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XI FOOTBALL STORIES
FROM ON THE ROAD



STEVE MENARY
& JAMES MONTAGUE

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The Democratic People's Republic of FIFAland

by Harry Pearson

USA v Iran

World Cup finals

Lyon, France

21 June 1998

Every so often, when searching for something in the attic, I come across a grey box file with a red-and-white sticker advertising the Argentinean newspaper *El Grafico* stuck on the lid. Occasionally I open it and glance inside. Last weekend for the first time in many years I brought it down the ladder. It's sitting on my desk as I type this: dusty, giving off a musty smell of aged paper tinged – though perhaps I'm imagining this – with the scent of garlic and black tobacco.

Inside are the relics of my trip to the 1998 World Cup – my laminated press pass, a raft of team sheets

and tickets, a typed itinerary with hotel phone numbers, the articles I wrote for *The Guardian*, which my mother proudly cut out and kept, and the little booklet I did for *When Saturday Comes*. There is my notebook too, a hardback Black n' Red A5 with a sticker for Urawa Red Diamonds of the J League on the cover. Whenever I see it I smile at the memory of the people who gave it to me – three giggling Japanese women, dressed as Geishas, I'd helped get a taxi to the Stadium Municipal in Toulouse on the day their nation played their first-ever game in a World Cup finals (they were gubbed 6-0).

France 98 was the first time I went to football as a journalist rather than a fan. I spent most of the first week sitting in media centres and on the *tribune de presse* convinced that at some point police would arrest me as an imposter. Later, when I mentioned this to a football writer from the *Daily Express*, he said, 'I feel exactly the same way and I've been doing this for ten years.'

I had a heavy schedule of matches – 17 in 19 days. I criss-crossed the country by train using my Eurorail pass so often I had to get a supplementary booklet to write the journeys in. I stayed in cheap hotels I'd found in the *Le Routard* guide. Some of them were charming, others were so like old people's homes you half expected

to find a mug with false teeth in it next to the bed. One night I was in Nantes, the next in Montpellier, the following one in Bordeaux. I travelled over 5,000 miles by rail in three weeks. Not that it was a chore. After all, I was in France, I was watching football and I was getting paid for it.

By the time I'd watched my tenth game, Spain v Paraguay in St Étienne, the matches had started to blur into one. Shaking my memory now I recall Roberto Baggio's equalising penalty in the rain at Stade Lescure, Bordeaux; Cuauhtémoc Blanco's bunny hop in Lyon; a mad refereeing display in Toulouse (South Africa v Denmark) by a Colombian named Rendon; Hristo Stoichkov stomping about like Alexei Sayle imitating Mussolini. The football was often dull, but meeting fans from all nations on trains and buses, hanging around in brasseries with journalists, queuing up at the press-centre café for croque monsieur between Bernd Schuster (who was dressed like he was auditioning for the Don Johnson role in *Miami Vice*) and Rinus Michels (who wasn't), it was fabulous. In fact, it was one of the happiest times of my life.

Game number 11 was a Group F fixture at the elegant Stade de Gerland in Lyon. I'd put my name down for a press ticket with limited expectation of getting one. Press passes for matches were allocated by

a complex system (nowadays it would be an algorithm, back then it was likely some FIFA official in a blazer with a flow chart, or maybe a blindfold, a list of names and a pin) and since this had been described by one of the competing nation's officials as 'the mother of all games' it seemed likely to me it would be over-subscribed.

Group F was the draw FIFA didn't want and the one most supporters had a feeling was inevitable. At the ceremony in Paris, Germany and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (as the agglomeration of Serbia and Montenegro was briefly called) had already been drawn, and they were then joined by the team from Pot C, Iran. Pot D was drawn next. An excited buzz went up when the name was read out: the USA.

Relations between the USA and Iran had been hostile since the revolution of 1979. There had been the hostage crisis of Jimmy Carter's final year as president, and US support for Saddam Hussein when he invaded Iran in 1980. There had been the kidnapping of US citizens in Lebanon by Iranian-sponsored terrorists followed by a bomb attack on the American embassy in Beirut as well as a US barracks. Almost 400 people were killed. In 1988, the US had attacked Iranian oil platforms in the Persian Gulf and shot down an Iranian airliner, killing 290 men, women and children.

In 1993 Bill Clinton placed an embargo on all US trade with Iran.

Sport had inevitably become mixed up in the dispute. When Iranian wrestler Rasoul Khadem won an Olympic medal in Atlanta in 1996, Iran's president Akbar Rafsanjani said the grappler had raised Iran's flag 'in the house of Satan'.

After the draw, US State Department spokesman James Foley took a different tack, suggesting the game might help thaw relations between the two countries: 'If this soccer match is a sign of our ability to deal with each other at least in this one area in a civilised and positive way, that's something we could applaud.'

Iranian officials seemed to be playing down the match as some kind of war minus the bullets, too. 'Governments are one thing,' one said. 'We are friends of the American people.'

US Soccer Federation president Alan Rothenberg, meanwhile, tried to lighten things up with a wisecrack. 'All we need now is an Iraqi referee,' he said. As it was, when an official was allocated for the fixture in Lyon they got the Swiss Urs Meier, who six years later would have to go into hiding after being hounded by irate England fans.

On the face of it the Americans seemed to have the better side, or at least the better known. Their regular

starting XI featured several players with experience in the Bundesliga, including captain Thomas Dooley (probably the only player to produce a joke about the 1950s US folk band The Kingston Trio on BBC TV commentary; their most famous single was called ‘Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley’ – Chris Waddle the culprit), as well as Premier League goalkeeper Kasey Keller and the ageing but skilful Roy Wegerle, the South African-born striker who had hit 29 goals in 65 starts for QPR a few years earlier. Wegerle was partnered up front by Brian McBride, a big, robust old-school centre-forward who looked like the ranch foreman in a Saturday night western. McBride was said to be on the radar of many English clubs (he would later play 140 games for Fulham and was so popular with the fans they named a bar at Craven Cottage after him) as was midfielder Joe-Max Moore who would end up at Goodison Park.

By comparison the Iran players were largely unknown. The exception was the powerful forward Ali Daei, who’d had such a successful season at Arminia Bielefeld that Bayern Munich had signed him. Those who’d followed the qualification tournament would likely also have recognised the name of his strike partner Khodadad Azizi. Iran had made it through to France via a play-off with Australia. The Aussies, managed by

the English media's favourite geezer, Terry Venables, had drawn the first leg in Tehran and been 2-0 up in the second in front of 85,000 fans at Melbourne Cricket Ground. But Iran had clawed their way back and in the 79th minute Azizi – who played for Cologne – had hit the equaliser. Iran sneaked through on away goals, the Australian TV commentators so distraught by the turn of events that one of them broke down in tears. Iran had been underestimated by the Australians, even though several of the team were playing at a good level in Germany. At the MCG they showed they were also tough and resilient.

Despite success in the qualifiers, the Iran FA had lost patience with their Brazilian manager Valdeir Vieira and fired him shortly afterwards. His replacement, the Croatian Tomislav Ivić, had won league titles in seven different countries. He lasted only a few months in Tehran. In came Jalal Talebi, an Iranian who was – ironically – living with his family in the US when he was appointed. Talebi and his wife ran a vegan restaurant in Silicon Valley and he coached part-time in a local college.

Not that there's any mention of that feature of Talebi's life in the printout from the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran that was handed to journalists before the game and which I found in my box file.

This told us that as a player Talebi ‘demonstrated his outstanding skill during the 1964 preliminary Olympic games in a match between Iran and India’; that as a coach he ‘underwent formal and on location training with Chelsea club (14 months), Arsenal club (four months) and with Tottenham club (four months)’ and that, in 1996, he was senior advisor to the ‘National Indonesian Football Federation’.

None of which quite explained how he came to coach his national team. The fact that he hadn’t been appointed until 20 May, three weeks before the tournament started, spoke of panic. However, it quickly became apparent that not only was Talebi a very competent coach he was also a thoroughly decent human being.

His side’s opening match in Saint-Étienne ended in a narrow defeat to the talented if politically fragile FR Yugoslavia team. The game’s only goal, a direct free kick from the perpetually simmering midfield stomper Siniša Mihajlović, didn’t come until the 73rd minute.

The USA had more stability than Iran – coach Steve Sampson had been in charge of the team since 1995. A disciplinarian in the tradition of US gridiron, Sampson had established his authority early on, kicking out skipper John Harkes for complaining about the position he was playing in and other unspecified

misdemeanours. He had brought in US players from the European leagues to bolster the inexperienced MLS recruits and managed a creditable runners-up spot in the 1998 Gold Cup, a run that included a 1-0 win over Brazil. The USA cruised through the CONCACAF qualifiers, but a Germany side who were rapidly tilting from 'experienced' to 'past it' easily brushed them aside in their tournament opener – goals from 31-year-old Andreas Möller and Jürgen Klinsmann, who would turn 34 in a few weeks time and get stretchered off later in the tournament after being struck in the back by a free kick.

On the day of this big, fraught game things started slowly. I got to the Stade de Gerland at 10.30am. The entrance to the press centre in Lyon was decorated with a large stretch of astroturf with pink plastic tulips growing out of it. Surrounding this were a series of huge fish tanks etched with maps of the city. Fat, bug-eyed golden carp glided about inside. To get that far you had to present your pass and go through a metal detector. One day an Irish journalist asked the security guard if they ever had to confiscate anything illegal. The guard showed him a cardboard box which contained several switch blades, a Bowie knife and a set of brass knuckle dusters. 'Jeez,' he said to me. 'Some of these foreign press fellas don't fuck about.'

Kick-off wasn't until nine in the evening, but I had copy to file and, since I had a limited budget, I wanted to take full advantage of the free coffee and croissants. Ahead of me in the queue a senior BBC commentator whinged about the slowness of the service, while to my rear Ian St John smiled cheerfully and winked. At 11.30am a FIFA directive came around saying that places in the press stand were oversubscribed and a waiting list was being drawn up. Usually, the first pick of tickets went to journalists of the competing countries, but back in 1998 the mainstream US media took about as much interest in soccer as they did in the politics of Liechtenstein, while Iranian journalists were almost outnumbered by those from the Falkland Islands (a bloke from Port Stanley who supported Preston North End). When the confirmed list came around my name was on it.

The vast temporary hangar that housed the Lyon press centre filled up fast and early. By noon all 300 workstations were taken. From outside you could already hear the drumming that seemed to prefigure every game thudding through the walls. The PA system beeped into life every 30 seconds with bureaucratic announcements about photographers' briefings and bib collection, the colour coding of those bibs, and the collection of lost camera equipment. Every one of them

was made in four languages. A reporter sitting opposite me, who had a looming deadline, slammed his desk and said, 'Why do they send so many of the tossers anyway? They all take the same fucking picture.' Which was utterly untrue but entirely understandable.

Despite the fact that there were no-smoking signs up everywhere the air was quickly filled with tobacco haze. A reporter from *The Mirror* gestured across to a Colombian TV crew, 'Look, there's one of those fuckers smoking a pipe.'

FR Yugoslavia v Germany came on the TV screens. Journalists and photographers abandoned their laptops and grouped around the television with commentary in their native language. This didn't always work as planned. Sometimes the TV channels switched suddenly and inexplicably. One minute you'd be watching Scotland v Norway, the next an episode of the daytime US soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* dubbed into German.

There were no such problems that day. The game was decent – a 2-2 draw. The most memorable incident came when Dragan Stojković scored his country's second, and Yugoslav coach Slobodan Santrač ran along the touchline in celebration of his team's goal only to suddenly pull up, grimacing in pain and clutching his hamstring. The laughter that followed rolled round

and round the press centre from linguistic group to linguistic group. Journalists of the world united by schadenfreude and professional cynicism.

Perhaps there was a tinge of nervousness behind it too. Because a rumour was going around that 7,000 tickets for the game had been bought on the black market by members of the Iraq-sponsored Iranian dissident group the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK). Most football writers had no idea who MEK were, but those who knew how to use the Ask Jeeves web search engine on the media centre's mighty computers quickly discovered that MEK was led by a woman named Maryam Rajavi, had carried out violent attacks on Iranian embassies around the globe and were listed as a terrorist organisation by just about everybody in the western world.

I went up to the press stand an hour before kick-off. Huddles of *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité* (CRS) riot police clustered around the concourses, red packs of tear gas on their backs and their shields stacked. A police marksman perched behind my workstation, rifle on a tripod, cheeks marked with anti-glare make-up stripes, his telescopic sight trained on the opposite stand.

Already the noise was extraordinary. From the south stand, behind one goal, where a mass of Iranian

supporters were gathered, came wave after wave of shrill chanting and whistling. When Ricky Martin's 'Macarena' came on the PA, as it did before every game, a young woman in a white mini skirt, crop top and white vinyl knee-high boots, her face painted in the colours of the Iranian flag, go-go danced on her chair waving a flag bearing an image of the MEK leader. Were these the dangerous terrorists we had been warned about? David Lacey, a man whose extreme reticence gave him a forbidding priestly air, turned and said, 'It reminds me of a women's hockey international at Wembley multiplied by a hundred.' The biggest danger seemed to be to our eardrums.

The teams came out to the usual plangent synthesiser music, thankfully barely audible above the din. The handshake has become an essential part of football's fractiousness. Managers harrumph that a proffered hand has been ignored, players pointedly refuse the outstretched mitt of an opponent who has wronged them. The handshakes before the USA Iran game were possibly the start of it all. According to FIFA protocol, Iran as 'Team B' in the match should advance towards the US ('Team A') for the handshake. However, it was soon revealed that the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, had ordered the players not to do so. Behind the scenes FIFA negotiated with the

US team, who agreed to make the first move. The handshake went off cheerfully. The Iranian players presented their opponents with white roses as a sign of peace and the two teams posed together before kick-off, arms around each other's shoulders. It was the sort of image FIFA revelled in, proof of the healing power of the game, of the congeniality of what the organisation's bumptious president, Sepp Blatter, insisted on calling 'the football family'. The scenes in the stands, meanwhile, were the sort of thing that had Blatter sweating in his silk pyjamas.

As 9pm approached, huge anti-Khamenei banners and T-shirts decorated with pictures of Maryam Rajavi started to appear around the ground. Three minutes before kick-off a large orange balloon with a portrait of Rajavi suspended from it floated across the pitch, bobbed over the heads of the Iranian players and was eventually captured by referee Meier on the halfway line. I looked down at the TV monitor at my workstation to get a close-up of the image, but the screen was showing pictures of some pretty American girls in the crowd. The images on the monitor lagged a few seconds behind those on the pitch, so that you had a persistent sense of *déjà vu*, but this was different. The TV cameras were resolutely pointed away from the stand behind the goal where the bulk of the MEK

protestors were located. They would stay that way. Television viewers around the world would have no idea what was going on.

When the game started, a mass of stewards appeared and began wading into the supporters in the south stand. Normally the stewards wore red Adidas tops, but this group had blue and black uniforms and orange armbands. 'Rozzers in disguise, got to be,' a bloke from *The Mirror* opined. It seemed a reasonable conclusion as the stewards battled to confiscate the dozens of 12ft by 5ft anti-Khamenei flags that had – according to a young American photojournalist who had been in among it – been smuggled into the stadium wrapped around bodies and then affixed to poles that had suddenly appeared from trouser legs. The battles went on for two hours. And through it all the chanting never let up. The noise level in the stadium varied from very, very loud to the absolutely extraordinarily loud. 'Fuck's sake,' the bloke from *The Express* said. 'Last time my head was ringing like this was after a Motörhead gig.'

Later that night the US photojournalist and I sat down for dinner in the cavernous but brilliant Brasserie Georges and he paraphrased an old ice-hockey joke, 'Tonight I was watching a political protest when all of a sudden a soccer game broke out.' Yet you can watch the match on YouTube and not get

any sense of that. The protests are comprehensively airbrushed out, like a disgraced Politburo member from a Stalinist photo.

Even for those whose job it was, events on the field were hard to register in the frenzied atmosphere. Before the match, US midfielder Tab Ramos had speculated that the game meant less to the US players than it did to their opponents. While Khodadad Azizi had referenced the dead of the Iran-Iraq War before the game saying, ‘Many families of martyrs are expecting us to win,’ Ramos shrugged off the politics and said, ‘You know, I don’t hear anyone in training saying, “Let’s go out there and win it for Bill Clinton.”’

If the Iranians were more motivated than their opponents it didn’t show in the opening moments. Only four minutes had gone when a free kick from Claudio Reyna reached McBride whose header cannoned off the bar with Ahmadreza Abedzadeh flailing. When Iran finally mounted a serious attack it was Azizi – who was wearing ridiculous mustard-coloured boots – who burst through one-on-one with Keller. The American keeper brought him down for a penalty so stonewall you could have carved your name on it. Urs Meier thought differently and waved play on.

The traditional frenzied discussion of which player’s pass had precipitated the event was brought to a halt

by a sudden bellowing laugh. Fingers pointed. There, amid the frenzy behind the goal, hoisted amid the fighting, was a union flag with the legend 'Fleetwood FC' on it.

Azizi's tumble was a brief moment of excitement for Iran. The USA continued to press, the excellent Reyna driving in a shot from 20 yards that struck a post. It was Iran who scored first, though, Javad Zarincheh's cross headed home by Hamid Estili. Azizi almost added a second a few minutes later but blasted an easy chance wide.

In the second period the US hit the woodwork for a third time and Abedzadeh saved acrobatically from Frankie Hejduk, a full-back with attacking tendencies and a face like an anteater. Flashbulbs were popping continually in the stand behind the goal now and files of CRS trotted along the touchline, shields and batons ready. Later FIFA would explain that, with their efforts at attracting the TV cameras thwarted, the MEK activists had planned a mass pitch invasion. The French authorities would not deploy the CRS unless the situation was serious and 'the situation was serious', a spokesman said defiantly. Well, perhaps, though as a friend of mine who was teaching at a lycée in Toulouse at the time remarked, 'The French will send in the riot police to quell a fight at the school gate.'

The game went on, the flashbulbs popped, whistles shrilled. When Iran's full-back Mehdi Mahdavia pounced on a loose pass on the halfway line and ran 35 yards before whipping a shot past Keller and into the net the noise reached such a crazy pitch you feared the goldfish tanks in the media centre might explode. With a couple of minutes to go and the US attacking desperately, McBride – who had swatted the Iranian defence around all night like a competitive dad in a primary school kickabout – bundled the ball into the net after Abedzadeh fumbled.

It was the last action. Well, almost. As the final whistle went one of the Iranian fans behind the goal finally broke through the police and stewards and sprinted across the field waving his flag. A platoon of officers smacked him to the ground. The TV monitors showed only the celebrating Iranian players. The producers and camera crews had worked so diligently that MEK's strenuous efforts to attract the attention of a worldwide audience to their cause had comprehensively failed. They would have had more success putting anti-Khamenei leaflets in bottles and chucking them in the Rhône.

Back in the media centre, British journalists expressed disquiet at what the TV had chosen to show, or rather not to show. The complete blackout

of what had been a peaceful political protest seemed like something from a totalitarian state rather than a modern Western democracy such as France.

But, of course, we were not actually in France. Entering the stadium, you crossed the border into FIFAland, a capitalist utopia with its own laws and customs, where politics and religion did not exist and the only true faith was profit. The ruling elite of FIFAland employed children to carry on the flags of countries with criminal human rights records, and proclaimed adherence to Corinthian ideals of sportsmanship but banned players from swapping shirts at the end of the game lest it offend the kit manufacturers. They introduced all kinds of rules to speed up the game but would not have ball boys or girls on the touchline because it would block the advertising hoardings. To complain that it was undemocratic was to miss the point.

The president of FIFAland, Sepp Blatter, had acted as swiftly against the MEK protestors as he would at a later tournament when a Dutch brewery threatened a guerrilla marketing campaign at matches. Whether you were protesting against a brutal and repressive political regime or promoting non-official lager, you had no place in FIFAland.

Even if you accepted this reality, it was hard not to revel in the irony. At the end of USA v Iran, as

the CRS gathered across the front of the south stand, tear-gas canisters at the ready, and a group of the special stewards gradually pressed the protestors back through the exits using shields and truncheons, a jovial announcer came on the PA, as he did after every game, thanked us all for coming and making the game such a special occasion and reminded us that this was FIFA 'fair play day'.

After the announcement had finished, the man from *The Telegraph* turned to me with a bitter smile, 'It's like Hunter S. Thompson said, "Who needs drugs when reality's this twisted?"'