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Over the Line

A History of the
**England v Germany
Football Rivalry**



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Rivals

WHILE I hope and trust that this book will be of interest to anyone with a fascination for football and its political and cultural contexts, I expect that many readers will be either English, German or – like me – a bit of both. I was born in Munich in 1985 to a German father and an English mother, neither of whom expressed any interest in football. Yet my earliest memory, to the extent that it is possible to distinguish between my own recollections and those of people around me, is of watching the 1990 FIFA World Cup semi-final between West Germany, as it was known then, and England on a small Blaupunkt television in our home in Hamburg. It was an exciting time for the country, with reunification on the horizon following the fall of the Berlin Wall nine months earlier. My mother had already spent 20 years living in Germany and was well assimilated. Except for a few words here and there, my parents, my older sister and I only spoke German in the house, and the green grass of Wimbledon's centre court, so famous in Germany because of Boris Becker's successes in the 1980s, was the only English sporting institution I knew. As I remember it, this match in Turin was the moment I became aware of another side to my identity, having been told that I had a connection to both teams. I knew that for my football-averse family to gather around the television, and for me to be allowed to stay up late into the evening, something special must be happening.

After they were eliminated from the competition on that dramatic night, I forgot all about the England national team. West Germany beat Argentina four days later to win

the country's third World Cup, and I was swept away by the euphoria and positivity, while even my parents understood that Guido Buchwald had done an excellent job in marking Diego Maradona. In the ensuing years, I played football in the street on a daily basis, and I eagerly collected stickers and photographs of the German players in the run-up to the 1992 European Championship. The tournament was held in Sweden, the destination my parents had chosen in their ignorance for a serene family holiday that summer, just as the latter stages were played out. The semi-final, in which Germany beat the hosts 3-2 with two goals from Karl-Heinz Riedle, was probably the first match that I watched with a great sense of hope and expectation, and it was followed four days later by the first crushing disappointment when Denmark sensationally won the final. On our journey back to Hamburg, the ferry from Sweden to Denmark was bedecked with a cornucopia of red shirts, flags and novelty hats that made an indelible impression.

In May 1994 we moved as a family to London, and I was placed in a school where neither the pupils nor the teachers could speak my language, or rather, I could not speak theirs. The new boy from Germany was duly introduced to the class during preparations to mark the 50th anniversary of D-Day. As ever, football was the international language that made the gap between the cultures – even then significantly wider than it is now – more easily passable.

On account of the club's signing of Jürgen Klinsmann that summer, my English uncle pointed me towards Tottenham Hotspur, and my emotional link to English football was irreversibly established. England's absence from the 1994 World Cup in the United States meant that I was all the more surprised to see and feel the excitement and euphoria that spread like waves from Wembley Stadium during the European Championship in the summer of 1996. Like most people in England, I was enthralled by Paul Gascoigne's volley against Scotland, and by those few minutes against the Dutch when everything seemed to click. When England reached the semi-final, however, I was faced with a problem. Germany were the opponents, and seemingly overnight, the nation was gripped by angst, wallowing in anti-German rhetoric. It was a bewildering situation for me

to be caught up in at the age of 11, and the high drama of the match that ensued only deepened my fascination.

* * *

At some level, every book addresses a problem, and while this book is primarily about football, it is also about Anglo-German relations. The problem I address – to some extent subliminally – in these pages is one of cultural difference. My interest centres on the question of how two nations, two football teams with long and storied traditions could produce so many dramatic contests and unforgettable moments in a series of matches that now spans 123 years. How could a nation which waited 69 years for a first win against the sporting rival it looked to emulate then come to dominate the rivalry? How did the erstwhile apprentice to the pioneer of the sport come to win seven major championships, six more than the former master? What lies behind England's 56 years of hurt? What are the foundational qualities of Germany's indomitable success? These are the questions that a cursory glance through the record books of international football will throw up, but there is much more that an in-depth study of the history of Anglo-German encounters in football can reveal. Just as the two nations navigated a path on which they were once mortal enemies, at other times close allies, and often keen students of each other's successes and failures, so the two national football teams have passed through periods of enmity, admiration and even co-operation.

This book is entitled *Over the Line* because of the single moment that is emblematic of the whole history of the rivalry between these two nations, an incident of great drama and utmost controversy. England's third goal in the 1966 FIFA World Cup Final at Wembley was scored by Geoff Hurst in the first half of extra time, when the score was 2-2. His shot hit the crossbar, causing the ball to bounce down and *on to* the line. The ball did not cross the line and the goal should not have been given, but this is a fact that must coexist in history with the actuality that the goal was awarded and that the end result was a 4-2 win for England. The salient point is that the moment has been mythologised to such an extent that in the collective memory on one side of the debate, the ball *was* over the line. In this sense,

the moment represents not just the broader football rivalry, but relations between the countries. At times, a will to believe is sufficient for facts to become unstable. Mindful that no history is truly objective, my sincere hope is that by examining events from both sides, from both English and German perspectives, I am able at least to produce an even-handed account which eschews such wilful obfuscation of the facts.

* * *

At the beginning of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Bernardo, a sentinel, bids Francisco good night on the battlements of Elsinore Castle with the words, 'If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus, the rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.' The use of the term 'rivals' here to denote 'partners' is exemplary of the variant and changing meanings of words, since Shakespeare frequently uses 'rival' in its modern sense of competition elsewhere. The sporting rivalry between England and Germany should be considered with such variance in mind, since at its inception it was in effect a partnership in the development of international football. Later, it was of course underscored by political differences and military conflict, while later still, and particularly in 1966, it became a direct sporting contest for the highest honours. England's rivalry with Scotland, which began with the very first officially recognised international match in 1872, is distinguished by its historical primacy. Yet the teams have only met twice in FIFA or UEFA competition finals, on both occasions in the group stage. Meanwhile, the Netherlands are often cited as Germany's fiercest football rival, and this holds true in terms of both on-field controversy and off-field enmity, but as we shall see, the football rivalry began in earnest only in 1974 and has simmered somewhat since the 2006 World Cup. For historical scope, socio-political context and sporting significance, it is hard to look beyond England v Germany. Added to these factors is the sheer quality and dramatic intensity of the most famous matches between the two teams. The four most important encounters, discussed in greatest detail in this book, are the 1966 World Cup Final, the 1970 World Cup quarter-final, the 1990 World Cup semi-final, and the 1996 European Championship semi-final. All four of these matches required extra time, and the latter two

were settled by means of a penalty shoot-out. With this rich heritage in mind, the German term *Klassiker*, often applied to matches against England, is perhaps more apt than any notions of bitter rivalry. England v Germany is best described as a classic of unmatched historical pedigree in international football.

The list of matches printed in this book indicates that the first five encounters between representative teams from England and Germany, from 1899 to 1901, are not recognised by either the English Football Association (FA) or its German counterpart (DFB), while the four pre-war matches between 1908 and 1913 are recognised only by the DFB. For this reason, there are four more meetings in the German records of the rivalry than in their English equivalents. The first official international recognised by both associations was played on 10 May 1930 in Berlin. This match is discussed at the beginning of chapter three, while the nine previous meetings from 1899 to 1913 are considered together in chapter two. The head-to-head record since 1930 is remarkably close, at 15-14 in favour of Germany from 34 matches, counting the two penalty shoot-outs as victories.

The time periods indicated in chapter headings throughout this book are merely indicative. At times they are chosen for reasons primarily related to football – as for example in chapter ten, ‘Football Comes Home’ – while on other occasions political and cultural developments take precedence, as in chapter four, ‘Triumph and Disaster’. In every case, however, the stated years signal the time period of greatest relevance to the given chapter. The German character ‘ß’ is pronounced as a sharp ‘s’, elongating the preceding vowel sound. I have retained original spellings for the names of German football clubs, including those where the respective city has an anglicised name, as for example in FC Bayern München and TSV 1860 München, both from Munich. The common appellation ‘1. FC’ denotes the first football club in a given place, such as 1. FC Köln in Cologne and 1. FC Nürnberg in Nuremberg. Hamburg’s largest club is called Hamburger SV, or HSV; Borussia Mönchengladbach is often shortened to Gladbach; and Bayern München is most commonly referred to as FC Bayern, since ‘Bayern’ is also the name of the federal state of Bavaria. The DFB’s men’s national football team is named *Nationalmannschaft*, and in using this term I consider

the team's entire history since 1908, spanning various historical eras and the division and reunification of the country after the Second World War.

* * *

Ultimately, a sporting rivalry of this type requires regular competition for it to thrive and retain significance. England's 2-0 victory over Germany at Wembley on 29 June 2021 came 11 years after the teams' previous competitive encounter, at the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. In the coming years, however, they are likely to face each other more often with more than just pride at stake. The implementation of the UEFA Nations League increases the number of high-quality matches among European national teams between tournaments, and England and Germany have already been drawn together in the 2022/23 edition of this competition. Both teams have qualified for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, and England will also bank on qualification for the 2024 UEFA European Championship, where the prospect of success on German soil is bound to stir excitement among England fans once again. The successful youth team programmes of both nations are also likely to continue to produce regular confrontations at FIFA and UEFA tournaments, such as the final of the 2009 UEFA Under-21 European Championship, discussed in chapter 12.

At the time of writing, England and Germany are among the favourites at the 2022 UEFA European Women's Football Championship. England's first win over Germany in women's football only came at the 21st attempt in 2015, in extra time of the World Cup third-place play-off in Canada, but the rapid growth in quality and exposure of the women's game in England will inevitably lead to more high-profile meetings between the two nations. The English FA's 50-year ban on women's football, which was only lifted in 1972 with the encouragement of UEFA, meant that the first England women's international match took place a century after the earliest FIFA-recognised men's international, the goalless draw between Scotland and England in Glasgow on 30 November 1872. Similarly, the DFB only lifted its ban on women's football in 1970, and the German women's national team was not formally established until 1982.

Yet a cultural breakthrough for women's football in Germany came sooner than for its English counterpart, with a television audience of over 10 million for the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup Final in the United States, the first of two successive World Cup wins for Germany's women's team. Particularly under the auspices of the supportive Theo Zwanziger, DFB president between 2006 and 2012, the *Nationalelf* enjoyed great success, repeatedly winning the UEFA Women's Championship. England's Lionesses, meanwhile, have reached the semi-finals at the last two World Cups and are now enjoying an unprecedented run of good results under the team's first non-British permanent manager, Dutchwoman Sarina Wiegman. England's historic first win over Germany on home soil, on 23 February 2022 at Molineux, indicates that a previously formidable gap between the two teams has now closed.

England v Germany at whatever level and in whatever mode of competition is now a well-established metaphor for the two nations' relative standing in the world, and the pages that follow constitute an attempt to apprehend how such a signification has been shaped over 123 years of history. Almost 20 years ago, the sports historian Peter Beck wrote, 'British attitudes towards Germany, far from resulting from a balanced and informed assessment of contemporary realities, are often influenced, indeed distorted, by fading memories of British greatness and unity of purpose, alongside mythologies, images, emotions and irrational prejudices moulded principally by Hitler's Germany and the Second World War.'

Public discourse has progressed significantly in the intervening years, yet these words still obstinately hold true for many people, especially in private. If this book can go some way to providing the type of balanced and informed assessment that is lacking elsewhere, it will have achieved its aim.