match against Germany a few days later.

That was an eccentric opinion, it has to be said. But who's to say he might not have been right? OK, I was and still am a huge Gareth fan, but I'm willing to discuss the view (albeit it's one with which I disagree) that another manager might have done still better, even if he'd been brought in mid-tournament. And that's the thing with football: by and large any disagreement between fans of the same team is friendly and good-natured, because we all ultimately want the same thing, which is simply England winning.

This power of England's football team to unify, if only briefly, a fractured English nation deserves more recognition and appreciation. Gareth Southgate summed it up perfectly in his Dear England letter on the eve of Euro 2020.

'There's something I tell our players before every England game,' he wrote, 'and the reason that I repeat it is because I really believe it with all my heart. I tell them that when you go out there, in this shirt, you have the opportunity to produce moments that people will remember for ever. You are a part of an experience that lasts in the collective consciousness of our country. Every game, no matter the opposition, has the potential to create a lifelong memory for an England fan somewhere.'

He's dead right. What a beautiful sentiment, one that almost brings a tear to the eye. For great football moments do indeed last in our collective English consciousness, and are more powerful precisely because they are shared so widely. In fact, what would England be without sport in general, and football in particular? Would England, as a collective entity, even matter?

I'm biased, as ever, but I reckon the importance of England's football team goes way beyond mere results on the pitch. Because of football, Englishness is a thing.

Winning is a habit – and so is losing

EARLY IN 2022, I was doing some training work overseas when it suddenly occurred to me that one of the delegates on my course looked just like a middle-aged Bobby Charlton, though without the combover. It really was uncanny.

But that wasn't the only reason I was drawn to him. What I appreciated far more was the fact that he was one of the few people I've met in a business environment who cared as much about football as I do. By that I mean he went way beyond a mere passing interest in the game. Like me, although about a decade younger, he was a proper obsessive.

So, during breaks, we'd take ourselves off into a corner to discuss the great matches we'd seen and talk about the upcoming World Cup in Qatar. Over lunch, we'd share anecdotes and theories about the game, and generally delve deep into the kind of territory that would bore the pants off 99.9 per cent of the population, but which never ceases to fascinate genuine obsessives.

The fact that this guy was German (yes, a German Bobby Charlton), and a Bayern Munich fan, somehow made our conversations, if anything, even more captivating. Because, as I've written, your average Bayern Munich and Germany fan hasn't exactly been short of success over the years. While I, in my late 50s, am still to break my duck, that German delegate, the lucky so and so, has celebrated an average of about a trophy a year throughout his life. Even if you ignore his club side for one moment, and

just focus on his national team, since he started watching in the late 1980s, he's enjoyed World Cup successes in 1990 and 2014, and the European Championship victory of 1996.

So, whereas I regard England lifting a World Cup or European Championship as some kind of glorious but improbable fantasy, and one that I'm increasingly and depressingly aware might always elude me, that Teutonic Charlton doppelgänger sees tournament triumphs as completely normal. So much so, that he was able to view the whole thing with a kind of shoulder-shrugging insouciance. There was no smugness or arrogance in this, but just an honest, understated acceptance that winning trophies was something that he, as a Germany fan, had experienced often enough for it not to be at all exceptional.

Blimey, what a contrast with me. I guess it's the sort of attitude that an extremely cool and good-looking young guy might have towards the whole process of attracting equally gorgeous young women. Success happens so often, and comes so easily, that there's really no need to get all that worked up about it. That's how it must feel to be a German football fan, all the bloody time.

That said, the good thing from my point of view was that I was talking to German Bobby not all that long after Euro 2020, when England of course had actually knocked Germany out in the second round on that scintillating summer afternoon at Wembley. It was therefore one of the handful of times in the last 60 years when a Germany fan and an England fan could get together to discuss things, and the England fan not feel the most gigantic sense of inferiority.

But there was no point in my bragging about it. Yes, we'd won that match. And yes, it was awesome. But the awful memories of being knocked out by the Germans in 1982, 1990, 1996 and 2010 were far too overwhelming. I

was only too conscious that during my lifetime, Germany's football record compared with England's has been like that of a spanking new top-of-the-range BMW next to a battered old Austin Allegro. If we'd got into some sort of argument about it, there was only going to be one winner. Him.

So, I came clean, and told my new German friend how it actually felt to see England win that match at the Euros a year earlier. I told him that it was because we'd so rarely beaten Germany in tournament football in my lifetime (only in the 2000 Euros group stage and then that famous 5-1 World Cup qualifier in Munich in 2001), while never doing so in a knockout match, that it felt like – and I used these precise words – 'a miracle'.

And that's when I really, truly came to understand quite how much England have underachieved down the years, and how much their failures have wrecked my sense of proportion, not to say my entire psychology. Because on hearing me say the word 'miracle', German Bobby audibly scoffed. Not in a nasty or pointed way, but just in a 'Come on you silly Englishman, this is a game of 11 against 11, so it can hardly be described as a miracle when you sometimes win' kind of a way.

I felt suitably admonished. Because logically he was right. Of course he was. It's logically absurd to talk about a miracle, as though it's like the feeding of the 5,000 when one footballing nation beats another, particularly when you have the advantage of playing at home, as England did that day in 2021.

Yet, in another way, the word felt entirely appropriate and I don't regret using it. Because Germany have defeated us so often. Because the bigger the match, the more likely it is that they'll do so. Because if it goes to penalties, they will almost certainly do so. Because Germany, more than any other country, has been responsible for so much English misery.

The horrible truth is that beating England, for Germany, has become a habit. Just as losing to them has for us. In a non-literal sense, therefore, 'miracle' was about right. That really is how it felt. I had a sense of disbelief after that Wembley match, just as you might if you witness something that appears simply supernatural.

That, I'm afraid, is what England's done to me. In contrast to German Bobby, my expectations are so low when it comes to knockout matches against the world's biggest teams that I go into them thinking that only a miracle will do for us. And for that to happen, you have to believe that miracles are possible.

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The sports journalist Jonathan Liew has a good take on 'belief' and its power in sport. He reckons you need much more than belief to win the big matches, and that the most successful teams do. I agree with him entirely. For example, when England lost to France in the quarter-final of the 2022 World Cup, despite being the better side on the day, Liew wrote that England merely believed, whereas France 'knew'.

And why did France know? Because they'd done it before. They were the reigning world champions. They hadn't lost to England in a competitive fixture for 40 years. History matters.

And why didn't England know? Because they couldn't. They hadn't won a knockout against a major nation away from Wembley *ever*. So, they only believed. History matters.

When you only believe, and don't know, winning is so much harder. And it gets harder and still harder each time you fail. It's so tough to break that cycle. So, yes, it really can feel like a miracle when you actually do it. But even that isn't enough. You have to do it several times before you stop only believing and start knowing. Before it becomes a habit.

German Bobby saw his team lose at Wembley in 2021 in a knockout. But it'll take a lot more than that to stop him knowing. Likewise, it'll also take a lot more than that to stop me, and the whole of England, merely believing.

That's the trouble with 60 years of hurt. It's a lot.

England's junior-age successes

THOSE MATHEMATICIANS who have convinced themselves that England haven't actually underperformed at all, and that our failure to win a major trophy can be entirely explained by applying this or that scientific formula, need to be asked this: how come England can win at junior levels? How come we can do it when our players are 17 or 20, but suddenly stop doing it when they become senior, forced to watch on as Greece and Denmark win the Euros instead of us? What's the mathematical explanation for that, then?

Let's just look at some of England's tremendous junior-age tournament victories over recent years. First the under-21s, the level just below the seniors. They've been absolutely marvellous, winning the last two European Championships for their age group, in 2023 and 2025. And the under-20s? Again, terrific. They won the World Cup in 2017. The under-19s? Excellent, lifting the European Championship in 2016 and 2022. And finally, the under-17s. They won their European Championship in 2014 and the World Cup in 2018. Not too bad, eh?

In summary, England's juniors have lifted no fewer than seven major titles in the last 12 years, which is a stunning return and better than anyone else in Europe. During that same period, the Germans, for example, have won four junior titles; the French two; the Spanish three; and the Italians none at all. At junior level, we're the best.

Now, as far as the seniors go, there are two ways of looking at this. The first, and most positive, is to say that

all this junior talent will surely feed through to the senior team, and we will therefore win a Euros or World Cup any day now. It's just a matter of time. (All England fans pray for that, of course.)

The second, rather more pessimistic view, is to say that as soon as these juniors start to graduate through to the seniors, they get hamstrung by all the doubt, fear, caution and negativity that have plagued our national team since the early 70s. They start dealing in near misses and brave defeats rather than the glorious victories of their younger years. They start feeling the burden of history, and find it way too heavy.

So, which will it be? A glorious future or more of the same? Only time will tell. A pessimist might look at those under-17s who lifted the World Cup in 2017, who are now in their mid-20s, and point to the fact that they have yet to achieve a senior tournament victory. The same pessimist might also point out that England won the under-21 Euros in 1982 and 1984 without any senior tournament win in the years that followed. And it's difficult to argue against that.

But football fans are natural optimists. We have to be. Even West Brom and England fans like me are allowed to dream. Otherwise, why keep on watching? What would be the point? Hope, if fading, still springs eternal. It always will.

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In any case, perhaps I'm looking at this the wrong way. Perhaps instead of seeing everything through the lens of the senior team, I should just take as much pleasure as possible from these junior triumphs.

And to a certain extent I do. All right, I haven't seen all those tournament successes by any means. Even an obsessive fan can't spend *all* his time watching England at every age group. I've got to earn a living, and I have to

draw the line somewhere. But two of those successes I did see were fantastic, not just for the final result but for the bravery of our play and for the fact that, unlike so often with the seniors, we went all out for victory rather than simply clinging on and trying to avoid defeat.

I watched the 2018 under-17s World Cup Final against Spain at home in Kent with the family, and made sure to tell the kids that they should savour the triumph, as global tournament wins, at any level, are so few and far between. I can safely say we all did.

Our team that day included players that would go on to represent the country at senior level, such as Phil Foden, Marc Guéhi and Morgan Gibbs-White. They had to come from 2-0 down as well, with Spain looking rampant, but stormed to an eventual 5-2 triumph. What a performance. Foden, in particular, was pure class. It was the first time I'd ever heard of him.

Then there was the under-21s beating a good German side in the final of the 2025 European Championship. Ever mindful of that Gary Lineker comment about 22 men kicking a ball around and in the end the Germans always win, I was convinced we'd end up with silver medals. That's just the way it's always been. But for once the boy and I celebrated a famous English victory, and were only too pleased to laud Lee Carsley's managerial skills. Winning back-to-back Euros is quite some feat.

And the great thing about that one was that it really could have gone either way. England raced into a 2-0 lead before the Germans scored two of their own. A betting man would have backed our opponents at that stage. Yet England found the strength and belief to score an extra-time winner. Fabulous. The only thing that could have made it better would have been winning on penalties. But maybe that was asking for too much, and I'm certainly not complaining. Any win against the Germans is special.

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So, the juniors can do it. The women can do it. It's just the senior men who can't. Or, at least, they haven't yet, although they've got pretty close these last few years.

Well, while we wait, hope, yearn and pray, obsessives like me need to get our kicks when and where we can. When we lifted the under-21 Euros trophy in 2025, I rejoiced. All right, it wasn't a hug-my-neighbour moment. I didn't shed a tear. I didn't embarrass myself, as I surely will if I ever get to see the ultimate. I don't watch it endlessly on YouTube, to the extent that I know the commentary off by heart, as I do with Ollie Watkins's last-minute winner against the Dutch in 2024, and Harry Kane's 2021 header against the Germans at Wembley.

But it was still unmistakably satisfying. And given our sad history, that's as much as any obsessive England fan can ask for.

Can 1966 matter to those of us who weren't alive?

THERE'S LITTLE doubt that 30 July 1966, will always be the most famous day in England's football history, and Geoff Hurst's third goal will always be our most iconic (though I reckon the German goalie could at least have gone for it). That line from the BBC's Kenneth Wolstenholme was so well crafted that it'll probably still be played several centuries from now. Forgive the pun, but it probably won't be all over even then, whatever they think.

So, I almost feel guilty, and definitely a little selfish, when I say that 1966 and all that feels to me like water off a duck's back. To put it bluntly, why should I care? I wasn't alive.

All right, I suppose it's nice to know we won the World Cup, and that we're one of only eight countries to do so. It means our history hasn't been a complete and utter unmitigated disaster, even if it sometimes feels like it to anyone under the age of about 70. It allows us to look back at those old black-and-white TV pictures, as well as the colour film, and take a smidgen of vicarious pleasure in what Moore, Charlton, Hurst and all the other glory boys achieved that day. It means we can endlessly debate England's third goal and wonder whatever happened to that Russian linesman who famously was actually from Azerbaijan (for the record, according to Wikipedia, he went on to officiate in a few more tournaments, then had a long retirement and died in 1993).

But that's about as far as it goes for any fan who wasn't alive to see it. I was born two years later, and by the time I first started watching England in the late 1970s, that great Wembley victory of 1966 was already ancient history. I really wasn't that conscious of it, and none of my friends were either. And if that's how we felt back then, only a few years after the event, I can only imagine that younger supporters today must regard it, if they ever bother to think about it at all, as something weirdly old-fashioned from the history books, from an era when commentators sounded like Prince Philip and England captain Bobby Moore deferentially wiped his muddy fingers before shaking hands with a youthful Queen Elizabeth.

The reality is that you can't take pride or comfort in something you didn't see yourself. I know that, not just with England, but with West Brom, whose rich history includes a league title in 1920 and five FA Cup wins, the last in 1968, the year of my birth. But did any of that matter to me when I stood on Highbury's North Bank in 1978 and sorrowfully watched my Albion heroes get defeated by a rampant Ipswich Town in the FA Cup semi-final? Was it any consolation at all to know that the Baggies had a glorious past before I was born? Not one tiny bit. It gave me no comfort at all. All that mattered was that my Wembley dreams had been shattered.

It's no different with the national side. My first big tournament experience was the 1980 European Championship, when England bombed in the group stage. I was just 12 years old, and felt completely crushed. And if you'd said to me after the Italy defeat, which sent us packing, 'Oh well, son, never mind, we were still world champions just a decade ago,' I'd have wondered what on earth you were on about. 'A decade ago!' I'd have replied. 'A decade ago! That's almost my entire life! Why should I care

about a decade ago? It might as well have been a century ago for all it matters to me.'

* * *

That said, I do really, badly envy England fans who were alive to see 1966. I wonder if they realise, truly and properly, how lucky they were to have witnessed it, and to know how it feels to win the ultimate trophy. Oh, it must be gorgeous. All right, I can't take pride or pleasure in it myself, but I've certainly read quite a lot about it, and seen all the documentaries, and it's clear that even though football wasn't nearly as big then as it is now – apparently you could turn up at your local newsagent to buy tickets for the final – it was still a massive occasion that gave joy and pride to the whole country.

And there's something else for which I envy fans of that generation, something that's possibly even more important. I can't help but think that the fact that you have seen England actually win something, albeit way back in the mists of time, must surely take the edge off the numerous subsequent blows that have littered our post-1966 history.

I get a bit of that with rugby. Yes, it's horrible when England get knocked out of the Rugby World Cup. It's almost, but not quite, as bad as the football equivalent. But it really helps to know that I did actually see Jonny Wilkinson's last-minute drop goal against the Aussies in 2003 and Martin Johnson lifting the trophy into the rainy Sydney skies. I know it sounds silly, but it does ease the pain of all the subsequent losses. It made, for example, the defeat to South Africa in the Rugby World Cup Final of 2019 slightly less awful.

Of course, that doesn't stop me wanting our rugby team to win, and I very much hope I'll see another England Rugby World Cup victory during my life. I really do. It matters to me. But if I don't, it won't hurt me quite so much

as never seeing the footballers win one or other of those two big trophies. Experiencing something once, even if it's never repeated, is so much better than never at all.

Just once. That's what I've had with rugby. And it's all I'm asking for from football. The 1966 generation had it. Every subsequent generation, including mine, haven't. So, I'm sorry, but we have a right to feel a bit left out, and we are entitled to say that what happened 60 years ago is frankly neither here nor there.

The social stigma of being an obsessive fan

ANY FOOTBALL obsessive with the slightest degree of self-awareness knows only too well that their passion can be a complete social no-no. The mere mention of the game, whether it involves England or not, is likely to be greeted by glazed looks, actual physical yawns and all-too-obvious manoeuvres to change the subject as quickly as possible. It's not that there is merely *limited* tolerance for football; there is quite often *no* tolerance at all.

And if you reckon this stigma must also apply to any kind of obsession, footballing or otherwise, I invite you to think again. I've been at social gatherings, from an evening in a pub with mates to a full-on dinner party, where an obsessive film buff will be utterly indulged by everyone else present. It's the same with an obsessive rock-music fan, gardening enthusiast or sci-fi fanatic, or someone who bangs on about how fascinating their job is, or how marvellous a recent holiday was, or how exciting quantum physics can be. All are given the time of day. But not football obsessives.

In fact, I can only think of one obsession that matches football in this respect as a social turn-off, and that's extreme evangelical religious beliefs. Frankly, no one who's not themselves 'born again' wants to sit next to someone boring on about how to welcome Jesus into their lives.

But why should football be lumped in with that lot? What's so socially unacceptable about the world's biggest sport, to the extent that even if you have three footie

obsessives and one normal person around a coffee table, the three obsessives will self-edit out of politeness, and turn the conversation to something that the normal person will find more to their liking? Why are footie fans so consciously inclusive yet never get any such courtesy in return?

This inclusiveness genuinely is something that people with other obsessions lack. Take theatre buffs, of whom I know a few. Now, I like a bit of theatre every so often, but I can't claim to be anything approaching a genuine enthusiast. Yet put me in a room with three keen-as-mustard thesps and they'll happily chat away among themselves about the latest play they've seen, or been in, without the slightest sense of social obligation to me, the non-thespy outsider. Any hope that they might do the decent thing and self-edit like a good, self-aware footie fan, is invariably disappointed.

Having given plenty of thought to this odd inconsistency, I've come to the conclusion that while there's nothing overtly offensive about footie talk, it's seen by non-obsessives as a bit too trivial and even childish to deserve the dignity of polite conversation. In contrast, theatre, music and film are about culture, and who wants to be seen as uncultured? Holidays are all about travel, and who wants to be seen as uninterested in the world around us? Gardening is about nature, and so on.

* * *

Well, those are the social rules, and there's nothing to be gained by footie obsessives moaning about it all. But it does mean, especially in the days just before or after a big knockout match, that while all we obsessives want to talk about is the game, because that's quite literally all we're thinking about, we're forced out of an excess of social decency to chat away about everything from allotments to patchwork quilts and organic vegetables. You name it.

And when I say 'chat', I don't really mean that in the literal sense. I mean listen and nod. Feign interest. Give the impression, as best you can, that you're taking it all in. And if at any stage you blow your cover – perhaps your eyes momentarily glaze over, or you accidentally blurt out, 'God, I hope Bellingham's fit' – and your interlocutor asks you a question to check whether you're fully engaged or not in the latest quilt pattern, a great catch-all response is the phrase 'Without doubt'. A friend of mine recommended those two magic words to me a few years back, and they've got me out of all sorts of potentially awkward moments in the past when my mind is focussed on whether the manager will play a false ten operating alongside Harry Kane, or whether Trent Alexander-Arnold might drift so far into midfield that we get caught on the counter. But be careful to stick to just those two words, without adding a yes or a no at the start. That's where it can go wrong.

Of course, the very best policy at any sort of social gathering is to get as close as possible as quickly as you can to other obsessives. Obviously, this is far easier at a stand-up event than one where everyone's sitting down, because you're free to move around and extricate yourself. And once you've found a fellow obsessive, you can both keep an eye out for any approach from a normal person, and swiftly change the conversation to allotments or quilts as soon as they get within striking distance.

In contrast, at a sit-down event, a non-obsessive who's right across the table can drop into your conversation at any stage, often with a 'you're not talking about football, are you?' kind of accusation. So, keep a close eye out for them. They love to pounce.

And what about gatherings where you don't know people well, and therefore don't know who your fellow fanatics might be? Well, there are a few easy rules to follow. First, don't assume that the person who looks most

promising might be a fanatic. That bloke over there wearing a T-shirt and drinking a lager might well be more fascinated by SUVs than 4-4-2s. And the woman in a posh party frock who looks like she's come straight from the ballet might actually be dying to chat about wing-backs and holding midfielders.

Secondly, make your move as swiftly as possible, as there's no point in getting stuck with a non-obsessive for more than about three minutes. I recommend dropping in a football-related quip that won't mark you out as a complete bore, but will still send a clear signal to any fellow obsessive. It's a tricky balance, but something like, 'Goodness me, did you see all those England flags in people's windows?' will do the trick nicely.

Finally, once you think you've found a fellow fan, be careful not to mistake mild, polite interest for genuine fanaticism. You can test this out pretty quickly by asking something like, 'How do you think Tuchel's done so far?' A genuine fanatic will give you a detailed reply lasting five minutes or more. A non-fanatic will ask, 'Tuchel who?'

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The good news is that the success of the Lionesses is breaking things down and making footie chat far more acceptable than before. By their very nature, the Lionesses are more inclusive and worthy of discussion. Frankly, nobody likes to appear uninterested in female athletic achievement.

But it's going to take a while for the men's game to throw off its social impermissibility. So, while we wait, the obsessive fan needs to perfect a few simple techniques to steer clear of trouble and maintain a decent social reputation. Ultimately, all it takes is forethought, discipline and practice.

Great presenters, commentators and pundits

I KNOW some people who are happy to switch on the telly moments before kick-off and get straight into it. I'm not one of them. It'd be like running a sprint with no warm-up, or acting in a play without learning your lines.

When it comes to big tournament matches, especially knockouts, I have to spend hours beforehand reading all the news, devouring the opinion pieces and predictions, watching the manager's press conferences and generally working myself up into a lather of anticipation and fear. And as soon as the build-up starts on either the BBC or ITV, I'm there, smack in front of the box, engrossed. Even if I'm in a crowded pub, I'll be straining above the noise to hear what's being said on screen. Not terribly sociable, but that's the way I am.

This means that TV presenters, pundits and, once the game starts, commentators and summarisers, have played a hugely important role in my England experience. What would David Platt's goal in 1990 have been without Motty's exultant 'England have done it!'? Didn't Des Lynam capture the mood perfectly with his cheeky 'Shouldn't you be at work?' intro in 1998? What about Gary Lineker's short but deliciously sweet 'Blimey' after England scored five unanswered first-half goals against Panama in 2018? And who couldn't be impressed by Alan Shearer's 'Pressure? What pressure? Pressure is for tyres!' after our 2024 shoot-out win over Switzerland?

None of this comes easily. Great footballers don't necessarily make good managers, as we all know, but fewer still make great TV stars. That's why some of the very best TV talent have never played the game at all, yet they have an ability to bring it to life and capture the moment.

So, who would we choose to support us through a big England knockout match? Who would constitute our perfect TV line-up? This is my choice from all those I've seen and heard during World Cups and European Championships going way back to the early 1980s.

Presenter

The BBC is always the biggest show in town for major tournaments, and Gary Lineker did a fabulous job as the channel's frontman for a stonking 25 years, starting in 1999. Yes, he departed under a cloud for matters completely unrelated to football, but none of that detracts from his sustained excellence for so long.

If anything, however, his immediate predecessor Des Lynam was even better – suave yet chatty and down to earth, and with an easy charisma that nobody else could quite match. Before him, fans of my generation remember Jimmy Hill, who did everything in football from player and manager to pundit, administrator and even linesman, and David Coleman, better known as an athletics commentator and presenter of *A Question of Sport*, but also a top football presenter and commentator in the 1970s.

Over on ITV, Mark Pougatch has proficiently performed the main duties for a decade now, having replaced my fellow West Brom fan Adrian Chiles in 2015. Great presenters have also included Bob Wilson, Steve Rider and Jim Rosenthal. But my all-time ITV favourite has to be Brian Moore, who wasn't just a brilliant commentator, but the man who fronted the channel's World Cup coverage from 1970 to 1986 with such consummate aplomb.

A great presenter needs a big, appealing presence, yet must be able to bring in other voices to capture an intimate sitting-room atmosphere. And fanatics like me need someone who keenly wants England to win, yet who is professional enough to hold it all together in victory or defeat.

It comes down to a straight shoot-out between the Beeb's Des Lynam and ITV's Brian Moore. I'd be delighted with either, but if I have to choose, the ITV giant just gets the nod.

My choice: Brian Moore

Studio pundits

There are so many to choose from. Terry Venables and Jimmy Hill created a great double act on the BBC for many years. Brian Clough and Jack Charlton were, as you'd expect, never short of forthright opinions, and Ian St John and Jimmy Greaves were incisive and wonderfully light-hearted in equal measure. Trevor Brooking, Mark Lawrenson and Alan Hansen were fixtures many years after retiring as players, and more recently there's been a whole host of names, from Alan Shearer, Ian Wright, Micah Richards and Glenn Hoddle to Gary Neville, Alex Scott, Rio Ferdinand, Karen Carney and Roy Keane.

My perfect studio pundit needs to be as biased towards England as I am without being quite as emotional (not difficult), and able to encapsulate big themes as well as single important incidents in a few well-chosen words, and to draw on plenty of knowledge as player or manager, while maintaining a good chemistry with the presenter.

My choice: Brian Clough, Terry Venables and Ian Wright

Commentator

On the BBC, three commentators have dominated my half-century of watching England in World Cups and European

Championships: John 'Motty' Motson, Barry Davies and in the last 15 years, Guy Mowbray.

Much though I admire Davies for his all-round commentating abilities (he went way beyond just football) there's something in his voice that doesn't quite do it for me and, though it's not his fault, I will always associate him with Maradona's 1986 'Hand of God' nonsense and Gazza's excruciating near-miss against the Germans a decade later. It's the same with Mowbray, who's had to contend with a much more crowded field of competitors, and who drew the short straw with England's gut-wrenching second-round defeat to Germany in 2010 and Lampard's disallowed goal.

But, in truth, Davies and Mowbray would have to be going some to match Motty, who covered World Cups from 1978 right the way through to 2010 and is an all-time broadcasting great. Back in 2001 some researchers deduced that he had the perfect voice for football commentary, with exceptional pitch, volume, range and rhythm, and, I'd add, exquisite word selection and timing. He had that ability to take fans through all the ups and downs of a crucial match with boyish enthusiasm yet without being glib.

But Motty has some fierce competition over on ITV. Brian Moore wasn't just a superb presenter, but a first-class commentator, as was Martin Tyler, who later became Sky's leading man. Clive Tyldesley covered England matches from 1998 to 2020, when he was replaced amid much acrimony by the more modern voice, which I very much like, of Sam Matterface. On balance, ITV's commentators have had the edge, and these days I'd definitely go for Matterface over Mowbray, though I know plenty who disagree with me.

Overall, there are two standout candidates: Motty and Moore. The trouble is, Moore can't be presenter and commentator (though if anyone could pull it off, he could). So that brings it down to just one man.

My choice: John Motson

Summariser

Chemistry with the commentator is crucial here. They need to gel without getting too chummy, and offer complementary skills, style and knowledge. Mark Lawrenson and John Motson were a great pairing, as were Ron 'Big Ron' Atkinson and Brian Moore. In recent years, Lee Dixon and Sam Matterface have developed a terrific partnership.

But I reckon my chosen commentator, John Motson, could make it work with just about anybody, from Alf Ramsey to Dion Dublin, from Jimmy Hill to Ally McCoist. So, I'm going to go for summarisers on their own merits. From ITV, based on his summarising skills alone (and ignoring his eventual disgrace) I'm going for Big Ron. If you want to get a taste of his excellence, take a look at the YouTube highlights of England's quarter-final victory over Spain in 1996.

As for the BBC, I've been so impressed with Alan Shearer. Yes, he's a great in-studio expert and pundit. But for me, he's an even better summariser, with the passion and knowledge that come from having played for England 63 times, including 34 as captain, and having scored 30 goals.

Does Big Al get ahead of Big Ron? Just.

My choice: Alan Shearer

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So, there you have it. Brian Moore presenting, with Brian Clough, Terry Venables and Ian Wright in the studio. John Motson commentating with Alan Shearer alongside. What a line-up to take us through any big knockout match. And win or lose, I reckon they'd be the perfect footie combo.

Incidentally, I've hardly mentioned Sky, despite its range of excellent on-air talent. That's mainly because World Cups and Euros are always covered by the Beeb and ITV. But it's also because I don't have a Sky subscription. Maybe one day I'll get one, when I'm retired. But for the

moment if I want to see Premier League matches, I'll watch *Match of the Day*. If I want to see Champions League stuff, I'll go to the pub or, very occasionally, pay for a one-day pass on NOW TV. A big annual payment just doesn't make sense for me now.

Of course, if the big two tournaments were ever sold to Sky (or TNT or whoever else) I'd fork out. But big England matches, particularly knockouts, are major national occasions. And they can hardly be that if most of the country is excluded. Long may they be shown on free-to-air.

The injury curse

IS IT a curse? Well, the mathematicians would no doubt come up with some formula or other to show that England suffer no more injuries than any other country with such a demanding domestic football programme. And it's true that the physical strain we place on our players, and the sheer number of matches a top performer in England has to contend with during an average season, play a big part. That's something that few of us would deny.

But even that doesn't account for the fact that injury always seems to strike our best and most important players (when did Messi or Ronaldo miss a World Cup through injury?) and the fact that, to take Euro 2024 as an example, our two most important players, both to my eyes unfit, played their domestic football in the German and Spanish leagues respectively.

I'm not quite biased and stupid enough (at least I don't think so) to believe in an actual curse. But it sure does feel like one. And it all started in the very first World Cup in which I saw England play.

Kevin Keegan in 1982

Kevin Keegan was an incredible player. Twice winner of the Ballon d'Or, scorer of 68 goals for Liverpool, 32 for Hamburg and 21 for England, and affectionately nicknamed Mighty Mouse by his German fans, he was one of the best players in the world in the 70s and early 80s. Yet, until the age of 31, he'd never actually played in a

World Cup. Why? Because England didn't qualify for the 1974 tournament, and Keegan, then just breaking into the team, only made two appearances during that campaign anyway. Also because we were in the same group as Italy for the qualifiers for Argentina 1978, and despite Keegan's delicious looping header against the Italians at Wembley (my first hug-my-neighbour moment) we just weren't quite good enough.

So, Spain in 1982 was Keegan's only chance on the world stage, and he was undoubtedly England's best hope. He wasn't just our star player, but our captain. Simply, if we were going to threaten, we needed Keegan to be fit and firing. But he went into the World Cup with a chronic back injury, and didn't appear until the dying minutes of our final game against Spain, when we had to score two unanswered goals to pip the West Germans to a semi-final spot. King Kev had a great chance, almost an open goal, which, if fit, he'd have buried with his eyes closed. He missed, England were out, and he never played for us again.

Bryan Robson in 1986 and 1990

Robbo was a hero of mine (I have his autograph somewhere) long before he became England's best and most important player, and captain, in the 1980s. Everyone remembers him as a Manchester United star, but for me he'll always be a Baggy, and a vital part of that great West Brom team under Ron Atkinson from 1978 to 1981. In fact, he's the greatest West Brom player in my lifetime, just ahead of Johnny Giles and Tony Brown. He was a typical English box-to-box midfielder, and nobody did it better. As with Keegan in 1982, we had to have a fit Robbo if we were going to win a major tournament.

But he became an expert at timing his injuries to coincide with World Cups. During the 1985/86 season he dislocated his shoulder, and though Bobby Robson begged

Manchester United to let him have an operation to fix it, thereby ensuring his fitness for Mexico, United refused. Inevitably then, Robbo went into the tournament with a massive vulnerability. His shoulder popped in England's second match, and that was that for Captain Marvel.

Would 1990 be different? Of course not. Robbo got injured, once more in our second match of the tournament, this time against the Dutch, and he didn't play for England again.

David Beckham in 2002

Until April 2002, nobody in the country, barring a few osteology experts, knew what a metatarsal was. Then Becks broke one of his (they are bones in your foot) in a match for Manchester United, and suddenly it was all any of us could talk about. We all became experts in the average healing time for a metatarsal break, and learnedly discussed whether it might be shortened for an ultra-fit footballer with the world's best medical knowledge at his disposal. After all, Becks was – just like Keegan and Robbo before him – England's captain and arguably our best player, and the only one we just couldn't afford to lose. We needed him to be fit.

In the end, Sven gambled on him and took him to the tournament. But we could all see he wasn't right. Moments into the second half of the quarter-final against Brazil, and with the score at 1-1, it was obvious he couldn't continue, although he remained on the pitch until the final whistle; Brazil ran out 2-1 winners.

Wayne Rooney in 2006

Lightning does strike twice, at least where England are concerned. Again, it was a Manchester United star. Again, it was England's best player. Again, it was a metatarsal. Again, it was just weeks before the World Cup, with Alex

Ferguson angrily lobbying for him to be left out of the squad. Again, Eriksson refused.

The FA had long targeted 2006 as the World Cup England would finally win, ending 40 years of hurt. And we could have done. The golden generation was at its peak and Rooney was one of the world's best young players, having taken Euro 2004 by storm only to break, you guessed it, his metatarsal in the quarter-final against Portugal.

He couldn't break it again, could he? You bet. In late April the ever-committed Rooney chased a ball down and went into a tackle in a league match against Chelsea that was already lost. It looked innocuous. But it wasn't. And we embarked on the same will-he-won't-he-be-fit charade as with Becks four years earlier. Yet again Sven gambled (I would have done too) and lost (I would have done too), and Rooney, frustrated at not being in peak condition, and unable to influence matches as we'd all have liked, not least in the quarter-final against Portugal, lashed out recklessly and got himself sent off, followed by that infamous Ronaldo wink.

Rio Ferdinand in 2010

Rio Ferdinand is in my all-time England dream team. He was a superb defender, blessed with elegance and skill – a sort of English Franz Beckenbauer – and by 2010 was our captain under the excellent but underrated Fabio Capello. So, of course he got injured in the very first training session in South Africa and had to be ruled out of the tournament. The dedicated Matthew Upson took over and did as best he could. But it was like trying to replace a Rolls-Royce with a family Volvo. It wasn't just Lampard's disallowed goal against the Germans that did it for us. So, without Ferdinand, did our defensive frailties.

Harry Kane and Jude Bellingham in 2024

Only once in my entire life have I ever considered England to be favourites, if only marginally, for a tournament, and that was the 2024 Euros in Germany. Gareth Southgate's team had reached peak maturity. We'd got to the final at home three years earlier only to be denied by spot-kicks. And we had two players who would walk into any other team in Europe: Harry Kane and Jude Bellingham.

Yup, you guessed it, despite playing for Bayern Munich and therefore benefitting from that famous German winter break, Kane injured his back towards the end of the season and never looked match fit. As the tournament went on, it became Gareth's policy to substitute England's captain and greatest ever goalscorer in the second half of matches, something that was previously unthinkable, but had become necessary. Without Kane's goals, we'd always struggle.

And Bellingham? He'd played so stupendously well for Real Madrid since joining them in the summer of 2023, scoring a series of late match-winning goals in the first half of the season that many people, including me, said he was one of the top two or three players in the world, and just the sort to dominate the 2024 Euros.

He should have done. But injury plagued him in the second half of the season, and although he still achieved so much, winning his domestic league and the Champions League, he wasn't the same. Yes, he still helped drive England to the final, including that late equaliser against Slovakia (who else?) but he was running on empty.

What would England have achieved with a fully fit Kane and Bellingham, given that we got to the final, only losing by one goal? It's useless to speculate, but I'm going to anyway. We'd have won.

Best performances

AMID THE many low points of following England, there have actually been a few great performances. Not a lot, but some. And I guess they're all the better for being so rare.

What counts as a great England performance? Well, certainly not beating San Marino 10-0, as Southgate's team did in 2021. There's little satisfaction in that. What matters is the importance of the match (the friendly against Brazil in 1984 can't therefore count), the quality of the opposition (it has to be against one of the world's foremost sides, not Panama or Iran) and the manner of the victory (or, in one case, a draw).

It's all terribly subjective, but here's my countdown of the seven greatest England performances in the last 50 years.

7. Italy 0 England 0, 1997 (World Cup qualifier)

How can a mere draw count as one of our greatest ever matches? Because a draw was all we needed to qualify ahead of Italy for the 1998 World Cup. This match was our peak under Glenn Hoddle, with a fabulous display in the most hostile of Roman atmospheres, and without our injured star striker, Alan Shearer. Every member of the team played well that night, with Gazza world class and our three centre-backs Gareth Southgate, Tony Adams and Sol Campbell forming a defiant and impenetrable wall in front of David Seaman. Ian Wright so nearly won it for us late on, hitting the woodwork, and although we had a heart-stopping last-moment scare, with a header flying inches past Seaman's post, England

deservedly qualified ahead of the hosts. Hoddle and his coaches collectively jigged for joy on the touchline, and back home in Birmingham for the weekend, I did exactly the same.

6. England 1 Argentina 0, 2002 (World Cup group stage)

I've seen England play Argentina in three World Cup matches (1986 and 1998 were the two others), and this is the only one we won. Sadly, unlike the others, it wasn't a knockout, but it was a crucial victory that helped us qualify from our group alongside Sweden, sending Argentina home. David Beckham held his nerve to score a first-half penalty, shrugging off Diego Simeone's blatant attempts to put him off, and thereafter it was an excellent backs-to-the-wall defensive display. I watched in a pub in Woking with my InfoSpace colleagues and muttered some vitriolic expletives in Argentina's direction after the final whistle.

5. England 4 Netherlands 1, 1996 (European Championship group stage)

This was the jewel in the crown of that glorious summer, and watching in the same central Manchester pub where just two weeks later I'd prematurely leap into the air as Gazza lunged for a golden goal, I couldn't believe how well England played and how dominant we were. Two from Shearer and two from Sheringham took us way clear, before we conceded a late goal that actually sent the Dutch through at the expense of the Scots. Personally, I reckon it would have been sweeter still if we'd knocked the Dutch out. All of Scotland does too.

4. Italy 1 England 2, 2023 (European Championship qualifier)

This was England's first competitive win over the Italians since 1977, and thoroughly deserved. Kane became our all-

time top scorer with his first-half penalty, and every team member played his part in dominating the opposition on their own turf. To beat one of the world's major nations in any match is a delicious rarity. To do it in Rome, in a competitive match, so commandingly, was particularly noteworthy. Watching at home in Kent, the boy and I agreed that we deserved to win by more. But we weren't complaining.

3. Germany 1 England 5, 2001 (World Cup qualifier)

After the 4-2 victory over West Germany in the 1966 World Cup Final, this is probably England's most famous scoreline ever, all the better for being so completely unexpected. As BBC commentator John Motson put it, the night just got 'better and better and better'. Well before the end, the German fans were flooding out of Munich's Olympic Stadium, and I don't blame them – nobody wants to see their team so comprehensively pulverised. Watching in an Islington pub, Irena, Suzi and I were beside ourselves with delirium and disbelief. Thurl got soaked in beer, but he dutifully joined in our celebrations (and he's had revenge ever since by texting me from New Zealand every time England get knocked out of a tournament, claiming not to have heard the result).

2. England 2 Germany 0, 2021 (European Championship second-round knockout)

We hadn't won a knockout against a major nation since that penalty shoot-out against Spain in 1996. It could easily have gone the other way, but Gareth Southgate's selection of two holding midfield players, without a creative central force ahead of them, paid off mightily. For the only time in my life with a knockout match, I didn't see the first half owing to a client commitment. But the second period was

a fabulous catharsis for all England fans of whatever age. I don't wish harm on the Germans, a nation I thoroughly admire. But, by God, it was lovely that we went through at their expense for a change.

1. England 2 Netherlands 1, 2024 (European Championship semi-final)

Remarkably enough (and horrifyingly enough), this was the first time England had ever beaten a major nation in a knockout away from Wembley. In the first half, in particular, we played beautifully, and should have been ahead. Instead, it was 1-1 at the interval, and our goal resulted from a pretty soft penalty decision. The second period was much more even, and, in truth, it could have gone either way. But Ollie Watkins's late, late winner stunned us all – English and Dutch equally – and we were through to our first final on foreign soil. I watched in Finland, on Finnish TV, but it really didn't matter. I wouldn't have heard the English commentary on that winning strike anyway.

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All of this would be pretty small fry for a German fan of my vintage, who's had two World Cups and two European Championships to feast upon. In fact, it would be pretty slim pickings for a France, Spain or Italy fan too. We England supporters, sadly, have no such privilege.

But each of these victories gave me huge, lasting pleasure in that great sea of England sadness. If you can't enjoy the great performances when they come along, there really is no point in being a fan.

Epilogue

DURING HALF a century, I've spent countless hours, days, weeks and months on football. In the early days it was West Brom and England equally. Since 1990, it's been increasingly the latter. It's not just the time watching the matches themselves. That's not even half of it. It's the thinking about it, the reading about it, the watching repeats and documentaries, the discussing it in pubs with mates, the dreaming about it, and now writing about it. God only knows what it all adds up to. But it's one heck of a lot. Years possibly. A huge chunk of my life.

And I still haven't seen my team win a trophy.

Has it been worth it? Logically, no. Of course it hasn't. Just imagine how my life would have been if I'd never heard about football, or just didn't care. Just imagine how productive I could have been, devoting myself to something good, over which I had some influence and control. Because however obsessive the fan is, that's one thing you never have: control. Not even one tiny bit. Oh all right, the fans in the stadium play a big part. But even then, each individual is just one voice out of tens of thousands, and those watching on TV can't even claim that. They are at the mercy of what happens in front of their eyes. They are passive recipients of whatever comes next.

Some are luckier than others. I know I've been unlucky. It's quite possible that, born when I was, I could not have chosen a worse combination of club and national sides to support than West Brom and England. West Brom were

successful in the century before I was born, winning several major trophies, but nothing since I was three months old. If I'd have been born into a family supporting any of the other big West Midlands clubs – Villa, Birmingham, Wolves or Coventry – I'd have seen my team win at least one major trophy.

And England? Oh God.

But like a gambler for ever tempted to roll the dice just one more time, it's impossible to stop. The obsession is too engrained. I found that out after Euro 2016. I vowed to give up. I intended to give up. I thought I had given up. But I quickly realised I couldn't.

So, no, it's not logical. It's not sensible. In many ways it's completely crazy. But it's about heart not head. It's about tribalism, hope, passion, occasional triumph, communal grief and, most of all, the knowledge that one day it could just all come right. And if it did, wow and hallelujah.

When Gareth Southgate resigned after Euro 2024, the obsessive fan was forced to look forward. We always do. The conversation moved swiftly on from what might have been, to who's next. Who will succeed Gareth? Another Englishman again? A top foreign coach? An energetic youngster or an experienced old hand?

I was pleased by the appointment of Thomas Tuchel, who, it seems to me, has all the attributes an England manager needs. He's won a Champions League. He's managed in England, so he knows the players, and is completely fluent in English. He has a reputation as a master tactician. And he's German. How can that last bit be anything but a big positive, given Germany's fabulous international record?

And come the 2026 World Cup, England will still have a good side. Injuries permitting, there will still be Harry Kane, one of the world's greatest goalscorers; Jude Bellingham, just coming into his prime; Declan Rice, one of

England's unsung heroes; and Bukayo Saka cutting in from the right to curl those zingers into the top-left corner. There will be other youngsters ready to support them – youngsters who might not have played much for the national side yet, but who will become household names once it all gets going.

And there will be the hope that this just might be our year.

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But I have to face facts. I'm in my late 50s, and the reality is that I might well go through my entire life without seeing my team win a trophy. It sounds morbid, but nor can I run away from it. I must recognise that after half a century of watching and hoping but never succeeding, the next few decades, or however long I've got left, might well just be more of the same.

Just look at the 2026 World Cup. A staggering 206 teams entered the qualifying campaign, from Brazil to Bahrain, from Germany to Gibraltar. Just under a quarter of them – 48 – will be at the finals. Just two will get to the last match. And ultimately, just one of them will lift the trophy. One out of 206. Why should that one be us, after what will by then be 60 years of hurt? If I'm honest, the probability lies in the direction of more heartache and more what ifs. Same for the following tournament. And the one after that.

None of us knows how our time on this planet will end, nor what we'll be thinking about when it does. I'm told that many people, men particularly, think something like, 'I wish I hadn't spent so much time in the office.' Will I be saying to my loved ones, 'I wish I hadn't spent so much time obsessing about England?' It's possible, I suppose. It's possible I'll experience some kind of last-minute enlightenment, when it's all too late, with a sudden surge of regret.

But I think that's highly unlikely. Once an obsessive, always an obsessive. That's how it will be with me right

down to the very last moment. So, I don't envisage a death-bed conversion. Far from it. In fact, assuming I've got my marbles, I'm pretty sure my dying thought will be, 'If only Gazza had scored.'

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