



BALLS!



The Best European Football Nations



Chris Whitfield

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By Chris Whitfield

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Dedicated to Gill for the idea.

I would like to emphasise that any resemblance to one hundred per cent accuracy and reasonable opinion within these pages is purely co-incidental.

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Introduction



They say Football is the beautiful game, though that is a bit of a stretch for the imagination when you are watching Dobrudzha Dobrich v Chernomorets Pomorie in the Bulgarian B League. They also say that football is the beautiful game because of its simplicity, a factor reinforced every time the media interview an English footballer to bring further resonance to the word simple. And they say football is beautiful due to the scarcity of goals, though tell that to the Hartlepool United diehards who celebrated New Year's Eve in 1992 not knowing their team was about to embark upon an eleven game streak without scoring. Whatever the true reason for its deserved tag, it is irrelevant. If bitten by the football bug, you are infected for life, and you do not want a cure.

Football is particularly important to the male gender. The ever-increasing participation of women as spectators and players is a wonderful thing for the game and is to be embraced with the vigour of a dog on heat. However, our creator blessed the female with a natural ability to converse with ease and to engage people at an emotional level. If the average man did not have football as an outlet, there would be nothing about which to talk. I have worked with guys where one hundred per cent of our conversation - aside from a query about an outstanding invoice to pay - has been on football. Five minutes with his new female colleague and she knows more about me than a bloke I have known for twenty years. He thinks 'I never knew you had kids.' For a huge proportion of the male population, the beautiful game is the conversational glue that holds such relationships together, satisfying some deep tribal need to belong to a gang. It is the one arena in life where the male lets emotions run free, and of course, we take it all far too seriously.

Part of the obsession is not being able to get enough. We now live in a 24-7 multi-channel society in which there should be enough football related material to satisfy the most addictive personalities, but we still crave more. If there is two hours of pre-match build-up to a game, we watch our TVs somehow expecting a

new revelation or eye-opening angle to proceedings. Yet, there is not one pundit, expert summariser, commentator, manager, player or ex-player with anything new to say. It has all been said before, and still we come back for extra helpings.

The greatest shot in the arm for any football fanatic occurs every other year with the finals of either the FIFA World Cup or the UEFA European Championship. This is the highlight of soccer's calendar and if your country qualifies, it triggers eight or nine months of acute anticipation. This builds to a frenzy in the month or so before the first game of the finals, and we collect the petrol station coins, the Panini stickers, and the Corinthian football figures. We fly flags from our cars, our windows and, in the case of the over-enthusiastic, from the dog's arse. We buy the wall charts; enter the football sweeps and the fantasy football competitions. We get the preview magazines, the newspaper specials and the old programmes. We watch re-runs of previous tournaments, qualifying game highlights and preview shows. We eat, drink, inhale and ingest whatever we can, whenever we can, all in the hope that this time, glory is just around the corner. Of course, it's not. It never is. Still, the football fan is the optimist's optimist and so realism is relegated to a dormant role, only coming to life when the inevitable occurs and the fan is in despair.

This chunk of football fare gives you a potted history for each of the sixteen teams that competed at the 2012 Euros, the cream of the European crop. My hope is that this read will offer something a bit different. Alan Hansen, Gary Lineker and Alan Shearer never discussed the pivotal role General Franco played in making the Spanish football team the most technically adept group of players in the history of the game. And nor did Adrian Chiles, Jamie Carragher and Roy Keane spend much time discussing the standard of the refereeing at the 1934 World Cup Finals. But I will.

I have always had a recurring dream. I am playing football at the highest level, usually Liverpool or England... cue jokes about the relativity of 'highest'. Being a dream, there have been one or two unexpected twists and turns, such as the Queen Mother playing in goal for the opposition and me taking to the field wearing no shorts or underpants, but the basics tend to be the same. Roared on by the crowd, I make a mazy dribble towards the goal, and on some occasions, the ball bursts the back of the net to the deafening sound of fifty thousand cheers and exclamations. Then I wake up and I have pissed the bed with excitement... OK the latter happened only once but it left a mark, a mark that Persil Automatic struggled to shift to be fair. The psychology of my recurring dream is simple. I still want to be a footballer. I am nearly fifty-six years old and as likely to forge a career in professional soccer as I am to invent a rocket that will send David Cameron and Nick Clegg into perpetual earth orbit - though I will continue to try

- but my sub-conscious still yearns for a calling in the game, such is the power of the bug.

So I hope you enjoy this book, even those who are nerds. You know who you are. Please accept my apologies for any inaccuracies, though bear in mind this may be deliberate. Yes I know the European Championships was called the European Nations Cup in 1960 and 1964 and that it wasn't until 1996 that the 'Euros' term was first used, but who gives a shit. Remember, this book is a load of *Balls!*

Chris Whitfield
July 2012

Group A POLAND



World Cup Appearances: 7
World Cup Best: Semi-final - 1974, 1982
Euros Appearances: 2
Euros Best: Round 1 – 2008, 2012

LOONS

The Polish national football team is like a pair of loons I used to own. They had a purple patch around about the mid 1970s... those concerned that I strutted the glam rock era with a gaudy coloured crotch on display can rest assured that the patch covered the split knee. Yet a review of the major tournament qualification record of Poland shows only one appearance before 1974, and that was in 1938 when they played a solitary match against Brazil in the first round. Poland scored five goals, four from Wilimowski, the first player ever to score four in a World Cup game. Unfortunately, Brazil hit six and the Poles were on

the train home sooner than you could say 'Time to prepare for a pending invasion courtesy of the *Führer*'.

The Polish Football Federation formed in 1919 and the national team played their first game in 1921 against Hungary in Budapest, the match finishing in a 1-0 defeat. They appeared at the Olympics in 1924 and 1936 before their World Cup debut, but with the Second World War intervening, it was not until 1954 that they next entered the competition. The draw placed the team in Group 7 along with Hungary, then the best team on the planet. So how did the Polish team prepare for this challenge? Did they compile a dossier on every member of the Hungarian squad? Did they plan to do a man-to-man marking job on their key player, Ferenc Puskas? Or did they concentrate on their own game, perhaps formulating a winning, defensive strategy? The answers are no, no, and no. They actually thought, 'Hungary? Sod that for a bunch of soldiers, we're off!' The team withdrew, apparently under the influence of the Polish Ministry of Affairs, which contrary to popular opinion has nothing to do with a Ken Barlow visit to Warsaw and Krakow.

This Ministry had history. In a 1934 World Cup qualifier against Czechoslovakia, the Poles lost the first leg at home, inducing a hissy fit from the bureaucrats who picked up their metaphorical ball and went home, refusing to allow the return leg to take place. As a young boy, I can now see that I found this lack of sportsmanship strangely inspiring, when at the age of five or six, I would invoke the spirit of the Polish football establishment by holding on to my bat and refusing to walk when clean bowled in a game of cricket with the family. I could blame these actions on the frustration at being both competitive and crap, but these days I prefer to blame the Poles.

THE EAGLES

Even when accepting the need to turn up and play important tournament matches, Poland struggled to make any progress, and the failure to qualify for World Cups and European Championships became as much a cert as indigestion from a Prenton Park pork pie. Sweden '58 was a close call, losing a play-off against the USSR on a neutral ground, though the extent to which Leipzig in East Germany was neutral, given the power of the Soviet Fatherland at the time, was questionable. That was as near as it got for a while, with exits to Spain, Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland - before they were shit - Italy, France, Bulgaria and West Germany in subsequent campaigns. Even in the bastion of amateur sport that was the Olympic Games, tailor-made for the Iron Curtain countries, 'The White and Reds' fared no better. However, when Kazimierz Górski was appointed head coach in 1970, promoted from his U23 role, everything changed.

It started with gold at the 1972 Olympics, which in turn led to qualifying for the World Cup in Germany '74 at the expense of Sir Alf Ramsey's England, largely thanks to Ronald McDonald's sterling work in goal. ITV's big mouth pundit, Brian Clough had lampooned the Polish keeper, Jan Tomaszewski, for being a clown. Unusually though, this clown had the last laugh due to a succession of great saves that helped Poland clinch a 1-1 draw at Wembley to send England crashing out.

In the finals, the Poles did not just make up the numbers. They beat Italy, Argentina and (OK not so impressive) Haiti in the first group stage, and then Yugoslavia and Sweden to reach the semi-final, where they suffered a narrow 1-0 defeat to the eventual winners, West Germany, on a soaking wet pitch that helped the Germans more than it did the Poles. Clough had been talking through his arse. Tomaszewski the clown had a memorable World Cup with a series of excellent performances, including two penalty saves in two separate matches and a trick that involved a water pistol, a bucket of glitter and a unicycle. The keeper went home to a hero's welcome and would eventually get elected into the Polish Parliament. Cloughie went to Leeds United, where he basically acted the clown.

Poland qualified for the Mexico '78 World Cup, where they topped their group in the first stage but then struggled against the South Americans on their home soil, losing to Brazil and Argentina. Nonetheless, it had been another successful competition for the *Biało-czerwoni*. By 1982, most of Zorski's Eagles, including the man himself, were largely gone with only a handful of the '74 squad still playing, but they still earned another semi-final, this time defeated by Italy. Mexico '86 was to be their last World Cup appearance of the century, and the man to blame was Lech Walesa.

SOLIDARITY

Leader of the outlawed *Solidarność* (Solidarity) Free Trade Union in Poland, Walesa was a key figure in bringing about the demise of Communist Party rule in the country. Revered for his courage and bravery in standing up to the tyranny of the generals, it seems a bit trite to talk about the detrimental impact on football, given the newly found benefits of free speech, civil liberties, human rights and economic prosperity. Yet it is a fact that the national team's fortunes nosedived in negative correlation to the increase in political freedoms.

Under the old Communist rule, Polish football clubs were owned and financed by the military, the government and even the police... such teams presumably winning trophies with the help of tear gas, batons and a sprinkling of mindless brutality. Post 1989, when private money replaced public ownership, the new proprietors had a choice between short-term gain and long-term investment, and

being astute businesspersons, they chose the former. Any emphasis on youth development was lost, and it meant that Poland stopped producing players with the calibre of Lato, Deynar and Boniek.

In all the qualifying campaigns from 1988 to 1998, Poland could only finish third or fourth and were nowhere near making it to any of the finals. For the 2000 Euros in Belgium and Holland, it did appear that their recent duck was about to be broken. They needed one point from the final game against the already qualified Sweden to progress, but Poland lost 2-0 and let Keegan's England in by the back door.

The new millennium was ushering in better times for 'The White Eagles', comfortably qualifying for the 2002 and 2006 World Cups, although both finals provided them with disappointing early exits. And then in 2008, at their - unlucky for some but not for them - thirteenth attempt, Poland at last qualified for the finals of the European Championships, and they did it in style, finishing top of their group and achieving number sixteen in the FIFA world rankings. But it was another let down in the group stages of a major tournament, and like my Uncle Frank at every party he has ever attended, the Poles went home early... though not as pissed as Frank.

More recently, there has been a fair to middling chance that old Frank would be the first name on the Poland team sheet; such has been the drop-off in their form. A disastrous 2010 World Cup qualifying performance saw them finish second to bottom in their group, only finishing ahead of San Marino, which is akin to defeating Bonnie Langford in a cage-fighting encounter. The tiny Italian principality are so shit that Poland's worst team for a few generations still managed to record the best ever result in the history of the national side, a 10-0 thumping in Kielce. It was a hollow achievement, for in 2012, the Poles dropped to an all time low FIFA ranking of seventy five. At the peak of Zorski's Eagles in the 1970s, Poland ranked the top side in the world. Their fall from grace to their current position is quite a story. What makes matters worse is that Polish Football has had to endure a major corruption scandal in the last few years, which has seen the whole of the PZPN Football Association suspended on more than one occasion. There have been over two hundred arrests since the start of the investigations, including referees, players, coaches, officials, and the stadium cat in Łódź.

However, as one of the co-hosts of the 2012 Euros with Ukraine, they had automatic qualification with the chance to relive past glories and discover another purple patch. Unfortunately, they approached every game like an inconsiderate, oversexed lover. Poland was the premature ejaculator of the tournament, peaking far too early in each of their three group matches. The team,

driven by adrenaline, the crowd and the occasion, came out of the traps for each game and played really well for the first twenty minutes. Having a genuine class striker in the Bundesliga player of the year, Lewandowski, gave them a cutting edge that suggested they could progress to the latter stages. However, by the second half of each game, it soon became apparent that their defence comprised clodhoppers schooled on a composite of Jack Charlton, Ron Yeats and the average Sunday League veteran. Two draws against Greece and Russia and a 1-0 defeat to the Czechs meant they were out. They ended looking very much aligned to their FIFA ranking.

Maybe the golden days could return if I donned split-knee loons again, Coco the Clown played in goal, and some big-shot pundit took the piss... then again, maybe not. There is as much a chance of loons making a comeback as the Polish Football team. It is an open and shut case of no flare and no flair.

GREECE



World Cup Appearances: 2

World Cup Best: Round 1 - 1994, 2010

Euros Appearances: 3

Euros Best: Winners 2004

BARREN TIMES

What is the difference between a Glen Medeiros CD and Greece? Well, you could put the CD up for sale on Ebay at 99p and some daft bugger would bid for it. Even fans of Glen, not renowned for their sensibilities, would think twice about bidding for the sun-drenched, debt-laden country.

Greece has given the world Mythology, Philosophy, Classic Literature, Architecture, the Olympic Games and the Kebab... and in the light of the latter, some would add Salmonella to that list... and for those who have watched too many episodes of *Eggheads*, Salmonella is not the Greek Goddess of Fish. As for football, until 2004 the nation had contributed more to spoon playing than soccer. With just a couple of exceptions, Greece failed to qualify for either the

World Cup or the European Championship with the monotonous regularity of my dad's nightly trip to the Kings' Arms for a few pints of mild.

They were late to join the international football jamboree, playing their first match in 1929 against Italy. The Italians were also their opponents in their first ever World Cup game in a qualifier for the 1934 finals. After a 4-0 defeat in Milan, the Greeks decided that was enough and withdrew from the tournament before the return leg. The 1938 qualifiers were a mixed bag. After defeating Palestine/Israel - perhaps help by some in-house fighting from the opposition - Greece went through to a play-off with Hungary in Budapest. Unfortunately, they were pulverized 11-1 in the tie, which still stands as their worst ever result.

They drew a blank in the 1950s, when Yugoslavia was their nemesis in the qualifying rounds. In the '60s, where there was now both a World and European Championship, they failed to get past a string of strong sides including West Germany, France and USSR to continue their record of non-qualification, although the wound was self-inflicted in 1964. For the second European Nations Cup, the draw matched them with Albania. The countries were not in military conflict, but this was the time of the Cold War - hard to imagine in the heat of Greece - and they were like two neighbours who had fallen out over the building of a garden fence. Like a male porn lead, Greece withdrew.

The '70s did not bring a change of fortune, though there were clear signs of improvement with near misses in 1970 and 1976. For Mexico '70, if they had scored one more goal in their final qualifying game against Romania, they would have qualified for the the World Cup Finals. Greek domestic football showed a similar positive move forward when in 1971 Panathinaikos reached the final of the European Cup, beaten by Johann Cruyff's Ajax. Then in the European Championship qualifiers for 1976, Greece did the hard bit, holding World Champions, West Germany to a draw home and away, and then did the unthinkable, playing naked against a team of nuns... not quite, it was even more unthinkable. They lost 2-0 to Malta.

In 1980, they finally made it to the finals of one of the big tournaments, the European Championships in Italy. Greece was one of only eight teams in the finals, and they were drawn in the same group as the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia and West Germany, which would have been a group of death - the losers get shot or something - but the Greeks had no track record and were therefore considered crap. They did not disappoint, going out in the group stage, but at least they were not humiliated.

And so when the team qualified for their first ever World Cup in USA '94, the Greek supporters approached the tournament with Frank Sinatra's song ringing in their ears - that's 'High Hopes' and not 'Looking at the World through Rose

Coloured Glasses'. Unfortunately, their time at the finals ended with that little known Greek folk song, 'What a Load of Shit, Stavros'. Their record of three games, three losses, no goals scored, and ten goals conceded, is right up there with the worst ever. I was actually on holiday in Corfu at the time of this tournament, and I can recall the local men struggling to come to terms with the shame, though I think this was more to do with the Stavros song and the fact that half of the males on the island had been christened Stavros. My other memory of that holiday was watching a game between Germany and Bulgaria with an older family member who had not yet forgiven the Germans for the Second World War. For ninety minutes in the company of other Europeans, including many Germans, she was a national stereotype with Tourettes, her words 'I hate the Krauts', only partially drowned out by our more reasoned protestations.

For the next three qualifying campaigns, the team just missed out, finishing third in the table each time. When it became clear that the Greeks were not going to qualify for the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea, the Hellenic Football Federation appointed the experienced German, Otto Rehhagal, as manager. This was a time when Germany was making a strategic shift in its approach that would ultimately lead to an infusion of youth and a greater emphasis on attacking football. But Otto was more old school and decided to shape his Greek side in the traditions of the classic German teams, with solid defence, hard work and discipline. His team did not get off to the best start, losing 5-1 to Finland, but it all came good in the next couple of years, Greece qualifying for the 2004 Euros in Portugal, their first European Championships since 1980.

2004 & ALL THAT

The expectations of the supporters were as modest as a modest man who has just won the 'Modest Man of the Year' award and is being modest about his achievement. A repeat of the 1980 Euros would suffice. People started to dust down their renditions of 'What a Load of Shit, Stavros' in readiness for the inevitable disappointment... and for the completists who have Googled the song and can't find it, may I suggest you get a life?

Yet in their first game of the finals against the Portuguese hosts, the Greeks won 2-1, following that up with a surprise 1-1 draw with fancied Spain. They lost the last group game to already eliminated Russia, but squeezed through to the knock-out stages on numbers of goals scored. Next up was the reigning champions, France, with the likes of Terry Henry. Surely, this was to be the game where the 'Stavros' song would be sung at the end. Not so. In a resolute performance, the Greeks won 1-0 to make it to the semis, where they were to

play the Czech Republic. Up to this point, the Czechs had won every game including victories over Germany and the Netherlands, and they were highly fancied to make it through to the final. Once again, Greece was the party pooper, winning by the habit-forming 1-0 score line, despite being out-played for much of the game. The final matched them up once again with the hosts. Portugal was a talented footballing nation with world-class players such as Luis Figo and up and coming starlets like Cristiano Ronaldo. They were hot favourites to win, and so naturally, they lost. The Greeks took the game by the inevitable 1-0 to collect the trophy.

It had been a remarkable achievement for the boys from Greece, confirmation that in the game of football, a team of journeymen and benchwarmers can triumph over the *galácticos* and brand-endorsing multi-millionaires through collective effort and achievement. And there was some icing on the cake for those either love the underdog or despise the 'Overpaid Prima Donnas'... copyright – embittered middle-aged man who never made it as a footballer and is scraping a living in a cooked meats factory. Theodoros Zagorakis, a former Leicester City midfielder who had struggled to hold down a regular first team place at the Midlands' club, became 'Player of the Tournament'. It was a triumph for the ordinary over the extraordinary.

The Greek people were understandably ecstatic. A history of non-achievement overturned in a few small weeks with the help of a pragmatic, German traditionalist. The team catapulted from nowhere to number eight in the FIFA rankings. This remarkable transformation was akin to the bass player from The Nolans having a simultaneous number one smash in the UK, US, German and Japanese charts, having previously endured a career in the shadow of his more illustrious partner.

It couldn't last and it didn't. The first game in the 2006 World Cup qualifiers was an away game in sunny Albania, their neighbours, long considered the North Korea of Europe. A 2-1 defeat set the tone for the campaign, Greece only able to finish fourth in the table. The 2008 Euros campaign was an improvement in that the team qualified, but in the finals, Greece were eliminated at the group stage when they suffered defeats to Sweden, Russia and Spain.

However, they made it to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa after finishing behind Switzerland in their group and beating Ukraine in a play-off. In the finals, they lost their first game in a dour encounter against South Korea, but then beat Nigeria 1-0, helped by the Nigerian goalkeeper who was clearly a fan of YouTube's 'Now that's what I call shit goalkeeping.' In the deciding game versus Argentina, the Greeks needed a combination of results to go through. Rehhagal recalled the 2004 Euros blueprint of dogged defending and the hope of

a breakaway goal. For most of the game, it looked like it might work, until the Argentinians scored two late goals to send the Greeks home. It was Otto Rehhagal's last game.

HARD TIMES

The campaign for the 2012 Euros saw the Greeks unbeaten in ten games and topping the group, ahead of the fancied Croatians. It took the team to eighth in the FIFA rankings. Despite this, it was still a surprise in the finals when they squeezed through to the last eight with a surprise 1-0 victory over the fancied Russians in the last game of the group stage. For a brief moment, some thought 2004 was about to repeat itself, but these people were fans of Glen Medeiros and had smaller than average brains, ignoring the fact Greece had to play Germany in the quarter-finals. A comprehensive 4-2 defeat sent the team back to their homeland, now a theme park called *Austerity World*.

So does the future look any good for the Greek national team? Not really. There is a clear correlation between economic prosperity and footballing success, which is why a desperately poor country such as Sierra Leone ranks so low. When the freewheeling capitalist model collapsed in 2008, we soon learnt that politicians and bankers with the financial and economic skill set of a pre-school playgroup had facilitated Greek expansion and economic growth. Arguably, this is unfair on the under-fours who know that if you have a £1 coin, you cannot get £1,000 worth of sweets, even if you have a *Masters of the Universe* figure as collateral.

The Greek economy is now in freefall, overburdened by debts and an inability to raise taxes from a population who propagate the black market as king. Salaries, wages and standards of living are plummeting, and this is clearly going to impact on football. TV and crowd revenues will fall, investment in developing youth talent will diminish, and the feed of talent to the the national team will be cut off. The 2004 success will inevitably be seen as a 'one-off'. They started 150-1 to win that year, and it stands to reason they will have to wait at least another couple of centuries to repeat the success. We can all look forward to an episode of BBC TV's *Question of Sport* in which Phil Tufnell has to name all the winners of the European Championships since 1980, and I guarantee that the answer Phil will omit is the Greek victory in 2004. It was a blip, and left no mark on the sporting consciousness of anyone other than the quiz nerd and the Greeks themselves. Notwithstanding Euro 2004, Greece in football terms will remain one of the also rans. They will just have to stick to their strengths.

'Donor kebab, anyone?'

RUSSIA



World Cup Appearances: 9

World Cup Best: Semi-final - 1966

Euros Appearances: 10

Euros Best: Winners - 1960

STALIN, SBORI & SWEDEN

What connects Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan? Perhaps one of these will win next year's Eurovision Song Contest with a performance that involves an attractive, loud voiced girl singer with high cheekbones, a dancer wearing a windmill on his head, and a group of backing singers that look like rejects from an audition for *Chernobyl* the musical. But the real connection is that until 1991, these countries were all socialist republics of the Soviet Union. Lacking independence and FIFA recognition, they were unable to play football under their own name, and so the national team, operating under the umbrella of the USSR, had its pick of the best players.

The 'Red Army' was late coming to international football. The original Russian team formed in 1912, five years before the revolution and at a time when the country still operated the Julian calendar, which was thirteen days behind the rest of the world. This might explain why international fixtures were to be so sparse during the early years of their football. The regular occurrence of players turning up for games in foreign climes nearly two weeks late was bound to take its toll. By 1924, the Soviets had adopted the Gregorian calendar and formed a USSR team to play its first competitive matches in a home and away encounter with Turkey. Amazingly though, it would be another quarter of a century before the team took part in their next international, at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, where they were knocked out in the second round, after their game against Yugoslavia went to a replay. The first match against the Slavs was

notable for finishing as a 5-5 draw, with the USSR coming from 5-1 down with fifteen minutes to go, to earn a replay with four late goals.

The next Olympic football tournament was Melbourne in 1956 and is probably the most shambolic of any such major contest. Only eleven countries competed and there were more byes than a Pakistani cricket game targeted by the spread-betters. However, the Soviets did not care and were happy to collect the gold medal after a 1-0 victory over fellow communists, Yugoslavia.

This led to the Soviet Union's first ever World Cup in Sweden for the 1958 competition. This was a little time after Joseph Stalin's death, which may not have been a coincidence. A list of the dictator's likes and dislikes could have read:

LIKES:

Nobody

DISLIKES:

Everybody

The Red Army playing in the World Cup

But with the tyrant dead and buried, the USSR took part in the qualifying stages, making it to Sweden at the expense of Poland and Finland, which included a 10-0 away win against the Finns, where the Russians were 7-0 up at half time. In the finals, they helped eliminate England in the group stages before losing to the hosts in the quarter-final. By any standards - other than those of the Soviet Communist - it had been a successful start to their World Cup adventures. However, to the Kremlin hierarchy, it was a national embarrassment, and so efforts would need to be doubled to ensure next time was victorious.

Despite their lack of international experience, it was not a surprise when the USSR emerged fully formed with a team that was highly competitive. Besides having the choice of fifteen different nations, there was heavy investment in sport, seen by the leaders as an ideal way to exert superiority over the Western world. There was a clear emphasis on developing young talent in sport, and spending was profligate in relation to facilities for training and development. Football was no exception, and a thriving Soviet league grew during the early years of self-imposed separation from international fixtures. The other factor that set Soviet football aside from the rest of Europe was its training regime called *Sbori*, which was militaristic in the way it operated.

Pre-season started with training camps far away from loved ones and would last for up to six weeks. Strict diets applied, which would not have included caviar and champagne, though vodka would have been on tap for the lads. As for

physical exercise, it was a bit more than a few star jumps and press ups. It was a stick and carrot approach, where the players were beaten with the stick and pelted with the carrots. I read recently of a part-time non-league player who had signed a professional contract with an English league side and was disbelieving of the time he had on his hands, training being a couple of hours each morning. Such ex-electricians would probably just about survive the Russian training camp approach, but only just. As for today's - cue the cliché - 'pampered football professionals', a few days of *Sbori* would kill them. It also goes without saying that there were no Soviet Wives shopping for designer handbags in Stockholm at the 1958 World Cup. But *Sbori* was in keeping with the prevailing Communist culture and so the ends went some way to justifying the means.

COLD WAR CHAMPIONS

In 1960, the first European Championships took place, and the USSR opted to take part. In the first round, they dispensed of a Hungarian side - ironically a lot weaker since the 1956 Soviet invasion - and then had a bye in the quarter-finals because General Franco of Spain, proving his long-term memory was functioning impeccably, refused to let the Spanish team travel to Moscow. He had not forgotten the Soviet Union siding with his opponents in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. France hosted the finals, and after easily beating the Czechs, USSR beat another communist country, Yugoslavia, 2-1 after extra time to win the tournament. The Soviets were champions of Europe.

The large number of top sides in Europe that had refused to take part had partially diminished the achievement, but for the ruling Communist hierarchy, it was a very satisfying state of affairs. The Cold War was hotter than ever. Two months before the final there had been the international furore over an American spy plan shot down over Russian soil, and in the following year, the East built the Berlin Wall. The rivalry against the West was at its peak, so it followed that sporting supremacy was a prime aim for the Kremlin masters. The football team had delivered the goods. Much of the Soviet Union success could be attributed to their secret weapon. To be fair they had more than one, hydrogen bombs and intercontinental ballistic missiles for starters. But the football team's ace in the hole was their goalkeeper, the legendary Lev Yashin

Touted by many as the best number one in the history of the game, Yashin is credited with developing the art of goalkeeping more than any one. He was the first to punch the ball rather than catch it, where safer to do so. He pioneered the quick throw to start a counter-attack. And he broke new ground by coming out of his penalty area, anticipating the danger from an opposition attack. Known as the 'Black Spider' - perhaps because he liked to appear from the plughole in the bath

and frighten the shit out of people - he kept 270 clean sheets in a career spanning a couple of decades and 812 games. The only keeper to win European Footballer of the Year, he was a remarkably agile athlete who is thought to have saved over 150 penalty kicks during his playing days. He did later provide an insight to his secrets, and it was typically Russian.

'To have a smoke to calm your nerves, then toss back a strong drink to tone your muscles.'

He cemented his place as the best of all time when FIFA named him in the World Team of the 20th Century. The only issue with the latter is that my dad was a goalkeeper in his youth, playing semi-professional football for South Liverpool and Runcorn in the 1950s, and my granddad used to tell a story about Aston Villa wanting to sign him. I also remember a dusty old scrapbook with yellowed pages and the odd creepy crawly. It was full of press cuttings with headlines such as, 'Whitfield Saves Last Minute Penalty' and 'Whitfield Saves the Day'. Therefore, if you do not mind, I would prefer if we nominated Lev Yashin as the second best. For me, the best will always be... Gordon Banks. In a nice piece of symmetry, my dad might not have been up to the standard of the England great, but at least he looked like him, both sharing some distant Chinese DNA in their genetic make-up.

For the '62 World Cup, the USSR won all four games in their qualifying group to make it comfortably to Chile. But in the finals, despite topping their table in the group phase, the European champions lost unexpectedly to the hosts in the last eight. Understandably, the Soviet generals were not happy bunnies, and maybe I am stretching things more than a pair of leggings over the thighs of Chaka Khan, when I draw your attention to the Cuban Missile crisis that followed just a few months later. From World Cup 'humiliation' to the verge of a nuclear war, the globe was a dangerous place in the early '60s.

Next up was the second European Championships in 1964, and the holders made it to the finals in Spain with three other clubs. After defeating Denmark, the Soviets were in the final again though this time they lost to the hosts. General Franco was there to take the piss. At the '66 World Cup in England, the USSR played their group games at Sunderland's Roker Park, the players settling quickly with the North Sea breezes redolent of those Siberian winter training camps. The team won all its Wearside games, including a victory over Hungary in the quarter-finals. Yet when they moved south to the Liverpool Riviera to play West Germany in the semi-final at Goodison Park, the change in the weather was too much of an adjustment, and they lost 2-1. The Soviets continued to demonstrate they were one of the stronger teams in international football with a fourth place in the 1968 European Championships, a quarter-final appearance in

Mexico '70 World Cup, and a runners-up position in the '72 Euros. However, when the communist model - like the Moscow Naked Bike Rack Formation Ensemble - began to show its cracks, the USSR team lost its way.

The momentum was checked in the qualification stage for the 1974 World Cup in Germany. Although they finished top of their group, the USSR had the worst record of the nine UEFA groupings and had to play Chile, their old football adversaries from the '62 tournament, in an inter-continental play-off. When the first leg took place in Moscow, there was a military coup in Chile led by Augusto Pinochet. Anyone considered undesirable to the new regime, essentially anyone saying 'Augusto, I hope you do not mind me saying but...' He did mind, rounding them up to torture and kill these unwanted in the national football stadium.

The Soviets, quite reasonably, suggested a neutral venue for the return leg, not wanting their players tripping over sawn-off limbs still scattered across the turf. FIFA, under the esteemed old fart and former referee Sir Stanley Rous, was unmoved and refused the request. The Kremlin responded by withdrawing the USSR team. Amazingly, the game still went ahead. The crowd turned up to see eleven outfield Chilean players and no opposition. The ref blew the whistle and the game was under way. I am not sure precisely what happened next, but it might have been one of two things. Chile was a naturally defensive team with caution the watchword. It could have easily taken about thirty minutes to score the first and decisive goal. Alternatively, one of their players might have tried to do a Pele, straight from the kick-off, and score from the halfway line, the ball skimming the crossbar and out of play. They would have then waited ninety minutes for the opposition keeper to take the goal kick, before going through on the toss of a coin.

DOWNHILL TO PERESTROIKA

Following their first appearance in Sweden '58, the USSR had qualified for every subsequent World Cup and European Championship up to 1972, yet it would be the World Cup of Spain '82, when they next appeared in the finals of a major football competition. They were the form team going into the tournament and just managed to get past Scotland in the first group phase. 'So what?' I hear you say, or at least those of you who would always wear underpants under a kilt. But this was one of the best Scottish teams with Graeme Souness, Alan Hansen and Kenny Dalglish, though in Alan Rough, the team still had a goalkeeper who was an expert at letting the ball slip through hands clearly greased with Swarfega before every game. The key match for the Soviets in the second group was against the Poles, occurring against a backdrop of political unrest in Poland,

where the communist leadership had recently imposed Martial Law to prevent any uprising. The Kremlin under the aged Leonid Brezhnev approved. The USSR needed to win, but the game ended goalless, Poland thereby qualifying for the semi-finals, a welcome respite for their suffering fans back home.

Some interpreted the relative improvement in Spain as an indication of a pending return to the golden era of Soviet football, but this ignored what was happening in the country itself. The vast expanse of republics that comprised the Union had long been in decline. Within a few months of the '82 World Cup, Brezhnev was dead, opening up the opportunity for reform. The old guard, as keen on change as a 19th-century English textile Luddite, appointed the chronically ill Yuri Andropov as the new President. It was not long before he popped his Russian clogs, and so the search for the next successor led to Konstantin Chernenko's appointment. He was the ideal candidate with all the right credentials, other than he was a man dying of emphysema. When he passed away, the door was open for Mikael Gorbachev to take the reins and try change and reform, a journey that would end with the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the end of 1991.

USSR had been turmoil in the 1980s, with a growing desire for independence from within the republics. It is hardly a surprise that the national football team could not emulate the prominence of its sides from the 1960s and early 1970s. They qualified for the next two World Cups in '86 and '90 but their performances never hit any dizzy heights.

Yet there was a golden swansong for the Soviets with an unexpected performance in the European Championship finals of 1988. They hit the ground running, surprising the Netherlands with a 1-0 win in the first round, which ultimately proved enough to get them to the semi-final where they beat Italy 2-0. In the final, they met Holland again. This was the Dutch team of Ruud Gullit and Marco van Baston, and their talent prevailed, helping their side to a 2-0 victory. The USSR was runner-up, unable to emulate their success from 1960, yet exceeding all expectations. This time, there would no politburo of politicians and bureaucrats ready to express disapproval or need for corrective action, punishment or extra *Sbori*.

The last international played by the USSR was the final game in the successful qualifying stages for Euro '92 in Denmark. The end of 1991 witnessed the break up of the union, and some of the republics gained independent status as countries. FIFA was quick to allow these teams to participate in their own right, leaving the remaining Soviets to play the European Championships under the name of the CIS. Lacking identity and togetherness, the team failed to win a game in Denmark and went out early.

OIL DOLLARS

Post *Perestroika*, Russian football began to disintegrate. The population was otherwise engaged with the loss of the central state and the corruption, crime, incompetence and separatist wars that followed in the slipstream. Sport, which in the heyday of the Communist regime had always been near the top of the national agenda, along with a plentiful supply of vodka, was now low down on the list of priorities. Football had failed to have the staying power of the national drink, and its degeneration became inevitable. There was no money in league football, all players desperately hoping to sign for an overseas club who might pay more than bread, dripping and an old Kremlin prostitute for a Sunday night. Crowds were sparser than the hairs on Bobby Charlton's crown, and the clubs even let fans in free at half time, just to make up the numbers.

Somehow, the newly formed Russian national football team rose above the turgid state on the domestic front to maintain a commendable international record during the first half of the 1990s, helped by a couple of factors. Firstly, there was a number of veterans from the USSR sunset hiatus of the late 1980s still playing, their tournament experience invaluable. Moreover, selectors could still call upon footballers from the Ukraine, which had long been a source of quality players for the old Soviet side. The Ukrainians were still unable to play in their own right, because someone in their Football Federation had either forgotten to post the FIFA registration application forms or used blue ink instead of black.

By the time of Euro '96, things were catching up with the Russians. Although they had the benefit of a favourable draw for qualifying, in the finals they were the weakest team in that year's 'group of death'. They finished bottom with one point. Thereafter, it was downhill, reflecting the weakness of its league football, and they failed to make it to either France '98 or Euro 2000. There was a revival of sorts for the the 2002 World Cup, as the team qualified strongly, and hopes were raised when they drawn into what was considered the easiest of the groups in the finals. It was not to be, and after a 1-0 defeat to the Japanese hosts, they were out and - cue Bill McClaren - there was rioting on the streets of Moscow.

The Russian Football Union was changing its head coach more than a WAG changed her shoes and between the years 2002 and 2006, the team had five different incumbents, all Russian. These guys were steeped in the old Soviet style of management, in which the *Sbory* was king and motivation was best derived from the threat of assassination, family abduction, or best of all, no vodka rations. But a terrible qualifying campaign for the 2006 World Cup in Germany led to a change in strategy. Finishing third in their group was bad

enough, but the games had included their biggest ever defeat, 7-1 to Portugal. It was all too much for the Russian President, Vlad 'the bad' Putin, who as an ex-KGB man saw sport in the way the old communist leaders did. Failure was an intolerable humiliation. He demanded that the head of the Russian Football Union contact his billionaire pal, Roman Abramovich, now ensconced in bankrolling Chelsea FC in the English Premier League, to locate a suitable foreign coach.

This led to the appointment of the illustrious Guus Hiddink who would guide the Russians in the Euro 2008 qualifiers. Hiddink immediately dismantled some of the old Soviet ideals, such as the *Sbori*, to bring his undoubted effective management style to the fore. Like a bridal bed, there were plenty of ups and downs, but the Dutchman achieved the aim of getting the team to the finals in Austria and Switzerland. So would there be the habitual blow out in the finals? In a word, no.

The Russian national team was starting to reap the benefit of a resurgent domestic football scene, transformed by 'oil dollars'. The natural resource that was leading the country's economic revival in the new century was similarly affecting football. Players no longer needed to go abroad to earn a good living as the Russian Premier League had improved dramatically from the lows of the 1990s to be one of the fastest growing leagues in Europe, positioned seventh in the UEFA league rankings. High calibre footballers such as Roman Pavlyuchenko and Andrei Arshavin were plying their trade in the Russian domestic leagues and it followed that this would enhance the country's ability at the international level.

The finals of Euro 2008 started with the usual cliché of a group defeat, but victories against Greece and Sweden put the team through to the quarter-final, where they played Holland, the tournament favourites. To the surprise of many, they recorded a memorable 3-1 win after extra time to make it to a semi-final against Spain, which they lost 3-0. To the neutral observer, and probably even to 'Vlad the Bad', defeat was neither unexpected nor a disgrace.

The setback of just missing out on South Africa 2010, unexpectedly losing a play off game against Slovenia, brought the Hiddink era to an end. But the football authorities maintained the Dutch love affair by appointing the man with a name that sounds like a sex game with an unfashionable drink, Cock Liebfraumilch... Ok then, Dick Advocaat, the man who led Russian club side Zenit St.Petersburg to recent domestic and European glory. Dick did the business and guided the new Red Army to the Euro 2012 finals.

Playing their games in Poland, Russia grabbed all the initial headlines with a sumptuous 4-1 demolition of the Czech Republic, achieved despite a shockingly

bad striking performance from Aleksandr Kerzhakov. The Zenit St Petersburg forward missed more chances than a coy virgin at an orgy, displaying the worst finish since my brother hand painted his bike in 1966... as a naïve eleven year old; he painted everything, including the chain. In the next match against their Polish hosts, they drew a game they should have won, but only an unexpected combination of results in the final games of the group would see them eliminated. Unfortunately for the supporters, the unexpected happened when the free flowing Red Army clotted, losing 1-0 to Greece. The Russians were out, and no amount of oil dollars could change the fact.

We now live in a world where the economic scales are being rebalanced. Western countries are in commercial decline, while emerging nations are booming. This includes the BRICK countries, Brazil, Russia, India, China and Kazakhstan... or is that BRIC? The link between economic growth and international football achievement augurs well for Russia, or does it? The Russian game is flourishing because of the oil money. Yet this money is in fewer hands than a convention of convicted Saudi Arabian thieves. Unless a long-term perspective is taken, investing in youth, infrastructure, and the development of the game, it may prove to be a false dawn. It is more likely that the oligarchs will look for immediate gratification, not achieve it, get bored, and go somewhere else.

However, it is not all bad news. They still have the Eurovision Song Contest. Where is that guy with the windmill on his head?

[CZECH REPUBLIC](#)



World Cup Appearances: 9

World Cup Best: Runners Up - 1934, 1962

Euros Appearances: 8

Euros Best: Winners - 1976

[A BOHEMIAN TALE](#)

The Czechs have had more identities than an IRA supergrass. The sequence is Bohemia part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovak Republic, Czechoslovak Republic, Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Czechoslovak Republic, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Czech Republic & Slovak Republic, and Czech Republic, the latter with Slovakia as an independent country. The football team could not quite keep pace with the frequency of these changes and kept it to just four, Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, the Representation of Czechs and Slovaks, and the Czech Republic.

Under their first name of Bohemia, the Bohemians - now you know that early twentieth century football inspired Freddie Mercury's Rhapsody - played a series of Habsburg Empire local derbies against Hungary and the odd one against England. Records are sketchy, but players such as Scaramouch, Galileo, Figaro, and Bismillah may have featured heavily in these fixtures. Then at the end of the First World War in 1918, Czechoslovakia declared its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the football team had a new name.

It suited them, for by 1924, Czechoslovakia was the number one team in the world rankings. When they first entered FIFA's World Cup competition in 1934, they made it to the finals, though it was a task made easier by their Polish opponents giving up after losing the first leg of the qualifying tie. In the finals themselves, the Czechs were hugely successful making it to a final against the hosts Italy and were only nine minutes - that's one listen to Bohemian Rhapsody in front of the mirror with a little bid added at the end to soak up the audience adulation - away from full time and glory. Then the Italians equalized. The *Azzurri* went on to win the match 2-1 with another goal in extra-time. It was an unlucky end to an outstanding tournament.

Qualifying easily for the 1938 World Cup, the Czechs reached the quarter-finals in a tie against Brazil. The game was a notoriously spunky affair, with three players sent off and two Czechs suffering broken bones. This is all the more remarkable when you consider officiating at this time. The norm was for the ref to give you a ticking off after the attempted murder of an opposition player, rather than your marching orders. (Although within three months of this tie, the Czech population received their more literal marching orders when Hitler dismantled the country through the threat of war.) As it was, the Brazilians won the replay, having to play the semi-final; two days later... teams embraced the need to play three games in four days as a good thing. It saved the lads from getting bored, stuck in their dormitories reading *Just William* and playing Ludo.

It was back to the Bohemia tag for 1939, and the team played one more international after the outbreak of the Second World War, a 'friendly' against

Germany. Not quite getting the point about Third Reich ideals, Bohemia raced into a 3-0 lead before sense took hold, and they facilitated a heroic 4-4 draw.

After the war, it was Czechoslovakia again, and this involved a few friendlies and playing in the Dr. Gerö Cup, a competition for Central European nations. The next FIFA World Cup entered was in 1954, but the team was out of practice at this level, and they lost both of their group games, scoring no goals and conceding seven. It could not have been worse, unless you were Scottish. Scotland, in the same group as the Czechs and making their debut, lost both their games, scored none but let in eight, one more than Czechoslovakia. For those quick on the uptake, wondering how two teams in the same group finished with 'nil points', this was one of FIFA's great ideas of having four countries in a group where teams only had to play two of the others. Those of you who did not make the connection, you really should have paid more attention at school.

Although they achieved qualification for the 1958 World Cup in Sweden, there was another disappointing exit in the group stage. Despite having a better goal difference, a superior goal average, and having scored more goals than Northern Ireland, FIFA rules insisted on a play off between two sides for finishing on the same number of points. Predictably, the Irish won.

PRAGUE SPRINGS & BELGRADE SUMMERS

The 1960s, that great decade of change if you lived anywhere other than behind the Iron Curtain or Warminster, started off really well for the Czechs. Before the heroics of the 1962 World Cup in Chile, they won the last Dr. Gerö Cup, pipping Hungary to the title. In these days of instant gratification, you are more likely to see a geriatric Jimmy Hill singing in trunks on *X-Factor* than the format of a competition like the Dr. Gerö Cup. When Czechoslovakia picked up the trophy in 1960, the contest had lasted seven years. If Chelsea was to take part in something like this, that would mean seven managers involved and seven accusations of racial abuse.

1960 was a good year for the Czechs. After their patient victory in the soon to be defunct Dr. Gerö Cup, the new kid on the block, UEFA's European Nations Cup took place the same year. Czechoslovakia was the only team with the Republic of Ireland that had to play a qualifying tie, which they duly won 4-2 on aggregate. The finals were remarkable for their one hundred and two goals scored. Though to be fair, this was an age when the art of defending was less than sophisticated. The main skill of a goalkeeper was to dive in the opposite direction to which the opposing striker hit the ball. It also helped if he was able to swing on the crossbar like an over excited small child. The Czech team

eventually made it to the semi-finals, where they lost to the eventual tournament winners and their political masters, the USSR.

At the '62 World Cup in Chile, they proved to be one of the best teams. Wins in the knockout stages against their old Central European adversaries, Hungary and Yugoslavia, saw the team in the final against Brazil. Despite taking the lead, the South Americans fought back to score three goals and win 3-1. Nonetheless, it was another great tournament for the Czechs and Slovaks.

The footballing team may have been hitting the heights, but the country itself was in decline. The imposed Soviet model of industrialisation was not appropriate to the already mechanised Czech economy, and the downturn led to demands for both economic and political changes, culminating in the Prague Spring of 1968. First Secretary, Alexander Dubček, proposed a series of liberalisations to which the Soviets, under Leonid Brezhnev, took exception. Enforcing his doctrine of non-tolerance towards any shade of capitalism, he sent in 200,000 troops and 2,000 tanks to occupy the country, a state of affairs that would last until 1990. The trauma and ensuing hardship fed through to the football team. With the exception of the 1970 World Cup, a first round whitewash anyway, the national team failed to qualify for any of the major tournaments until the 1976 European Championship, the year of their finest hour.

In that year's qualifying stages, they triumphed over Don Revie's England in the final game of their group in a match played over two days. And no, this was not a 24-hour Le Mans Rally style encounter. Fog that settled during the first half thwarted the first attempt to play - though I suspect it was the lads on the bench enjoying their cigars a little too much - and so the referee abandoned the game, with the replay the next day. This was the last Euros where only four teams participated in the finals and so it was straight to the semis and a 3-1 victory over the great Dutch team of the 1970s. This set up a final in Belgrade against World Champions, West Germany, who did what came naturally to them by downing a yard of ale, eating a giant sausage, and then scoring a last minute equaliser. The match went to penalties, and after German forward Uli Hoeness aimed his kick at a pigeon circling above the stands rather than the goalmouth, up stepped Antonín Panenka to try to win it for the Czechs. Demonstrating the cool of Clint Eastwood's 'Man with No Name', Panenka dinked his spot kick into the middle of the goal as the goalkeeper sprawled to his left. Others have done the same since, but he was the first. The Czechs were European Champions... cue the usual orgy of players running from the halfway line to simulate group sex with one another on the side of the pitch.

It is interesting to contrast and compare this Czech success with the decline of the England national team occurring at the same time. Many English football fanatics would have willingly swapped places with their contemporaries of Prague and Bratislava yet might have lived to regret the choice, if it had ever come to fruition. A visiting Czech I met at this time was amazed at the ready availability of consumer electronics in the UK. If he wanted a refrigerator, he could not go to Comet and buy one. He would have to go and make his own. We have to assume that the Czechoslovakian equivalent of *Blue Peter* did not make dolls houses out of cardboard and sticky back plastic. They would make a Twin Tub with industrial sheet metal, nuts, bolts and rivets. The Czechs may have been the football kings of Europe, but we had our Deep Freezers and Music Centres.

REPUBLICANS

Although Czechoslovakia failed to reach the '78 World Cup finals, 1980 proved to be another good year with Gold in the Olympics and third place in the newly enlarged Euros. The rest of the decade, however, was undistinguished, the achievements of the team on the same downward spiral as the country itself. There was one final flourish for the Czech nation at Italia '90. They made the quarter-finals before exiting to the team who would go on to win, the ubiquitous West Germany. This was just after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, when people started to dress like Laurence Llewellyn Bowen, communist rule ended, and the country became a democracy. By 1993, the old Czechoslovakia had split amicably in two. Accordingly, there were now two national football teams, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

In 1996, the Czech Republic almost replicated the success of twenty years before in the European Championships. The qualifiers were not without a few hairy moments, including Karel Poborsky's flowing locks and the team having to suffer the indignity of losing a group game to Luxembourg in front of a crowd of only 1,030 at the Stade Josy Barthel... 1,029 if you exclude the guy on the pie stall. To put this into context, the lads from Lux did not win a single game between 1996 and 2007. It was like coming behind Eddie the Eagle in the Olympic Ski Jump. In the finals in England, they squeezed past Italy in the group stage, beat Portugal and then France to reach the final, once again to face, who else but the Germans. Despite taking the lead in the game, they eventually lost 2-1, with the winner coming in extra-time as a golden goal. All the same, it had been a very successful first ever tournament for the newly formed Czech Republic, and the optimism engendered by this success provided a mirror image to that created by the country's recent social and political changes.

The team then failed to qualify for the France '98 World Cup, but did win all ten of their qualifying games for Euro 2000, where they were very unlucky to lose out in the group stages in the finals. This good run of results saw the Czechs at number two in the FIFA World Rankings. Again, the World Cup eluded them in 2002 but a stonking run of twenty games unbeaten meant an appearance in Euros 2004. In the finals, they performed well, reaching a semi-final against Greece after winning all their group games and a quarter-final against Germany. They went into the semi as favourites, but the Greeks had mastered three things. One was borrowing ridiculous amounts of overseas money, two was spending it, and three was a 1-0 victory based on strong defence and a breakaway goal. The Czechs finished third.

The World Cup spell was broken when they qualified for Germany 2006 but injuries to their leading goal scorers Koller and Baros, coupled with two red cards in two games, meant an early exit from the finals. This led to the retirement of a number of stalwarts including Nedved and Poborsky, but the younger guns who took their place helped maintain the momentum, and they kept up their 100% record in the Euros by making it to the 2008 championships. These finals, however, ended in disappointment, when they conceded three late goals to lose 3-2 to Turkey in the decisive group game.

The World Cup demons returned for the South Africa 2010 qualifications. Not only did they finish third in their group, but their former compatriots, Slovakia, qualified as group winners. This pill to swallow was more bitter than an aspirin dunked in unsweetened cocoa, grapefruit, Worthington 'E' and citrus peel. They then had to watch the Slovaks reach the knock-out stages in the finals, eliminating Italy in the process, giving them a better World Cup history than themselves.

At least it was back to normality with the Euro 2012 qualifications, the Czech Republic making it five in a row by reaching the finals in Poland and Ukraine. Slovaks had to watch from the bars and cafés of Bratislava as the Czechs enjoyed a good tournament, reaching the quarter-finals before going out to Cristiano Ronaldo, helped a little by another ten Portuguese footballers.

The Czech Republic has been a consistent performer at the highest level since its inception, although there is a marked difference between its record in the Euros and that in the World Cup. In many ways, the quality of the national side is not a great surprise. The old Czechoslovakia had an esteemed record of football achievement, most players sourced from Prague based teams such as Sparta Praha, and there is little reason to expect this to change. The republic is the first of the old Soviet Bloc nations recognised by the World Bank as a 'developed country' and ranks very high in terms of human development, infant

mortality, democracy and peace. In short, it ain't no Afghanistan, so its football team is going to rank much higher than the boys from Kabul... and they are unlikely to have part-time suicide bomber in central midfield. As for the country's name, that's anybody's guess. Mind you, don't bank on Keith.

Group B
NETHERLANDS



World Cup Appearances: 9

World Cup Best: Runners Up - 1974, 1978, 2010

Euros Appearances: 9

Euros Best: Winners - 1988

CLOGS, PIPES, SNEAKERS & JOINTS

Which is the best football team of all time? Working backwards, we can certainly eliminate American Samoa, East Stirling and Apollo Athletic as contenders. Apollo who? Well, they are no more. They disbanded in 1971 after a couple of disastrous seasons languishing at the foot of the Wallasey U14s League table. This hapless band of brothers consistently lost by score lines that looked more like the results of a Kremlin sub-committee vote, 26-0, 24-0, 42-0, that sort of thing. Yes, they did lose by forty-two goals despite playing for only thirty minutes each way. Taking into account the time after each goal for the goalie to retrieve the ball from the local brook, and then for the striker who scored seven hat tricks to shag the corner flag senseless, that was about a goal a second. When my team played Apollo Athletic, we won 26-1, and it was the one and only time in my junior football career that I scored a goal. In hindsight, perhaps centre forward was not the right position for me.

Answering the question directly, I believe the greatest team ever to grace the beautiful game is Holland circa 1974, although the current Spain team is closing in. This generation of the *Oranje* played with a freedom and style even better than the great 1970 Brazil side of Pele, Jairzinho and co. Like the Brazilians, the Dutch boys had that something extra to lift them to a higher plain. Something more than skill, tactics and formations. Something that could not be taught on the training ground. Messrs Johan Cruyff, Rudi Krol, Johan Neeskens, Johnny Rep et al were extra special because they exuded an effortless cool. In an era where half-time for their English counterparts meant half an orange, a sip of

Bovril and a bollocking from Alf Ramsey or Don Revie, it always seemed likely that these Dutch masters were passing a giant spliff around the dressing room, as they thumbed their way through a selection of porn mags. And has there ever been a footballer with a better name than Johnny Rep, sounding like an obscure drum and bass specialist that Zane Lowe has plucked from nowhere to be his 'Hottest Record in the World'? But what made the brilliance of this Holland side all the more remarkable, was the fact that the country had no footballing pedigree whatsoever.

The Netherlands national side was formed in 1905, and there was some moderate success early on, winning three Olympic bronze medals in a row, in 1908, 1912 and 1920, the achievement undermined by the fact this was the early days of international football and some of the games were about as competitive as two grandmothers playing Trivial Pursuit. In 1934, they entered their first World Cup. They topped their group of three in the qualifiers, ahead of Belgium and the Irish Free State, the latter perhaps impeded by the carrying of banners around the turf about the injustices of Ireland's partition in 1920. The finals were held in Italy, and the Dutch met Switzerland in the San Siro, only to lose 3-2.

Qualifying for the 1938 World Cup was not the most arduous task, in a group of three with old foes Belgium and the 'Red Lions' of Luxembourg... 'Red Hamster's might have been more appropriate. It was easy because the top two of the three made it to the finals in France. With qualification confirmed, there was never going to be the usual singing and dancing on the streets of Amsterdam. Unfortunately, the team lost again in the first round, this time to Czechoslovakia, but they had done better, forcing extra time before losing out 3-0 by the final whistle.

When football resumed after the Second World War, although they took part in the 1948 Olympic Games, the Dutch KNVB Football Association elected not to enter a Netherlands team in the World Cups of 1950 and 1954, and when they did throw their hat in the ring for the '58 World Cup in Sweden, they lost out to Austria. The '62 qualification was an even more miserable affair with no wins and even a game cancelled when the East Germans failed to get visas to enter Holland. But perhaps the nadir was the 1964 European Championship, where things started OK with a win over the Swiss in the preliminary round but an aggregate loss of 3-2 to lowly Luxembourg saw them eliminated, the Grand Duchy's team no doubt comprising the usual ragbag mix of plumbers, electricians, shopkeepers and, presumably, Tony Blackburn, Johnnie Walker and Emperor Rosko. Remember, this was a mere ten years before Holland's emergence on to the world stage.

The Dutch football team at this time was a reflection of the country, a European backwater in the early 1960s, viewed, not without some foundation, as all clogs and pipe smoking, and the football scene mirrored this stagnation. The favoured formation was 2-3-5, and so teams played with only two at the back, thereby inadvertently providing the defensive blueprint for Apollo Athletic, a decade later. Yet everything was about to change.

The Netherlands was already prospering from a significant economic upturn when popular culture arrived in the form of The Beatles, pop music and television to facilitate a level of social change that the new generation readily embraced. The clogs and pipes made way for sneakers and joints, and the backward flatlands became progressive, white bicycles and all. Meanwhile, somewhere on the outskirts of Amsterdam, a man with a name that rhymed with sinus was plotting a football revolution.

TOTAALVOETBAL

Rinus Michels was a coach with a vision. A vision of footballers playing in a team without fixed positions. A vision of footballers trading places, according to the passage and fluidity of play. A vision where defenders could move into forward positions while midfield players covered for their defensive duties, and where forwards could drop deep as full backs raced into the gaps created. The only player to have a fixed position was the goalkeeper. The concept was not brand new. Most notably, the brilliant Hungarian team of the 1950s with Puskas espoused the same principles, but Michels, aided by the masterful Johann Cruyff, was the first to refine the components into a workable concept. His big idea would eventually be coined *Totaalvoetbal* (Total Football).

This concept clearly created great demands on the technical ability of players to adapt to any outfield position, and there was the rub for the Home Nations, with the uneven distribution of soccer skills throughout the teams of the English and Scottish leagues. For example, the everyday granny in a pinny with a rolling pin tended to have better ball control than the 'big man at the back' in the those days, and you only have to look at an old job specification for a 1960s' centre half to see why...

ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS:

Physique and build of Frankenstein's monster

Mobility of the RMS Lusitania

History of breaking limbs from badly time tackles

Ability to head a cannonball about fifty yards

Propensity to tread on the ball and fall over

DESIRABLE REQUIREMENTS:

Bolt in the neck

Total Football was as suited to the the British game as Pol Pot was to bereavement counselling. When I played regular schoolboy football in the mid to late 1960s, our PE teacher, Mr Mason, a Josef Stalin/ James Robertson Justice cross-breed, ruled the tactics of our team with a rod of iron and an inflexibility commensurate with that of an even thicker rod of iron. If you were a right back or a left back, the mandatory instruction was never to cross the half way line. To do so, would be met with the threat that your testicles were about to be dismembered and fed to his slaving, hungry German Shepherd, which I assume was a dog and not some rural, beer-drinking, sheep shearer from Bavaria. We, along with every other school team, still played in a soccer world of right halves, inside lefts, and dubbin. Our role model was the former schoolteacher and England coach Walter Winterbottom, who had managed the English national team for sixteen gloriously unsuccessful years under the less than refined tactical concept of 'Kick the shite out of every ball'. The new world of *Totaalvoetbal* was going to take a long, long time to catch on.

No such problem in the land of tulips and Edam cheese, where Rinus put his plans into action with Ajax, and that does not mean he revolutionised kitchen hygiene via the imaginative and flexible application of a pan scourer, cloth and household cleaning solution. Michels was the coach of AFC Ajax from 1965 to 1971, during which time he applied his theories and guided them to four league titles and three cups. And whilst the Dutch domestic competitions may have been as competitive as a 100m hurdles in Nazi Germany with Adolf Hitler in the field, in the manager's final season at the club, he helped them to the first of three consecutive victories in the European Champions Cup.

The national team was improving during this time but still struggling to make an impact. In the '66 and '70 World Cups, and in the '68 Euros, the team finished third in its qualifying group, though came close to qualifying in the '72 Euros when finishing second behind Yugoslavia. However, the 1974 World Cup was the watershed. There were clues in how the team qualified for its first major finals since 1938. Victories such as 8-1 over Iceland and 9-0 against Norway showed how lethal the team could be, once on a roll. Although pushed all the way by Belgium, the 'Clockwork Orange' made it to Germany with a superior goal difference. The jinx was broken.

In 1974, Michels, Cruyff and the rest of the Ajax team were reunited to represent the national team in the finals. Total Football took centre stage in the

tournament as the Holland team eased their way through the two group stages, with the panache and flair of Bryan Ferry, to face the hosts in the final. Apart from a draw with Sweden, they had won every game and built a strong momentum, including convincing victories over Argentina and Brazil. It says something about the rapid progress made by the Dutch that, despite the major tournament histories of the two South American sides, the *Oranje* players were favourites to win.

Within two minutes of the final's start, the Dutch went ahead thanks to a penalty converted by Neeskens and proceeded to give a demonstration of total football to their old German enemies and the watching world. Fatally though - slight overstatement here as nobody actually died - they forgot about scoring a further goal to cement their lead. Two German goals cancelled out the penalty, one from Paul Breitner and one that proved to be the the winner from Ernie Wise... sorry, that should be Gerd Müller, the striker with the short, fat, hairy legs. Total Football had been a bit too clever for itself on the day. It should have been the victor.

TANTRUMS & TIARAS

Despite Michels departing as manager, the team carried this form forward into the 1976 European Championships and made it to a semi-final against the Czechs in Zagreb. The weather gods were not on the side of the Dutch that day. Like a wet Tuesday in Manchester, it pissed down with rain, making the surface difficult for the silky skills of the Netherlands side. The bad news for both teams was the referee. His name was Clive Thomas, a Welshman famous for his officiousness. Both teams were already down to ten men when in extra-time, Johann Cruyff was floored by a mistimed tackle that a blind octogenarian would have seen. Thomas waved play on, enabling the Czechs to break up the field and take the lead. Van Hanegem, still furious at the ref's poor decision, was then sent off for refusing to kick off. The Dutch imploded, and by the final whistle had lost 3-1. This was to be the shape of things to come, their temperament the Achilles heel for many future tournaments.

Fate dealt a poor hand when it came to the '78 World Cup. At the end of 1977, after helping them qualify for the finals, their talisman Johan Cruyff suffered an attempted kidnap ordeal with his wife and children in Barcelona, where he was now playing his club football. The fallout from this resulted in close police protection and security for his family, and a resetting of his priorities. He duly announced that he was withdrawing from the finals. Bereft of their best player, the Netherlands still performed well in Argentina, although it was almost over before it started, as they just edged past Scotland on goal difference in the first

group stage. When they topped their group in the second group phase, the Netherlands had earned a second chance to become world champions.

Once again, they played the hosts, who had achieved a highly predictable 6-0 victory against Peru in the semi-finals... predictable in that the Argentineans needed six goals to reach the final, and Peru acquiesced by putting Stevie Wonder in goal and Gladys Knight & The Pips across the back four. In the final, history repeated itself, and Holland again failed to lift the trophy, losing 3-1 after extra time.

The team made it to the quarter-finals of the 1980 European Championships, but it would be the last major tournament for a while. A number of the veterans from the total football squad had retired, and the team failed to qualify for the '82 and '86 World Cups, as well as the Euros of 1984. It was beginning to look like the total football revolution of the 1970s had ultimately failed.

However, in 1986, Rinus Michels returned to coach the national team for the European Championships to be held in Germany in 1988. *Totaalvoetbal* was still integral to the Netherlands game, and he had at his disposal the latest generation of über talented footballers such as Ruud Gullit, Marco Van Basten and Ronald Koeman. The alchemy was still there, and the team qualified with ease for the finals. In Germany, things started badly with a 1-0 defeat to the Soviet Union, but after a 3-1 win over England, including a memorable Van Basten hat-trick, and a victory over the Republic of Ireland, the Dutch were in the semi-finals against the hosts. It was a cathartic moment for the Netherlands as they laid the ghosts of 1974 by winning the game 2-1 with a late goal, again from Van Basten. In the final, they met the USSR again, this time winning the game 2-0, to be crowned champions. The national side had the major trophy it had long deserved, albeit wearing shirts designed by Timmy Mallet in his glue-sniffing phase. Total Football may have taken its time, but it had eventually conquered Europe.

Michels stepped down, and although the team qualified for Italia '90, the finals were disappointing, drawing the first three games before losing to West Germany in the knock-out stages. That game is best remembered for Frank Rijkaard invoking the spirit of 70s British punk by gobbing on the flowing locks of German striker, Rudi Völler. Frank's assertion that he was demonstrating an easy way of dealing with problem curls, without the need for expensive hair styling products, fell on deaf ears... other than Leo Sayer who found the advice invaluable.

The 1990s saw the emergence of such talents as Dennis Bergkamp and Two Unlimited. The quality of the squad improved their fortunes in the major tournaments, and the team found a consistency previously lacking. Holland

reached the semi-finals of the '92 Euros in Sweden, where they narrowly lost on penalties to the surprise package that was Denmark. Dick Advocaat then took the Holland team to the '94 USA World Cup. Playing in those bedrocks of football tradition, Washington DC, Orlando and Dallas, they made it to the quarter-finals, before losing out to Brazil in a 3-2 defeat.

In 1995, the Ajax club side won the Champions League with a team that comprised mainly Dutch players. Names such as van de Sar, Reiziger, Blind, Davids, Seedorf, Kluivert, Overmars and the de Boer twins, all featured for the Amsterdam side, which naturally became a feeder for the national team, making the Euro 96 squad awash with Ajax players.

Guus Hiddink was now in charge and pulling the strings. In the finals, the team again went out in the last eight, this time to France on penalties, although this only tells half of the story. Hiddink had inherited a hugely talented squad, but one that was full of internal division and conflicts, which may have been about finances and tactics, yet presented itself as a race issue. The England '96 campaign was undermined by these tensions, leading to Edgar Davids being sent home for telling the manager to 'stop putting his head in some players' asses'... though to be fair a Dutch TV investigation proved that none of that year's Dutch players owned any kind of equine creature.

THE FUTURE WAS ORANJE

Gus showed his pragmatic streak for the France '98 campaign by bringing his best players together and wiping the slate clean. This helped the team top its qualifying group and make it to the finals, where the journey to the semi-finals included a memorable late goal by Bergkamp against Argentina. In the semis, the dreaded penalty shoot-out returned to haunt the Dutch. Cocu made a cock-up of his spot kick and when Ronald de Boer missed his, it was all over.

Bob Carolgees and Spit the Dog fan, Frank Rijkaard, was in charge of the 'Clockwork Orange' for Euro 2000, and the team was one of the favourites heading into the tournament, where they were co-hosts with Belgium. The team stormed their way to the semi-finals winning every game and scoring thirteen goals, including five from Patrick Kluivert. Standing between them and a place in the final was Italy, and after a third of the game, things were looking up. The Italians were down to ten men, with Gianluca Zambrotta on his way for an early bath thanks to a second yellow card. Now, in the modern football era, Dutch players have always been up there in terms of technical ability, but they proved again that they were unable to score a spot kick for toffee...though who knows, maybe the incentive of a chewy caramel could have re-written football history.

This particular game was worse than the normal elimination on penalties after extra time. Yes, that happened as well, though not before the Holland team had missed two penalties awarded in normal time. Even Chris Waddle took the piss. The KNVB held Rijkaard responsible and replaced him with the former Ajax supremo, Louis Van Gaal for the 2002 Japan/Korea campaign. His tenure ended disastrously, failing to qualify when beaten by the talented Portuguese and Mick 'I'm from Yorkshire so get over it' McCarthy's Republic of Ireland, who had inherited Jack Charlton's long ball game and refined it to a slightly longer version.

It took a play-off victory over Scotland to reach Euro 2004, and the team limped their way through the tournament, uncharacteristically winning a penalty shout-out in the quarter-finals against Sweden to move to the semis, where they lost to the hosts Portugal. This was to be the swansong for much of the 1995 Ajax golden generation, and subsequent national teams then struggled to emulate the technical prowess of their predecessors, though the killer instinct and winning mentality, the one deficiency of the great 1974 team, began to surface to compensate for the loss of genius, rather too much in fact.

In the 2006 World Cup group of 16, Holland, under new manager Marco van Basten, met Portugal in what became the 'Battle of Nuremberg'. Any team that has Marco Van Bommel and John Heitenga is never going to gain a reputation for tasteful flower pressing, and the former set the wheels rolling in the second minute with the first yellow card of the game. Just over ninety minutes later, the Russian referee had set a world record for cards shown in one match, a total of sixteen yellow and four red, shared equally between the two teams. The logo of the tournament, 'A Time to Make Friends', suddenly appeared particularly incongruous. The Dutch lost the match by a Maniche goal and were going home early. The neutrals were indifferent. This was a long way from the beautiful game.

To the surprise of many, van Basten remained in charge for the 2008 Euros, and it nearly backfired in the qualifiers when they only just squeaked past Bulgaria, a team a shadow of its former self. There were mixed expectations heading into the finals, mainly because the *Oranje* had been drawn in the proverbial 'group of death' For once, the label was warranted. Italy and France were ranked first and second in the world, Romania eighth and the Dutch themselves were fourth. However, the men in orange came out of the traps like a hungry, classy greyhound chasing a hare covered in foie gras. They devoured Italy 3-0, France 4-1 and Romania 2-0, playing an irresistible brand of counter-attacking football. The unstoppable Dutch were becoming many people's favourites to lift the trophy, and next up in the quarter-final was Russia, managed

by... Guus Hiddink. However, the unstoppable were stopped in their tracks by the Old Maestro who masterminded the downfall of his former charges, the Russians winning 3-1 after extra-time.

Recovering from this setback, the Netherlands then stormed to a remarkable fourteen consecutive wins in World Cup games under new coach Bert van Marwijk. This team had learnt to be as consistent and reliable as the healthy man's morning poo, and it took them all the way to another final, this time to face Spain in South Africa. There had always been suspect temperaments in the Dutch camp, the pre-disposition for having a 'barney' that led to a trend of self-destruction for their squads with internal squabbling undermining morale and togetherness. It destroyed any chance of winning on a number of occasions with more fallouts than a 1950s American Army Nuclear Testing Base. The South Africa 2010 team was far from the most talented bunch of Dutch footballers to represent their country, but for once, it was a united squad, and it gave them every chance of being crowned World Champions for the first time in their history.

Yet it was not to be, losing for a record third time. The fact that Spain had played in a style known as *tiki-taka*, a derivative of *Totaalvoetbal*, provided no crumbs of comfort. To be frank though, the final was a shameful performance from Holland, with overly defensive tactics and an aggressive, spoiling approach to the game that resulted in them receiving nine yellow cards and one red for Johnny Heitenga. The 2010 final and the the Battle of Nuremburg had besmirched the legacy of Cruyff and Michels. Although Michels said nothing, his passing in 2002 being the main reason, Cruyff was vocal in his criticism of his fellow countrymen, claiming that Barcelona and not Amsterdam was the new home of Total Football.

However, by August 2011, the Netherlands were number one in the FIFA World Rankings, celebrating a month later with a record 11-0 win over San Marino and winning nine Euro 2012 qualifying games in a row. Total Football, in its purest form was long gone, but its more pragmatic successor was proving to be its equal.

Unfortunately at Euro 2012, it all unravelled like my dad's old string underpants snagged on a rusty nail, when Holland suffered three losses in three games against Denmark, Germany and Portugal in the group stage. The old bogeyman of squad disharmony raised its head, with petulance shown on and off the pitch. Coach van Marwijk oscillated between an over emphasis on defence (7-1-1 formation) and an over emphasis on attack (1-1-7 formation). Yes, I know both only add up to nine, but anyone seeing the young left back would agree that the Dutch effectively played each game with ten men. The team was out, van

Marwijk fell on his sword (fencing is such a dangerous hobby), and the nation's football team was back at square one.

The Netherlands will continue to churn out quality players and so the national team will always be in the tournament mix, but there is a flaw in their team ethic that seems likely to be an omnipresent impediment to achieving success on the field. Time has proven the ad man wrong. The future does not look like being Orange after all.

DENMARK



World Cup Appearances: 4

World Cup Best: Quarter-finals - 1998

Euros Appearances: 8

Euros Best: Winners - 1992

OH, WHAT A LOVELY WAR!

In the 2010s, many would agree that the country producing the most compelling, watchable TV programmes in the world is Iran. My favourite is that law enforcement programme masquerading as a cookery show, *Ready Steady Fire*. And you can't help but love that fly-on-the-wall documentary about the nuclear weapons facility at the rear of a Tehran coffee shop. What do you mean you've never seen it? Have I been dreaming or something? Oh, I have... Anyway, coming a close second is Denmark. I defy anybody to watch *Borgen* or *The Killing* and disagree, unless your idea of must watch TV is Paddy McGuinness gurning his way through a dating show with twenty airheads and a dickbrain. The Danes are now top of the broadcasting tree, but what of their football and its standing in the world.

It is a little known fact that Denmark was once the highest ranked football team in the world, though this was rather a long time ago, long enough for Bruce Forsythe to be in the middle of puberty. In 1908, the French were probably more interested in playing *boules* than soccer; even so, Denmark's 17-1 victory over France does stand out. It led to the golden era of Danish Football from 1914 to

1920. Call me a stickler for detail, but I think it is fair to say that in these years, particularly 1914 to 1918, much of Europe was distracted by the small matter of a World War, inevitably limiting the kudos for any measure of success at this time in history. That said, facts are facts, and the Danes can boast what few others can, that they were once top dog in the world of football.

There has always been a view that FA shortsightedness has impeded the development of the English game. For many years, a bunch of old boys, all Brylcreem, Baratheas and horn-rimmed glasses, ran the game in Blighty. They were universally dismissive of change, including anything to do with the burgeoning overseas game. However, compared to the Danish equivalent, the DBU, the English FA heads were a pioneering bunch of brown rice munching innovators.

Denmark enjoyed some success at the Olympic Games in the early part of the twentieth century, although admittedly against some dodgy opposition. In 1906, only four teams took part and the other three were club sides including two from the old Ottoman Empire, Smyrna and Thessaloniki... sounding like the backing singers to Demis Roussos. This led to their golden era when much of their European opposition was blowing shite out of one another in the fields of Belgium.

In 1920, as football was starting to become increasingly international, the DBU opted to play only friendlies and the regional Nordic Cup. Denmark gave the Olympics the big heave-ho and did not enter any of the World Cups that took place in 1930s. The Danes were proudly flying the flag for the small mind.

AMATEUR DRAMATICS

It was not until 1948 that things changed and the Danish footballing authorities eased their stance, allowing their national team to compete at the London Olympics in 1948, with some success as well, winning a bronze medal. The Danes produced natural footballers, and Denmark ought to have been real contenders for the World Cup, Unfortunately, the DBU had the vision of a blindfolded bat with an eye infection in a bat cave with the lights switched off. They went one-step further than the average parochial FA by holding to the amateur ideal, applying this to both the Danish leagues and national side. If a footballer wanted to earn a living from the game, he had to go abroad and thereby forfeited his right to play for his country. Some might argue this was a laudable objective, holding on to the last vestiges of fair and equal competition where money had not corrupted the balance. However, I would reason the extremes cause the damage, rather than the presence of cash in sport itself. To prove the point, I draw your attention to the world of Entertainment.

If you want to see a formulaic, predictable, largely shit piece of entertainment, then go and see the latest Hollywood blockbuster at the cinema. Such films are fundamentally a product and not a piece of art, and so compromises to garner broad appeal are essential. At the other extreme, if you want to see an attempt at serious drama that will give you more comedy anecdotes than a back catalogue of David Niven interviews, you ought to go to a local amateur dramatic society's production. To see local vicars, bakers, nurses, primary school teachers and shop assistants hamming it up more than a butcher specialising in ham, will have you literally digging up the ground beneath your feet in the hope it swallows you up whole. Add a bit of professionalism to the equation and standards of entertainment improve markedly, and you can end up with something of the quality of *Borgen*.

It is the same with football. Once the game turned professional, it was the beginning not the end. Nevertheless, the DBU took a different viewpoint, and when Denmark reached the semi-finals of the 1964 European Championship, they claimed it as a vindication of their amateur ideals. This ignored the fact that the Danes had enjoyed the same kind of luck as Viv Nicholson the 'Spend Spend Spend' pools' winner. To get to the last four, Denmark only had to play teams like Malta, Albania and Luxembourg.

In 1971, the DBU finally gave in and permitted their best professional players, all earning a crust abroad, to represent the national team. Then in 1978, the Danish Leagues discarded the last vestiges of the amateur principle, when they allowed professionals to take part. Sponsorship arrived with enough cash to finance the first full-time professional coach for the 'The Red and Whites'. It was time to get serious.

DANISH DYNAMITE

You might think that being so far behind the competition, it would be some while before Denmark was challenging on the international stage, but the team qualified for the 1984 European Championships, eliminating England on the way, including a 1-0 victory at Wembley. An official Euro song emerged called 'Danish Dynamite', a name that stuck to the team like shit to a wall. In France, the Danes did not just turn up for the ride either, making the semi-finals before losing on penalties to Spain on the same day that the country launched its first space mission. Striker Preben Elkjaer's penalty miss flew so high over the bar it ended up in earth orbit with the satellites and space debris. The Danes were not too hard on Elkjaer about this, as his shorts were hanging off his backside when he took the kick, the result of an over exuberant challenge from a Spanish opponent who interpreted the tackle from behind a little too literally.

The country then qualified for the 1986 World Cup in Mexico and put in a commendable performance that included a 6-1 victory over Uruguay before elimination in the knockout stages by Spain. After a whitewash in the 1988 European Championships and failing to get to Italia '90, it was time for a change and assistant coach Richard Moller Nielsen was appointed as the man in charge. The new era started very badly. Nielsen, clearly a big fan of early 1960s Inter Milan tactics, adopted a very defensive style, favouring the 10-0-0 formation. This went down badly with the flair players of the squad, including the gifted Laudrup brothers who decided to retire with immediate effect from international football. Denmark subsequently failed to qualify for the 1992 Euros and that was that... or was it? Thanks to the war in the Balkans, and thanks really should be in inverted commas, UEFA banned Yugoslavia from competing in Sweden. The team that finished second in their group would take their place. That team was Denmark.

Pundits and journalists immediately discounted the chances of the Danes, given that their preparation was just to turn up and play. Arguably, this was an advantage. Many other squads were full of homesick, sex-starved, under-pressure players with too much time on their hands, spending the hours in their hotels thrashing away on their joysticks... and that is not a euphemism. The next few weeks were remarkable for the country that, until the 1970s, had been an amateur footballing nation. With Brian Laudrup back in the fold and (copyright Carlsberg Danish Lager) probably the world's best goalkeeper in Peter Schmeichel; the Danes left a trail of quality teams in their wake. They dispensed with England and France in the group stage, defeated Holland the defending Euro champions in the semis, and beat the World Champions Germany in the final by a 2-0 score line. From the land of Hans Christian Anderson, it was fitting that the Danes had brought us one of the great footballing stories of all time. A Phoenix able to rise from the ashes thanks to the warring factions in Yugoslavia.

After the Lord Mayor's Show came the Cup of Tea at your Nan's, as Denmark failed to qualify for the World Cup in USA '94. A 1-0 defeat to Spain in the final group game saw them eliminated, which was hard for the Danes to swallow as that they had lost only one of their twelve games and conceded just two goals throughout, a man called Schmeichel having something to do with the latter.

A disappointing exit at the group stage of the Euro'96 finals led to the departure of Nielsen and the appointment of the Swede, Bo Johansson who led the Danes to the peak of their achievements. In 1997, they made it to number three in the FIFA World Rankings, and in France '98, they reached the quarter-finals of the World Cup, losing narrowly to Brazil, 3-2. It was the swan song of

the gifted Laudrup brothers, and although the Danes have maintained a decent record in tournament football, they have never quite managed to emulate the success of their team from the 1990s.

Euro 2000 was a disappointment, in that despite reaching the finals, they lost all three-group games. Two years later in the Japan and South Korea World Cup, it was a much better performance in the group stage with the team topping their group. Unfortunately, in the group of 16 game, they met England on one of their better days, the English winning 3-0. Most neutrals were happy to see the Czechs beat the Danes comfortably in their quarter-final at the 2004 Euros in Portugal, the non-competitive 2-2 draw with Sweden had smacked of mutually beneficial collusion to guarantee progression out of the group phase.

Denmark then failed to qualify for both the 2006 World Cup and 2008 European Championship, although the latter was self-inflicted. In a game against Sweden, they had come back from 3-0 down to be drawing 3-3, when all hell let loose... well, not all hell. There was no furnace of fire or molten lava, acts of sexual depravity or creatures with red horns running around... which sounds like a stag party on Mount Vesuvius. A late penalty awarded to the Swedes resulted in a fan running on to attack the bastard in black, his translated words, not mine. The ref abandoned the game, and Sweden was later awarded the match 3-0.

The squad under Morten Olsen was showing signs of improvement, moving up the World Rankings and qualifying from a difficult group for Euros 2012. In the finals, the team had a great start, beating the Dutch 1-0, somehow keeping a clean sheet despite twenty-nine shots on goal by the *Oranje* boys. But defeats to Portugal and Germany meant they were not able to progress to the knock-out stages. To be fair, this was not a total surprise. Getting out of Group B was always going to be as tough as rump steak cooked by my wife's mother... I think she learnt her cooking technique in a crematorium.

The football of the Danes may still be lagging behind their TV artistry, but the emergence of a Schmeichel and a Laudrup could change all that, although the return of Denmark to number one team in the world is a pipe dream, unless World War III intervenes, and then who knows?

GERMANY



World Cup Appearances: 17

World Cup Best: Winners – 1954, 1974, 1990

Euros Appearances: 11

Euros Best: Winners – 1972, 1980, 1996

THE CLICHÉ'S CLICHÉ

Football has an open door policy when it comes to the cliché. Commentators, pundits, expert summarisers, ex-players, players, journalists, spectators, tea ladies - the game remains as chauvinistic as a '70s comedian - which is basically everyone connected with the game, talk in a language all of its own. Examples include, 'He's lost half a yard', 'He's got a great engine', 'There are no easy games at international level any more'.

My favourite football speak is where personality or behavioural attributes are applied to parts of the body. 'And the ball flew past the despairing hands of the keeper.' Have you ever looked at your own hands and thought they remind you of *The Scream* by Edvard Munch? Then there is the otherwise illiterate footballer who has a 'cultured left foot'. The player likes reading *The Sun* and watching ITV1 quiz shows, but his left peg enjoys nothing more than the music of Sibelius, the novels of Dostoyevsky, and Cezanne's late nineteenth century work that bridged the gap between traditional Impressionism and Cubism.

There is a football cliché, which belongs exclusively to the boys from *Deutschland*. It is, of course, 'You can never write-off the Germans'. There is no irony at play here, it based on fact and bitter experience. In September 2001, England humiliated Germany by beating them 5-1 on home soil. Nine months' later in Japan, as the England players were trying to enjoy the second week of their summer holiday in Dubai with their wives shopping for the latest Jimmy Choos, the most ordinary German side to appear in a World Cup was playing Brazil in the final. So why is the cliché so appropriate? Why are they so adept and at home in tournament football? The answer is in the genes, and I do not mean the Levis.

One of the key personality traits of the average German is a mental strength born out of a natural stubbornness. They know what they are good at, are loyal

to their beliefs, and just get on with it. When combined with a pre-disposition to be somewhat emotionally reserved, this is routinely misinterpreted as arrogance, and whilst these attributes were manipulated and abused by the Fascists in the 1930s, to interpret it as conceit is unfair. The recovery from their position at the end of the Second World War is testament to the German people. These strengths have transferred to their national football team, and this is why they are one of the three most successful footballing countries in the world, having appeared in seventeen European or World Cup Finals. Furthermore, this is why they will rarely lose in penalty shoot-outs... take note Englishmen.

It may seem strange now, given their financial strength, but Germany did not enter the 1930 World Cup because they could not afford the travel costs to Uruguay. To be fair, it was the time of the Great Depression... not to be confused with the recent equivalent, caused by the Irish band Westlife spreading misery and desperation with their tepid ballads and mushy songs. However, by 1934, the *Dies Mannschaft* was ready to participate in a major tournament and achieved a very worthy third place at their first attempt.

Four years on, and the backdrop to the 1938 World Cup in France was the building tension in Europe. Three months before the finals, Austria, who had already qualified, was annexed into Germany, and their key players conscripted to play for the German team, supposedly to demonstrate the unified nature of the larger Reich. To Hitler's chagrin, the initiative backfired. The team playing under the red and white Nazi flag lost to Switzerland, thereby knocked out in the first round. It is remarkable that this remains the one and only elimination suffered by Germany in the opening stages of a World Cup. Are you getting my drift about mental strength?

On 1st September 1939, Hitler's army invaded Poland and football had to take a back seat. Although there were games between military teams and matches against friendly nations, which usually meant the Swiss, domestic leagues, international leagues and tournaments were suspended. At the end of the War, the Allies divided the country into three, West Germany, East Germany and the French protectorate, Saarland. The people of a defeated Germany were not thinking too much about their football team, now banned by FIFA, and it would not be until the 1954 World Cup that Germany would re-emerge on to the international stage.

THE MULLER'S TALE

The government of East Germany withdrew their side from the '54 tournament following the 1953 uprising, which was neutralised by the communist authorities adopting their trademark, delicate negotiating style,

supported by Russian tanks and heavy artillery. Despite a very limited number of post war games, West Germany qualified for Switzerland, beating Norway and Saarland, which by 1956 had transferred to the GDR. This was, therefore, akin to beating yourself, not such an achievement unless you are a committed sadist. Expectations from the rest of the world were low for the Germans to progress far, and the fallout from the war was such, that going into the finals, they were certainly not everybody's favourite neutral side. By the end of the tournament, things had not changed.

One characteristic of the World Cup's first fifty years was the ever-changing format, as FIFA tinkered in an attempt to get the best structure. In 1954, it was something else, clearly formulated by a group of ten year olds, high on fizzy pop, BCG injections, and the latest Enid Blyton book. Never repeated changes included four groups of four teams, in which countries only had to play two of the three, extra-time played in the group matches that finished in a draw, and an arm wrestle (or equivalent) in the event of a tie for first and second place in a group. Bizarrely, the top four group winners formed a grouping for the next stage, while the four runners up formed the other group. These same kids evidently designed the poster for the finals, which purports to be a goalie but is more Arab widow. It looks like one of the misshapen drawings from my art book at the age of twelve, at which I actively encouraged my classmates to take the piss.

In the initial group stages, the pragmatic West Germans fielded a reserve side against the world's number one team, Hungary, to take advantage of finishing second in the group for an easier ride to the final. They lost the game 8-3, but ensured their team included a carthorse that laid manure traps for the Magyar wizards and clobbered their best player, Puskas, who was not properly fit for the rest of the tournament. They won all their other games to make it to the final where they were to play Hungary again, then on a run of thirty-two games unbeaten. In one of the biggest upsets in World Cup History, the Germans won 3-2, coming from two goals down, but the victory was not without controversy. The referee inexplicably disallowed a late equaliser, and there were accusations of doping irregularities, years later substantiated as amphetamine injections. The 54' World Cup winners were laying out the path to the High-Energy club scene of the 1990s.

The West Germans call that final 'the Miracle of Berne'. It is now recognised as the one thing, perhaps coupled with *schlager*, that lifted the spirits of the nation from the doldrums of its post war years to the promise of a new tomorrow... before you jump to any conclusions, *schlager* is a form of music, so sentimental, that your vinyl records would drip honey.

1954 was the pre-cursor to a litany of successful major tournaments, although the Germans would disagree about the 1958 and 1962 World Cups, in which they reached the semi-finals and quarter-finals respectively. In England, this would have led to street parties and a hero's welcome home, but the DFB viewed this as failure, prompting a domestic reorganisation that led to the creation of the *Bundesliga*. This almost paid immediate dividends at England '66, but they lost to the dubious England goal that never crossed the line, the moment when commentators first made the call for goal line technology... although a man standing by the post with a Polaroid Instamatic was never going to be the solution.

Revenge came at Mexico '70, when they beat England 3-2 in the quarter - finals, before losing out to Italy in the semis in what many call the 'game of the century. Franz Beckenbauer would probably disagree. He finished the game on the losing side, having played to the end of the game with a shoulder hanging from its socket like an Albert Pierrepoint victim on the gallows. I personally dispute this game of the century tag. My choice would always be Monopoly.

Germany had made a slow start in the European Championships, not entering until 1968 when they failed to qualify, the only time this has ever happened in a major tournament. Are you still paying attention, Mr England fan? Fortunately, everything came good in 1972 when, under the guidance of new captain Herr Beckenbauer and the goal scoring profligacy of Gerd Muller, the team took the trophy. Muller was an absolute goal machine. In his career, he scored 68 goals in only 62 internationals and 365 goals in 427 *Bundesliga* games, an incredible return for someone nicknamed fatty, because... he was a bit overweight. I saw Gerd play at Anfield in 1971, when Bayern Munich lost to Liverpool 3-0 in the old Inter-Cities Fairs Cup. He was crap, unlike Alun Evans of the Reds who scored a hat trick. To be fair, this was like Tiny Tim upstaging the Rolling Stones and the ensuing careers of Evans and Muller soon resumed normality. By the time the German striker was in his mid 70s pomp - by which I do not mean that Bayern adopted a shirt inspired by Rick Wakeman's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* - the former Liverpool forward with the mop top hair of a children's TV presenter, was plying his trade with Walsall.

Deutsch Fussball and the *Bundesliga* had come of age by the 1970s. The Germans were the World and European Champions, Gerd's Bayern was mopping up a trio of European Cups, and Borussia Mönchengladbach was weighing in with success in the UEFA Cup. The force of good had undone the abhorrent ideals of the Third Reich, the German people emerging from tyrannical control into democracy, economic progress and a preferred form of world domination via the beautiful game. Yet there had been two Germanys created after the war,

an East and a West. So what about the East Germans? What footballing success did they enjoy? In short, as Paul Daniels might say, 'Not a lot'.

KOCH AND BALLS

In the post war years, East Germany, known as the German Democratic Republic or GDR, was a major power in sports such as weightlifting, cycling, swimming, athletics and boxing, essentially any event where a stomach full of anabolic steroids created a competitive advantage. The GDR achieved gold medals and championship victories in these sports when a drugs test was, 'What colour packaging does Anadin use?' One prime example was the 200m and 400m runner, Marita Koch. Now, there is a bit of a clue in her surname, so let us just say Marita made Fatima Whitbread look like a delicate flower blowing in the summer breeze. She was Olympic Champion in Moscow 1980, World Champion three years' later, and set countless world records, including the 400m in 1985 at a time that still stands today, and is unlikely to be beaten in our lifetimes. Records unearthed after the fall of the Berlin Wall show a programme of drug misuse in GDR sport, and Ms Koch - sounding like something you would book for a stag night, though you would be seriously disappointed - was on the list.

Unfortunately for the East German footballing fraternity, drugs in soccer do not critically enhance performance. A pill or two has no impact on skill and ball control... we are straying back to Ms Koch territory with the latter. You might argue that steroids improve the stamina of a player, enabling him to get up and down the field for the duration of a full ninety minutes. This, in turn, gives free reign to the 'great engine' cliché, something always welcome to the ears. Yet my dog could run up and down a field all day long and still have as much chance of scoring a goal as I have of becoming the next President of Azerbaijan. The greatest footballers are born great, and while practice and coaching are part of the equation, drugs are not, and so the GDR soccer team from the land of the steroid was always destined to be as unsuccessful as the communist ideals that underpinned the society of this Soviet satellite.

There was a clear difference between the lives of the teams and players behind the Iron Curtain and those in the West. The football professionals in West Germany would dress in clothes from the fashion houses of Milan, drive BMWs, Audis or Mercedes, and enjoy an evening out with their stunning blonde girlfriend at the town's most exclusive restaurant, perhaps savouring the Chateaubriand and a glass or two of Mosel. Meanwhile, the GDR footballer was driving round in a Trabant rust bucket, thankful that the vehicle still had all four doors attached to its body at the end of the journey. As for his clothes, they were

were hand-made by Auntie Gertie from recycled potato sacks. And his girlfriend, who would join him in the daily queue for bread, was considered a catch if she did not have a moustache. It was little wonder that players in the East aspired to play in the West, players like Lutz Eigendorff. The infamous *Stasi*, the Ministry for State Security, murdered the former Dynamo Berlin star, after he defected in 1983.

East Germany failed to enter or to qualify for every World Cup and European Championship between 1950 and 1992, except one, the '74 World Cup in - cue the scriptwriter - West Germany. The FIFA draw followed the required script, as both German teams ended in the same group. The West Germans had already qualified for the next round when the two teams met and so Beckenbauer's boys played an under-strength side. East Germany won 1-0 and went through as Group Winners, into the more difficult side of the draw. Whether or not this was tactical on behalf of Franz is difficult to say, but when you see that the East ended up playing the Netherlands, Brazil and Argentina, while the West played Poland, Sweden and Yugoslavia, it makes you think. East Germany was eliminated, but West Germany went on to lift the trophy for the first time in twenty years. They had lost the battle but won the war... the kind of analogy likely to get you into trouble at the time. That was good as it got for the boys from the East. No more tournament football until Communism imploded and unification occurred in 1990, the players integrating from both sides to create the one team, simply called Germany.

The West German juggernaut next powered its way to the finals of the '76 European Championships, unexpectedly losing to the Czechs in the final. After going out of the quarters in Argentina '78, they regained their European crown two years later, beating Belgium at the *Stadio Olimpico* in Rome. There were more near misses in the 1980s, finishing runners-up in both the 1982 and 1986 World Cup Finals. The Finals in Spain '82 were memorable for making a German player less popular than Hitler, at least in France.

German number one, Harold Schumacher's foul on French striker Patrick Battiston is considered one of the worst tackles of all time... though come to think of it, it is quite possible that I am the owner of the worst tackle, but let us not make this too confessional. Any goalkeeper, facing a one on one with a striker thinks the same thing. It is drilled into them in training. 'Make yourself big.' Young trainees may misinterpret this and start masturbating, but experienced internationals spread their arms and legs to cover as much of the goal as possible. On this occasion, Schumacher decided on a different tack. He ran towards the approaching forward like Bob Beamon on the long jump and then attempted the high jump like Dick Fosbury, failing to clear the bar, the bar

being his opponent's head. He knocked Battiston unconscious, who lost three teeth and then lapsed into a coma.

Did the ref immediately issue a red card? No, he engaged in a conversation about the price of sauerkraut and the weather while the medics attended to the stricken Frenchman. There was no foul, no free kick, no caution, nothing. Even the most lenient official would give a yellow card for attempted manslaughter, but this ref was from the Netherlands, and we have to presume he had smoked a bit of wacky baccy and was feeling chilled man. The Germans went on to beat France after extra-time in a penalty shoot-out. The French blamed one man, Schumacher, the goalkeeping topping a subsequent poll as the most unpopular man in France, relegating Adolf to second place.

ELEVEN INTERNATIONALS

West Germany headed to the 1990 World Cup in buoyant spirits, despite the relative disappointment of losing to Ruud Gullit's Holland when hosting Euro '88. Just over six months before, the people of Berlin had celebrated the fall of their wall. The GDR was crumbling, and *Deutschland Deutschland* was on the way to unification. The swansong of the West German team was pretty special... a chorus of a thousand Germanic voices soaring into the night skies singing about Sammy the White Swan? Not quite... it was a little more exhilarating.

Franz Beckenbauer was now the manager, and he and his captain Lothar Matthäus, on the way to a record number of three million caps, steered the team with ease to the knock-out stages of Italia '90, where they defeated the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, and Bobby Robson's England to meet holders Argentina in the final at Rome's Olympic Stadium. The game was atrocious, Argentina offering little as an attacking force and ending the game with only nine men. The penalty converted by Andreas Brehme was enough to win the game for West Germany, who became World Champions for the third time. Before the end of the year, the newly unified national team, Germany played its first ever-competitive game against that bastion of neutrality, Switzerland. In the footballing world and beyond, 1990 truly belonged to the German people.

When FIFA introduced their ranking system in 1992, Germany was number one and held on to the spot for the next few years. Despite winning Euro '96, it was evident, however, that a slow decline in German football was underway. At USA '94 and France '98, the team was beaten in the quarter-finals. To most nations, this would be respectable, but the German football heritage was such that commentators and scribes viewed the *Allemagne* star as fading fast. The cracks were there for all to see at the European Championships of 2000 in Belgium and Holland, where they recorded their worst ever performance in a

major tournament finals. They finished bottom of their group, below even Kevin Keegan's defeated England side, truly rock bottom.

In the World Cup of Japan '02, a workman-like German team ground out a succession of 1-0 victories in the knockout phase against the 'lesser' countries of Paraguay, USA and South Korea to reach the final. In a one-sided tie against Brazil, the South Americans never looked like losing, and won the game 2-0 with a couple of goals from Ronaldo, exorcising the ghosts of Paris '98. Runner-up position could not mask the fact that Germany was no longer the powerhouse of international football, something confirmed by another poor showing in the 2004 Euros. This time, a draw against Latvia cost them further progression from the group stage.

Going into the 2006 World Cup as hosts, for the first time ever, the expectation of the fans for glory was low. The DFB appointed Jurgen Klinsman as manager, and this failed to inspire confidence. He may have been a legend of German football, but Harry Redknapp's cat had more experience of coaching... arguably, the cat was the more talented, as the former striker struggled to piss in a litter tray. However, he did have the nous to bring in an experienced manager, Joachim Low, as his assistant.

As it turned out, Germany lit up the tournament with their attacking, expansive style of play, quite contrary to their traditions. The national side had achieved its history of success through organisation, discipline, hard work and determination. If this had been the traditional mirror image of its people, the 2006 German team reflected the changes that had taken place within the country, a country that was multicultural, open-minded, outward facing and inclusive. This translated to the football field, and in the group phase of the finals, the team won all its three games. Victories in the knock-out phase over Sweden and Argentina, the latter on penalties, followed to set up a semi-final with Italy. One game away from yet another final, the match seemed to be heading for penalties until two very late goals won the game for the Italians. If it had gone to spot kicks, I know who would have won.

At the 2008 Euros, with Low now in charge of team affairs, the Germans, in contrast to the team from earlier in the decade, entertained as they progressed to a final against Spain. The victories in the knock-out games were by 3-2 rather than 1-0, though ironically, a 1-0 score line undid Germany, when a solitary Torres goal won the championship for the Spanish. Things had changed. Germany was no longer the team that everybody loved to hate, not least because the side was so offensive i.e. attack minded rather Andy Gray and Richard Keys.

This change continued at the 2010 South Africa World Cup. In the quarter-finals against the old foes of England, the English were leaden-footed and

wasteful, as though wearing lead lined boots smeared with a compound of grease and shit. They played like a team of vets... you can interpret that as either veterans with an average age of sixty five or veterinary surgeons playing with the handicap of their right arm stuck up the arse of a cow. The Germans were young, vibrant, sprightly and incisive. Low's team did the same to Argentina, pummeling them 4-0. However, in a repeat of the Euro 2008 encounter, the Germans lost by a lone goal against Spain in the semi-final, and the players were on their way home, though with their heads held high, unlike England.

After this World Cup exit, the Germans embarked upon an astonishing run of fourteen consecutive victories in competitive games. This included ten out ten wins in their Euro 2012 qualifying group and a 100% record at the finals in Poland and Ukraine up to their semi-final against the only country that can match their European football heritage, Italy. Germany was the standout team of the tournament, playing an attacking brand of football that was both attractive to watch and effective in terms of winning games. They became most people's favourites to lift the trophy and the Italians were not expected to cause an upset. However, Italy had not read the script, running out 2-1 victors. German players and fans were shell-shocked, such was the certainty that they would make the final. More than anything, their Polish downfall was due to the inexperience of the squad, something that the canny *Azzurri* took advantage of to emerge victorious. Euro 2012 almost belonged to Germany, and you can only see them getting better in the next few years. Their time may well come before the end of this decade.

Germany's transformation from the epitome of a workman-like machine to one with the style, panache and practicality of a top of the range luxury car was the culmination of a plan. Some years before, recognising that German domination in the game was on the wane, the *Deutsch* footballing authorities initiated changes to deliver a strategic vision where the country had both a successful national team and a thriving *Bundesliga*. Youth development was to be a priority, the German FA insisting that to earn a license to play, club sides had to run an education academy. Five thousand young Germans are now educated there, and it has provided a natural feeding ground for young talent. Furthermore, the *Bundesliga* has a 51% rule, which means that foreign investors can never hold a controlling share at a club. The only 'sheiks' to be found in the German league would be the chocolate, vanilla or strawberry varieties in the McDonalds franchise, and the only oligarch would be Oliver Garke, plying his trade in the Hertha Berlin reserve side... don't look that one up. Combine this factor with sensible financial stewardship, a lesser reliance on TV money, and salary policies that link wage levels to income, then German league football

becomes less attractive to the mercenary footballer than the Premier League. This facilitates opportunities for young players at the highest domestic level, which in turn helps the National team. Germany have seen the fruits of this approach by recently winning the European Championships at U17, U19 and U21 levels, and the impact can also be seen in the senior side's squad listings, which includes such young talents as Mesut Ozil, Manuel Neuer and Thomas Muller.

There's the rub. The partnership between the German FA and the *Bundesliga* gives the national team every chance of success at tournament level, though possibly, at the expense of having the best league in the world. The two are probably, mutually exclusive... again, are you listening England fans? The relationship between the English FA and the English Premier League is so dysfunctional, that they ought to have their own reality series on ITV2 hosted by Peter Andre and Vinnie Jones.

For all these reasons, Germany should be the bookie's favourites for every major tournament, though maybe not for the World Cup in Brazil... step forward you Brazilians. If you disagree, remember the cliché, 'You can never write off the Germans.' As Steve Lomas, the ex. Northern Ireland international famously once said, 'Germany are a very difficult team to play against. They had eleven internationals out there today.'

PORTUGAL



World Cup Appearances: 5

World Cup Best: 3rd - 1966

Euros Appearances: 6

Euros Best: Runners Up - 2004

A BOY NAMED RUTH

Football in Portugal is like an English provincial town... nothing much happened until the late 1950s, early 1960s. In the Ludlows and Lincolns of England, rock and roll ushered in youth culture to shake, rattle and roll things

up. In *Portuguesa*, Benfica's success in Europe suddenly brought the country's football to the fore.

The set up of the Portuguese Football Federation had all the timing of my mum telling a joke. It was 1914, on the eve of the First World War, and so the national team would have to wait until 1921 to play its first international game against Iberian neighbours, Spain. For the decades that ensued, it was a catalogue of non-achievement and near misses for *A Seleção*. The nearest thing to glory was a quarter-final appearance at the 1928 Olympic Finals. The team consistently failed to qualify for World Cups, though you have to feel some sympathy for the efforts of the players in 1938. Drawn against Switzerland in a group of two, they narrowly lost 2-1, and so you might think they were still in with a chance for the return leg. Unfortunately, this was a group where there was only one game. To my mind, that is a knock-out rather than a group stage but hey, it was a long time ago, and there was another World War on the horizon.

It would not be until England 1966 that Portugal finally qualified for a World Cup, but before then, their major club side Benfica had taken the European Cup scene by storm with the help of a free scoring centre forward called Ruth Malosso. Even Angus 'Statto' Loughran would be scratching his head at this point, dredging his memory for a Portuguese striker, perhaps slightly more attractive and alluring than the norm. Ruth Malosso was actually a codename given to a young player by Benfica officials during transfer negotiations. The deal was sensitive due to the striker playing for a feeder club to one of their main rivals, Sporting Lisbon. The striker's name was Eusébio da Silva Ferreira, known simply as Eusébio.

Benfica's success was not just down to this new signing. Their victory in the 1960/61 European Cup occurred before he signed. They were the first side, other than Real Madrid, to lift the trophy when they beat Barcelona 3-2 in the Wankdorf Stadium in Bern, their victory helped by a number of the more immature Spanish players giggling in a corner at the pitch at the name of the stadium.

This triumph proved to be no fluke. With Eusébio now central to the team, they repeated their success in the 1961/62 competition, this time beating Real Madrid, Puskas et al, 5-3 in Amsterdam. They would go on to make another three appearances in the final in the next five years, although each one ended in defeat including the epic 4-1 loss to Matt Busby's Manchester United in 1968. The success inspired the national team, after a litany of failures, to qualify for a major tournament.

Eusébio's goals enabled Portugal to overcome the favourites in their qualifying group, the Czechoslovakian runners-up from the '62 Final, and thereby make it to England in 1966. They made a great start in the finals, beating

both Bulgaria and Hungary. Next up was the old colonial master, World Champions Brazil, and so Alfonso the manager devised a master plan to counteract the threat of the world's greatest player, Pelé. This was to kick the shite out of him. One particularly brutal tackle on the Brazilian, executed by defender João Morais, was unpunished by referee George McCabe, demonstrating a level of tolerance more akin to that found in the developing hippy communes of California. The agricultural approach of the Portuguese team was not a complete surprise. Portugal had been a dictatorship since 1933. Its politics had hardened the populous, and this was bound to impact on its football teams. When he later saw video footage of the tackle, Pele announced his retirement from international football. The world of football was glad that he changed his mind, for we might never have had the glorious football of 1970 if he had carried through with his threat.

However, it was more than assault and affray that defeated Brazil. Eusébio carried on his goal scoring exploits from the qualifiers and scored two crucial goals to help his team to a 3-1 victory and a place in the quarter-finals, where they would take part in a classic. North Korea was the surprise package of England '66. They arrived on the budget of a Ryanair traveller, stayed at an airport hotel, and practised on a pitch at an ICI factory in the North East. Yet they managed to knock-out Italy and Chile in the group stage, finishing second in their table. All the same, the Portuguese were clear favourites to win their game. Twenty-five minutes in, and things looked very different. The Koreans had scored three goals to take a 3-0 lead. The watching world and *A Seleção* were shell-shocked. Enter Eusébio to give a virtuoso performance and score four goals before the hour mark. A fifth goal later in the game and Portugal had won 5-3. They were now in the semi-finals against England, a game they lost 2-1, though Eusébio scored yet again to take the golden boot for the tournament with nine goals.

It was a shame that Portugal would have to wait nearly twenty years before appearing in another major tournament, by which time Eusébio was long gone from the international scene. His performances oozed quality and epitomised sportsmanship, providing a stark contrast with the hatchet men in defence. Before the twilight of his career in the US, joining the likes of Sammy Davis Junior, Tom Jones and Elvis in Las Vegas - I think Sammy played central midfield with Tom and Elvis as a centre back partnership - he had played 419 senior games and scored an incredible 437 goals. He remains one of the all time greats... certainly better than Celine Dion and Barry Manilow.

THE SALTILLO AFFAIR

In between the '66 World Cup and the UEFA Euro '84 competitions, Portugal changed from a dictatorship to a democracy following the Carnation Revolution of 1974, in which the military surrendered when faced with flower waving people on the streets demanding revolution... maybe the Syrians should try pansies or daffodils. It was the start of colossal social and economic change, which would impact positively on the fortunes of the Portuguese football team.

Qualifying for their first European Championship in 1984 made a clear statement that Portugal was emerging from the wilderness of international football. They had won a very tough qualifying group that included the USSR and Poland, having unearthed a number of talented young footballers such as Chalana, Diamantino and Rui Jordão. In the finals in France, they laid down an early marker by holding West Germany to a draw. It proved to be enough to finish second in their group, eliminating the Germans in the process. This put them through to a semi-final, paired against the hosts and favourites, France. *Les Bleus* were strong favourites to win, and yet with six minutes to go in extra time, the Portuguese were leading 2-1, before two late goals won it for the French. Heartbreaking stuff, but Portugal had made the same impact as '66, and this time, the country hoped it was not such a 'flash in the pan'.

Portugal then qualified for the Mexico '86 World Cup, giving credence to this new hope, but this was undone by the Saltillo Affair. Before they had left, a doping scandal embroiled the squad. António Veloso was supposedly tested positive for taking steroids, an accusation that turned out later to be fake... drug testing was in its infancy at this time, and it's quite possible that Veloso had been overdoing the *Frango* chicken and developed a decent cleavage that the officials took as irrefutable proof of wrongdoing. The Portuguese football federation invoked the spirit of Ebenezer Scrooge by booking flights to Mexico City via Frankfurt and Dallas rather than direct. Tired and demoralised, it was a bad start for the team, and when they finally arrived at their headquarters for the tournament in the Mexican town of Saltillo, it was apparent that officials had concentrated on the issue of altitude to the exclusion of everything else.

There was no security in the hotel, and it swarmed with reporters. The practice pitch had the gradient of a ski slope and a surface from the dark side of the moon. The local workers who provided the opposition in training would have struggled keeping the score line in single figures against a second division Sunday league side in Bootle. And when a con artist embezzled the players' cash on a bogus shopping trip to Laredo, the players had had enough. They went on strike, demanding a higher proportion of the financial purse. This did not go down too well back home, and although the players won a few concessions, their actions largely backfired on them. Despite this, the team won their first game,

admittedly against the dysfunctional England team, but subsequent defeats to Poland and Morocco meant elimination. The sorry mess that was Mexico '86 was over.

Even though Porto rediscovered the golden touch for European club success as winners of the 1986/87 Champions Cup, this did not arrest the damage caused to the national side after Saltillo, and it would not be until 1996 that they would again qualify for a major competition. The late 1980s sewed the seeds for this with the arrival of a golden generation of young players. This included Luis Figo, Rui Costa and Nuno Gomes and Portugal duly won the FIFA Youth Championships in 1989 and 1991. This translated into reaching the final of the 1994 UEFA European U21 Football Championship and then comfortably qualifying for Euro '96, including 8-0 and 7-0 victories against Liechtenstein. At the finals, the team topped their group before losing to the eventual finalists, the Czech Republic in the quarter-finals. It had been a worthy effort on the part of the young Portuguese side, and it augured well for the future.

There was a setback in failing narrowly to get to the France '98 World Cup, but at Euro 2000, Portugal appeared to be the likely lads... though I do not think Bob Ferris or Terry Collier made the squad that year. The golden generation was maturing - Figo and Gomes had stopped making farting noises with their hand under their armpit - and they won every game up to a semi-final against France, including victories against Germany and England. The game against the French World Champions ended controversially, with a disputed penalty awarded against them in the last three minutes of extra-time. A number of players, including Abel Xavier sporting a Marilyn Monroe creation on his head, manhandled the referee and tried to confiscate his red card. UEFA, subsequently, doled out lengthy bans. It was an ignominious end to a tournament that promised much, and it would prove indicative of Portugal's performances over the next decade, never quite able to deliver when it mattered.

THE BUTCH T CHILLI PEPPERS

At the Japanese World Cup of 2002, there was almost a repeat of the Saltillo shambles from Mexico City. The similarities were 'striking', thought not literally so. There was the usual doping scandal before leaving for the finals, the player Daniel Kenedy found to have used an illegal substance. At the finals themselves, there were similar accusations of amateurism directed towards the Portuguese Football Federation, shopping sprees - this time without the involvement of the Mexican Arthur Daly - as well as disputes over bonus payments to players. The results on the pitch mirrored Mexico '86 as well, with Portugal on the bus home after the group stage.

The FPF then appointed Luiz Felipe Scolari, the manager who had guided Brazil to victory in the 2002 World Cup. The media knew Scolari as 'Big Phil', which was a bit strange given he is less than six foot tall, my own height, and nobody has ever called me Big Chris... apart from that dream when I was Dirk Diggler. Big Phil took the job knowing the team had the great advantage of automatic qualification for Euro 2004 as hosts. Furthermore, although time had tarnished the players from the golden generation somewhat, there were one or two new jewels shining brightly for *A Seleção*, in particular a young Cristiano Ronaldo, now established in the first eleven for the national side. And when Porto emulated their achievements from the 1980s by winning Europe's premier club trophy, the 2003/4 Champions League, this further enhanced the healthy state of Portuguese football. Porto's manager was a certain José Mourinho.

The first match in the group stage of the 2004 European Championships ended in a shock 2-1 defeat for the hosts to unfancied Greece, but that did not stop Portugal from topping the group. After an epic quarter-final win over England, 6-5 on penalties, and a semi-final win over the Netherlands, they were through to the final against the Anne Widdecombe XI i.e. the still unfancied Greece. The Greek team had started the finals at 150/1 outsiders, and Portugal was the clear favourite, hotter than a Trinidad Scorpion Butch T chilli pepper. However, the champagne on ice went flat when the underdogs confounded expectations by taking the game and the trophy with a narrow 1-0 score line. Once again, the Portuguese had fallen short.

In the 2006 World Cup, Portugal breezed through qualifying and the Group phase of the finals in Germany, and then enjoyed a group of 16 win against the Netherlands in the 'Battle of Nuremburg' game, in which the ref showed a record number of yellow and red cards. Next up was England, and the English were undone when Ronaldo goaded his Manchester United teammate Rooney into a sending off, accusing the volatile Scouser of having more than one GCSE Grade C. The semi-final was a repeat of Euro 2000 against France, and history repeated itself as once again the Portuguese lost to a Zidane penalty. So near yet so far, but there was some consolation in their new FIFA ranking of number two. Two years later, the Austrian/Swiss Euros of 2008 turned out to be the last tournament for Big Phil, after a somewhat disappointing exit to the resurgent Germans in the quarter-finals. There had been a few near misses, but Scolari had not been able to replicate the achievements from his time with Brazil.

A place in the 'group of death' that included Brazil, Ivory Coast and North Korea, was the reward for Portugal's qualification at the South Africa World Cup of 2010. In the game against the Koreans, the Portuguese won 7-0, and you had to worry for the Asian players and coaches returning to their secret society after

such a humiliating defeat. Never has the 'group of death' tag taken on such a menacing tone. *A Seleccção* emerged from the group behind Brazil to face the daunting task of playing the favourites Spain in the group of 16. A David Villa goal put paid to Portuguese hopes, helping the Spanish to a 1-0 win.

The team made it to Euro 2012 but only by the 'skin of their teeth'... although I still struggle to find any skin on my molars, unless the gravy from Sunday's roast had overdone the corn flour. In the lead up to the tournament, Portugal had some poor results in friendlies and so many pundits dismissed their chances, particularly as they were in the same group as Germany, Holland and Denmark. But the Dutch imploded to leave the door open for Portugal and especially, Cristiano Ronaldo. A dominant win over the Czechs in the last eight led to a semi-final against the mighty Spain. Again, most experts were dubious about the chances of the Portuguese, yet they matched Spain over two hours of football in a scoreless draw. Unfortunately, the national team fell short again, when they lost in the penalty shoot out.

Euro 2012 proved that Portugal is now an established top European football team. Normally positioned within the top ten of FIFA's world rankings, they make regular appearances in the finals of both the World Cup and the European Championships. Yet until 1984, the team had only appeared once at the 'business end' of a major tournament, in England 1966. The Carnation Revolution of the 1970s did not just change politics, economics and society in Portugal for good; it also changed the nation's football.

As the Euro zone crisis has deepened, the country has required an EU/IMF bailout, conditional on the introduction of severe austerity measures for its people, measures rejected by a sizeable proportion of the population. The economic woes have led to a number of general elections and governmental changes. The Portuguese economy is now shrinking at an annual rate of about 3%, and given the correlation between success on the football field and GDP, it may well be that the golden era is over for *A Seleccção*. The net worth of Portugal the country is on the wane, but its football does have one priceless asset that is off balance sheet.

It takes only one new star to regenerate rock and roll into its latest form to sustain youth culture and inject some life into those sleepy old provincial towns. Similarly, football needs just one charismatic individual to relight its flame and lighten the pathway to success. Lucky Portugal might have no economy, but they do have José Mourinho, the likeliest of the likely lads.

[Group C](#)

SPAIN



World Cup Appearances: 13

World Cup Best: Winners - 2010

Euros Appearances: 9

Euros Best: Winners – 1964, 2008, 2012

CIVIL WARS

After years of underachievement, Spain has come good. They are the current World Champions, the current European Champions, and the current number 1 team in the FIFA rankings. Their domestic league has the best two teams in the world, although Manchester United supporters and blind faith fanatics of Vauxhall Motors FC might take issue with that supposition. So why is the Spain team so good? What is the secret of their high quality play? I attribute much of their success to the Lennon & McCartney factor.

Few dispute the contention that John Lennon and Paul McCartney would never have become songwriting legends on their own, always feeding off one another to develop and prosper. The combination of Paul's melodic gifts, John's rebellious nature, and the duelling impacts of collaboration and competition, fused into an unsurpassable creative output. When The Beatles split in 1970 and the two went their separate ways, their solo songs never reached the heights of those written when they were part of the 'Fab Four'. Spanish football has its own Lennon and McCartney, both giants of world soccer, Barcelona and Real Madrid. I suppose that makes Deportivo Alavés, Ringo.

The rivalry between Barcelona and Madrid underpins the history of Spanish football - early pretenders such as Atlético Madrid and Bilbao faded to the chorus line - and this is much more than the usual tribal thing. The two were on different sides in the Spanish Civil War. The city of Barcelona, as capital of the autonomous community of Catalonia, had aspirations of independence and supported the incumbent left wing democratic government that was sympathetic to separatism. Madrid, as capital of Spain, lent its sympathies to the anti-separatist conservative nationalists who started an uprising against the ruling

republic. The civil war lasted from 1936 to 1939, by the end of which the nationalists prevailed, leading to a dictatorship under General Franco that lasted until his death in 1975. This took the already fierce competition between the two cities to a new level. Any game between the two main football protagonists became *El Clásico* and the driving imperative for both teams was to outperform the other, the same dynamic as the young McCartney and Lennon. An unhealthy backdrop had provided healthy competition and Spanish football was ready to reap the reward. However, then came the litany of underachievement.

Spain had made their international debut at the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp and somehow managed to win a silver medal. Belgium defeated them in the quarter-finals, who in due course met Czechoslovakia for the gold. In the final just before half time, the Czechs walked off in protest at the English referee's performance and the Army of Belgian Soldiers circling menacingly around the perimeter of the pitch. The organizers disqualified the Czechs and applied the bizarre *Bergvall* System in which the teams that had lost to Belgium played one another for the silver medal, and Spain won. It may have been a noteworthy start to tournament football, but, like a two-faced hairdresser, it was something of a false dawn.

They declined to enter the 1930 World Cup but four years later qualified for the finals in Italy, where they managed to overcome Brazil in the first round to set up a quarter-final against the hosts. The game was drawn and Spain lost the replay 1-0. It was a harsh lesson for the Spaniards. The Italians had played a tough, aggressive game that would later inspire Teddy Boys, Mods, Rockers, Skinheads, Vinnie Jones and Larry Grayson... at least on the days he got out of bed on the wrong side.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 put paid to any chance of the team participating in the 1938 World Cup, and with the impact of the Second World War, it was not until the 1950 World Cup in Brazil that *La Roja* played in a major tournament again. Here they achieved a 100% record to move into the next stage of the competition but could only finish fourth. Despite this relative success, the team did not qualify for the '54 or '58 World Cup. However, just as the international scene was on a bit of a downward slide, so the Spanish domestic game took off.

Santiago Bernabéu Yeste was the President of Real Madrid from 1943 to his death in 1978, when he tried to sing like Barry Gibb and dance like John Travolta one time too many. When originally elected, Bernabéu had the creative foresight to restructure the club with an emphasis on the technical excellence of each department, football and otherwise. He also constructed what was then the largest stadium in Europe, which still carries his name today. He adopted the

groundbreaking strategy of attracting the best footballing talent from around the world, players like Di Stefano, Kopa and Puskás. This blueprint for the future took a while to catch on, but when it did, it spread like a sexually transmitted infection at a swingers' party. A true visionary, Bernabéu was also instrumental in bringing about a new European club competition that would evolve into the UEFA Champions' League. Real Madrid reaped the rewards of their President's innovations by winning La Liga and dominating the early years of the European Cup. Barcelona upped their game and Spanish football was the beneficiary.

A chance to prove the positive impact of these changes on the national team came with the inaugural European Championship in 1960. After beating Poland, the draw matched them with the USSR in a game over two legs. This is when General Franco intervened. The Soviets had supported his Second Spanish Republic opponents in the Civil War. It may have been a quarter of a century ago, but dictators have long memories and a disinclination to forgive and forget. The Spanish team was withdrawn from the competition.

BERNABÉU SKIES

Normality resumed soon after Franco's 1960 intervention with qualification for the '62 World Cup. Alfredo Di Stéfano was the Real Madrid player whose hobby was collecting caps by playing for different countries, including Argentina, Colombia and Spain. In the twilight of his career, his goals helped the Spanish national team qualify for Chile, but then an injury just before the tournament's start meant he was unable to travel. His international career was over, and he would have to find another way to satisfy his hat fetish, getting his caps perhaps mail order from Harrods. In the finals, the team missed him. Two late goals from the Brazilians in the group stage were enough to send the Spanish team packing.

The nearly boys finally delivered glory in the 1964 European Championships. Once they had reached the last four, UEFA selected Spain as hosts, and they beat Hungary to reach the final against the USSR. The players and the coaching staff waited nervously for the call from General Franco, but the game went ahead, and Spain were victorious, winning by 2-1 with a late goal. It was another achievement that owed a debt of gratitude to the vision of the Real Madrid president. It was also fitting that the final took place in his Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in Madrid. General Franco was there and departed to the sound of 120,000 voices in the sky celebrating their country's triumph over the old red enemies from the civil war. Suffice to say, he was a happy dictator that evening.

The draw for the 1966 World Cup qualifiers placed Spain in the same group as the Republic of Ireland and Syria. Clearly, someone in FIFA was not very good

at reading maps, allocating the Middle Eastern country to Europe. It did not matter anyway, because the Syrians withdrew from the competition. It was in support of the African nations who boycotted the games due to the allocation of only one place for African and Asian teams, no doubt something determined in a meeting of ex-colonial FIFA officials who deemed the protest futile because they all looked the same anyway. The same officials still lacked the foresight to use goal difference or any criteria other than number of points to determine final table placings, so that when Spain and Ireland both won their respective home games, a play off was organised in Paris, an indicative half way between Madrid and Dublin. It shows how much the balance of power has switched from national teams to clubs, another legacy of the Bernabéu strategy, because it is unthinkable of such replays occurring in the modern game. Spain prevailed in the final match and so went to the England finals, where they had the misfortune of a draw in the same group as Argentina and West Germany.

The Germans were a talented team with emerging quality players such as Franz Beckenbauer, while the Argentineans were 'animals', at least according to England Manager, Alf Ramsey. He attached this label to the South Americans, and assuming this is not a reference to some bizarre pre-match sexual foreplay, he inferred they lacked any human dignity in how they approached the game. Such comments would now be criticised by lobby groups, arguing it was a slur on the animal kingdom made by the only species on earth innately bad... the Ramseys? The Argies played the game rough and FIFA cautioned them for their aggressive tactics in the group stage. Nonetheless, it served them well, and they went through to the next stage with West Germany. For Spain, it was the same lesson as in 1934, and they went home early with their tales between their legs... at least they would have done, if they had tails like the Argentinean beasts.

In 1966, Real Madrid lifted the European Cup, but it would be another twenty-five years before a Spanish club triumphed in the same competition. Club football in other countries was catching up. Italy, Germany, Netherlands and England all took turns to dominate European football. The self-esteem of *La Roja* seemed impacted, and there followed a period where the national team was in the doldrums, failing to qualify for either a World Cup or a European Championship until Argentina '78.

The team failed to deliver in Buenos Aires, once again eliminated at the first group stage, but at least the spell of non-qualification had been broken, something reinforced by them making it to the final stages of the 1980 European Championships where, yet again, they went out in the group stages. 1964 apart, the Spanish were destined in major tournaments to lose their bottle more than an alcoholic with Alzheimer's.

Things did not get any better when they hosted the 1982 World Cup, normally a big advantage, but not for Spain. The first game was against Honduras, seeking revenge for three hundred years of colonial occupation started by Christopher Columbus in the sixteenth century before he got a proper job and directed the *Home Alone* and *Harry Potter* movies. The match ended in a shock 1-1 draw, irrefutable proof that empire building is always a bad idea. A win against Yugoslavia and then defeat to the minnows of Northern Ireland was just enough for them to scrape into the next stage, in which they were matched with England and West Germany, the redoubtable Germans prevailing as victors of the mini-group. Spain, on their home soil of the Bernabéu, had failed again. The underachievement continued.

Two years on and going into the last qualifying game for the 1984 Euros, Spain was at home to Malta, a banker you would rightly think. However, the task was bigger than just a victory. The team had to win by eleven clear goals. Guess what? That's right! In the type of outcome that has conspiracy theorists drooling like a boxer pup, they won 12-1. Now, there is no proof of any wrongdoing, so let us just say the Maltese defended like a team paid to lose... in case you are an ex-Maltese footballer with the litigious habits of Mohamed Al-Fayed, please note the use of the word 'like'. Against the odds, the Spanish had made it to the finals in France and for once had a good tournament. By topping their group, they knocked out West Germany and reached a semi-final against the Danes that they won on penalties. In the final, they played hosts France who had Michel Platini in his pomp, and the Frenchman inspired his team to a 2-0 victory. Spain had been defeated, but supporters hoped it was the beginning of a new era of success.

THE UNDERACHIEVERS

The Mexico World Cup of 1986 gave fresh renewal to this optimism. The team had an easy ride in the Group Stage, and in the first game of the knock-out phase, they beat Denmark 5-1. In the quarter-finals they met Belgium, a late equaliser taking the game into extra-time before losing out on penalties again. Unfortunately, the relative successes of '84 and '86 did not herald that new dawn. In Euro '88, defeats to Italy and West Germany meant an early exit, and in Italia '90, they lost to Yugoslavia in the round of 16.

There was also a disastrous qualifying campaign for Euro '92, in which Spain lost every one of their away fixtures. By the time of their last group game in Albania, both teams were out of the competition, so they did not even bother to play. UEFA gave the reason for the cancellation as 'social unrest'. This was lost in translation, as it really meant, 'can't be arsed.' Spain had failed to qualify for a major tournament finals for the first time since 1976.

However, there was success for the Spanish national team in 1992 and it came at the Summer Olympics. While Linford Christie was swinging his appendage in tight Lycra shorts to the winning line of the 100m, Spain's younger players were participating in the football tournament. This was the first year in which Olympic Soccer squads were age limited with teams of U23 players, reinvigorating the competition. Although the Spanish had the benefit of playing on home soil, the winning of the gold medal was an indication that, at its roots, football in Spain was healthy, and that this should give cause for optimism.

Furthermore, the realisation of Johan Cruyff's vision as manager saw the emergence of a newly successful Barcelona side, later coined the 'Dream Team'. Although the side contained some foreign players such as Koeman, Laudrup and Stoichkov, the nucleus was Spanish, and as such, a feeder for the national squad. This Barcelona won La Liga for three consecutive years in the early 90s and broke the Spanish duck of many years by winning the European Cup in 1991/92. In a piece of interesting symmetry, the Olympic winning team included a young Josep Guardiola who would later go on and manage his Barcelona club to unprecedented success and achievement. From the depths of the Euro '92 qualifying fiasco, there was cause for optimism. Nonetheless, many Spanish fans did not necessarily feel that way.

The RFEF appointed a new coach, Javier Clemente, for the start of the USA '94 qualifiers. As the early games went by, Clemente was proving to be none too popular. There was criticism about his style of play and the preponderance of Basque players, though I personally have no recollection of a Spanish team that included anyone wearing *Agent Provocateur* underwear. A number of nil-nil draws did not help his cause, but a 1-0 victory over European Champions Denmark assured them of a place in the USA. In the finals, *La Roja* had little difficulty in making the group of 16 and then beat the Swiss, 3-0, to set up a quarter-final against their old Mediterranean adversaries, Gibraltar... OK, Italy, just keeping you on your toes. The game was 2-1 to Italy with just a minute to go as Spain pressed for an equaliser. The ball was crossed from the right wing into the Italian box, where defender Mauro Tassotti elbowed the advancing Luis Enrique to the floor. It was a clear penalty to Spain - so clear that Tassotti later received an eight match ban - but the Hungarian referee took a 'boys will be boys' perspective on the infringement and waved play on before blowing up - his whistle not some Semtex device - for full time. Spaniards remained disillusioned that their team was doing nothing to discard its reputation for underachievement and loss of nerve.

There was further disappointment for their long-suffering fans at Euro 96 with the now familiar tale of a quarter-final exit, this time to the hosts England. The

English enjoyed the luck of a lottery winner who has just received a suggestive text message from Angelina Jolie. Spain had two goals disallowed and two obvious penalties waved away by the referee. The game went to spot kicks, where it was a case of Seaman and a bad shot, as Nadal had his effort saved by the big number one to send England through and the Spanish crashing out. It was an embarrassing exit. To lose to the English on penalties was like losing to a eunuch in a 'largest bollocks' competition.

France '98 was worse, exiting the finals in the first round after a crucial defeat to Nigeria. Perhaps the only thing to save Clemente's job was their final group game, which ended in a comprehensive 6-1 defeat of Bulgaria. However, when the team lost its first Euro 2000 qualifying game against Cyprus, Clemente was gone, replaced by José Antonio Camacho. Camacho managed to turn things around and get his team to the final, and you can probably guess what happened next... a giant spaceship descended and an *ET* creature appeared, evidenced his Spanish citizenship and scored three hundred goals in the tournament, thereby winning the competition for his adopted Spanish compatriots? OK then, Spain was knocked out in the quarter-finals, this time by France. Please forgive me that bit of surrealism. This quarter-final nonsense is getting a bit tedious you know.

BASTARD IN THE BLACK

It was 2002 and World Cup time again, this time in the land of the rising sun, or at least nearby in South Korea. Winning three games out of three in the first group stage led to a group of 16 encounter with the Republic of Ireland. Here, Spain was coasting 1-0 until the last minute, when a Robbie Keane goal sent the Irish crowd wild. It even induced the raising of eyebrows in Wexford. However, Spain beat the Irish on penalties and at the end of the group stage progressed to the quarter-finals, where everyone thought they knew the script. They would lose to hosts, South Korea, courtesy of some dubious refereeing decisions - this had been the pattern of the Koreans' progress to date. The referee was from Egypt, his assistants from Uganda and Trinidad, by any measure vulnerable to financial persuasion or just being crap.

Now, refereeing is a hard gig. I recall when my son was eight and playing organised football but still too young for the local football league to allocate a proper ref, and so the solution was for the dads to take a turn. When it was my go, I was surprised at two things. Firstly, how much abuse I received. I silently objected to taunts of 'Who's the bastard in the black?' as I was wearing a lighter shade of blue and the cries were coming from our team's supporters. I also think it was wrong for my son to join in. The second thing that surprised me was how easy it was to spot infringements. As a spectator, your attention is focused on

how your team is playing, the tactics, the skills on display, the chances, even the pies at half-time. However, as the bastard in the lighter shade of blue, you are solely on the lookout for fouls and offsides. Refereeing is therefore harder than you'd think, yet easier than you'd think.

There was an embarrassing postscript to my stint as a referee. I blew my whistle at full time and felt a surge of self-satisfaction. I had had a decent game and felt that all the goals scored were fair and that sending off the red haired left back for telling me to shove my unmentionables up someone else's unmentionables was fair, even if he was only seven. As I left the field, I saw the opposition's manager approach me with a certificate. This was it. After years of enduring a lack of recognition in my career as an accountant, my glorious sixty minutes as the man in the middle was about to be rewarded with a scroll. He gave the A4 size paper to me and what started as a proud moment quickly drained away, as I read the words 'Man of the Match', awarded to one of the players in my son's team. This guy had thought I was the manager. It was the most deluded moment of my life, and I am certain it will not be surpassed.

Mr Ghandour did not leave the Spain v South Korea game expecting a certificate from the Spanish. However, he might have expected a brown envelope stuffed with Egyptian pounds. Although it's easy jump to erroneous conclusions, by any standards, the officials had a shocker. In extra time with the match a stalemate at 0-0, Joaquin chipped the ball from the byline, over the defenders and keeper to where Morientes had the simple task of heading the ball into the empty net. The linesman waved his flag in a panic, desperately thinking of a reason to disallow.

'That's it,' he thought, 'the ball was out before he crossed it.'

It was not. Even Geoff Hurst's 1966 goal crossed some of the line. Replays confirmed there was clear space between the ball and the line. It was an appalling decision, and the Spanish were understandably upset. If this had been England, it would still be haunting the nation. Diego Maradona's 'Hand of God' was an extremely skilful sleight of hand executed by the little man, and could be argued as deserving of a goal for its originality. This, by comparison, was just shit officiating. By the time of the final whistle, the heart seemed to have left the players in red and blue, and they lost again on penalties. Camacho resigned immediately after the game.

After another early elimination at the European Championships of 2004 in Portugal, the Royal Spanish Football Federation appointed Luis Aragonés as the national coach. Although unbeaten in qualifying, they finished in second place to Serbia and Montenegro, and it took a two-legged play off victory - though it would have been harsh to play a three legged game, and harder still to carry an

egg and spoon - against Slovakia to make it to Germany. In the finals, they won every game in the group stage and then met Zidane's France in the Group of 16. It was a tough draw because the French had come second in their group. The Spanish lost the game 3-1, despite the undoubted talents of players like Casillas, Xavi, Torres, Fabregas, Ramos and Villa. Aragonés concluded that his team lost, not because they were technically inferior, but because they were not physically strong enough. To make advantage of their superior skills, he would have to change the way they played. Thus, *tiki-taka* was re-born.

TIKI-TAKA

Some commentators were initially sceptical of this, claiming that the idea of a team's tactics being directed by a John McCririck from the sideline was preposterous, until someone pointed out this was mixing up the bookmaker's tic-tac with a variation of Dutch total football called *tiki-taka*, first seen when Johann Cruyff coached Barcelona in the 1990s. The style of play concentrated on short passing movements where possession of the ball was the key, the polar opposite of the Jack Charlton route one physical game. It did not matter that players were as statuesque as Iniesta or Xavi, because the engine of a *tiki-taka* demanded skill, creativity and flair as the essential ingredients, and an ability to apply an accurate, one touch or two touch passing game. Barcelona under Guardiola adopted the technique to accomplish an incredible level of success. In 2009, his team achieved an unprecedented sextuple - which has nothing to do with one of the more randy second team players impregnating half a dozen Catalan ladies - winning all six competitions that they entered in the year.

Qualifying for the 2008 Euros started badly with two defeats in the first three games against Sweden and Northern Ireland. Once they were in a groove though, they did not look back and ended topping their group. In the finals in Austria, there was a familiar start to proceedings. Spain won all three of their group games to set up a quarter-final tie against Italy. This was an Italy past its sell by date, and many thought it was Spain's game to win, yet this time, Spain prevailed and won 4-2 on spot kicks. Following a comfortable semi-final win over Russia, *La Roja* were back where they belonged, in a major football tournament final. Their opponents were those formidable tournament footballers from Germany and it was a close game. Despite the objectives of *tika-taka*, Germany had more possession, but Spain was nonetheless the superior side and deserved a 1-0 victory, courtesy of a Fernando Torres strike in the first half.

Decades after their last major championship victory, Spain had done. Furthermore, the team was now number one in the FIFA rankings. So what was different about Euro 2008? Why did the years of underachievement finally end

with glory in Vienna? It is argued by some that the greatest problem facing previous Spanish teams was the a lack of unity, reflecting the same issue within the country itself, Basques and Catalans identifying more with their own geographical domain than anything else. It is said that this young and exuberant squad, being free of such political influences and guided by the old experienced hand of Aragonés, was liberated to play its *tiki-taka* brand of football to devastating effect without the old constraints of disunity. I would suggest it was simpler than that. Football is a game where luck and chance plays a part. If you play football as well as the Spanish had over the years, notwithstanding a weakening mental attitude reinforced by regular failure, eventually it would come right. The political divisions had played their part, but only in the sense that the intense rivalries of Barcelona and Real Madrid had continued to provide an assembly lime of high quality, technically gifted soccer players for the national side.

The bad news for the rest of us from this success was the likelihood of Spain repeating the accomplishment in the near future. The under achievement baggage was now as lost as your average Samsonite on a flight to Malaga, and with that, there would be a stronger mindset to accompany the ever-present natural skill. Aragonés retired to be replaced by Vicente del Bosque, the ex-Real Madrid man, who picked up the unbeaten run of his predecessor and extended it to a record equalling thirty-five games, including a stretch of fifteen consecutive victories. The run finally ended when the Spaniards lost to the USA in the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup.

For the 2010 World Cup, the team qualified with a staggering ten wins out of ten, but then, somehow, lost the opening game of the finals against Switzerland, though they still finished top of their group. Three successive 1-0 wins followed against Portugal, Paraguay, and Germany, the latter one of the teams of the tournament. Spain was in the World Cup final for the first time in history. The opponents were the Netherlands.

The final was a disgrace with more cards on display than in Clintons. Referee Howard Webb issued fourteen yellow and one red., though Spain only picked up five of the yellows, including two very late bookings for Xavi and Iniesta, by which time the ref was confused, thinking he had to book anyone who was less than 5' 7" tall. Proof that the Spanish were not at fault for the relative brutality of the final came with their subsequent FIFA fair play award. However, none of this mattered to Spain. Iniesta's goal, with four minutes of extra time to play, secured victory for Spain. They were now World Champions, and fully deserving of the accolade.

For Euro 2012, the team replicated their South Africa 2010 achievement by winning every game in their qualifying group. They headed into the tournament as clear favourites and ranked number one by FIFA. It was not quite more of the same in Poland and Ukraine, where they could only manage a draw against Italy in their opening game, but the team still exuded class, particularly in the match against an admittedly average Irish side, and they were able to ease through to the knock-out stage. In the quarter-finals, they outplayed France to win 2-0, yet struggled to get past Portugal in the semis, needing penalties to reach the final after a 0-0 draw. However, it all came good on 1st July 2012. The history books will state, Spain 4 Italy 0, but that does not do justice to Spain's performance, especially in the first half, which was breathtaking, the best football I have ever seen. In winning Euro 2012, they had achieved an unprecedented third major championship in a row. What price a fourth in Brazil?

In short, they are The Dog's Bollocks... who may be your favourite band, but I prefer The Beatles. Furthermore, the global brands of Barcelona and Real Madrid provide protection from the economic crisis that threatens Spain, in common with many of the Euro zone countries. The rivalry from *El Clásico* is fiercer than ever. The Civil War lives on in Spain, albeit in football terms, and with that the likelihood of success for the national team. The underachievers are dead; long live the achievers... viva España.

ITALY



World Cup Appearances: 17

World Cup Best: Winners - 1934, 1938, 1982, 2006

Euros Appearances: 8

Euros Best: Winners - 1968

BACKHANDERS & THE LONG BOAT TO RIO

'I'll bet you ten thousand Euros that this Italy team will lose today.'

Those of you fond of a flutter may want to take me up on the challenge, given *La Nazionale's* record of grinding out results, but you have the wrong end of the

stick. This is the imaginary dialogue of the Italian manager to his team before the start of a game, and whilst I am sure that the current national coach, Cesare Prandelli, is as clean as a whistle polished with Brasso and spit, the satire does have some credence. Italy may be the most successful European nation in World Cup history, but no assessment of *Calcio* is complete without reference to the litany of bribes, corruption, match fixing and betting scams that have permeated Italian football over the years. It is a history with more ups and downs than a bridegroom's bottom on his wedding night.

Italy's first international was a 6-2 victory over France in 1910, and the watching fans rewarded the players by throwing cigarettes on the pitch. The manager of the Italians was Vittorio Pozzo, a man who, with a few breaks in between, was still in the role nearly fifty years later. Pozzo was a man of his times. When he finally took the job on full time in 1929, he only did so on the condition that he was unpaid. He really should have found himself an agent.

In the 1930s, when Benito Mussolini was posturing on the top of military tanks and pointing at an attractive girl in the distance using an outstretched palm, Italy was a Fascist state and in 1934 hosted the World Cup. Look up the image of the poster for the finals and you will appreciate why the country has a reputation for style. The player on the cover seems to be wearing a kit from the twenty first century, with a neat slim fitting shirt, and the posture of the player as he shoots looks like a still from *EA Sports FIFA 2012* for the X-box. The English game at this time had all the style attributes of Shackleton's Antarctic expedition.

The controversy that surrounded refereeing decisions marred the progress of Pozzo's team in the '34 tournament. In the quarter-final against Spain, Italy scored a goal that referee Louis Baert rightly disallowed for Schiavo's thump on the Spanish goalkeeper. The *Azzuri* players surrounded the ref and jostled him in protest at his decision. Baert, perhaps glancing towards the directors' box and seeing a man who he thought was Mussolini, changed his mind and awarded the goal. He then disallowed a goal by Spain's Lafuente for offside, despite the playing dribbling past four Italians to score. The game went to a replay that had similar accusations of refereeing skullduggery, this time involving the official from Switzerland, Rene Mercet. The Swiss FA, unimpressed by his performance, promptly banned him on his return from the finals. Such matters, however, are largely lost in the detail. The record books show that Italy went on to win the first of their World Cup triumphs with the help of the footballing genius of Giuseppe Meazza and bowlfuls of pasta.

Four years later, they repeated the feat in Paris. A tricky quarter-final tie against the French hosts was made easier by the return of an old friend; referee Louis Baert, the official from the '34 finals. Pozzo was still manager, and he

exercised some early mind games when faced with Brazil in the semi-final. When he heard that the South Americans had requisitioned the only plane out of Marseille for Paris on the day after their game, he used this demonstration of arrogance to rouse his players. They responded positively and won 2-1, going on to beat Hungary 4-2 in the final. Unfortunately, there was not a lot of time to celebrate, because war was looming. It would be 1950 before the next World Cup.

At the end of the Second World War, Italy became a republic with an elected government of Christian Democrats, after the electorate acted to avoid takeover by either the Communists or the Monster Raving Spaghetti Munching Party. The country was free and looking forward to defending its World footballing trophy in Brazil, when tragedy struck.

In May 1949, a plane carrying the Torino football squad crashed near Turin, killing all aboard including eighteen players. At the time, the club provided ten of the first choice eleven for the national team and so the loss decimated the *Azzuri*. The air crash scarred the Italians, and so the Italian squad travelled by ship to Brazil for the World Cup. The draw had placed them in the same group as Sweden, Paraguay, and that giant of Association Football, India, the same India that played barefoot in the Olympic Games of 1948 and 1952. However, the Indian football authorities withdrew their side before the tournament started, essentially on the grounds of the cost. In many ways it was a shame this happened. Imagine now watching the priceless footage of a team playing for a quarter-final place in soccer's most prestigious contest, without a footy boot to their name.

Fatigued after the long boat journey from Italy to Rio, and with nerve endings jangling from having to endure second-rate cabaret aboard the liner, courtesy of a young Jayne McDonald, the Italian side underperformed in the group stages. They were soon on the boat home with young Jayne's '*I'm just a girl who can't say no*' ringing in their ears.

BATTLE OF SANTIAGO

The period that followed was not a particularly successful one for *La Nazionale*, failing to make the knock-out phases in 1954 and 1962, and not qualifying at all in 1958. The 1962 World Cup is most famous for the Battle of Santiago, a first round encounter between Italy and the hosts, Chile. BBC TV's David Coleman introduced highlights of the game as 'the most stupid, appalling, disgusting and disgraceful exhibition of football, possibly in the history of the game.' (He clearly never saw my performance in goal at Primary School.) Englishman, Ken Aston, refereed the game, a man who would later invent red

and yellow cards, presumably in his padded cell as he rocked back and forward. Ken sent the Italian Ferrino off in the twelfth minute for an atrocious foul, and when the player refused to leave the field, the police had to get involved to escort him to the dressing room. The ref was being a bit more tolerant of Chilean indiscretions, perhaps influenced by 60,000 screaming, hotheaded locals, baying for the blood of anyone who was not from Chile. He ignored the punch by Sanchez on David, though when David retaliated a few minutes later by kicking Sanchez in the head, Italy was down to nine men. Sanchez was not finished yet, and he later broke the nose of Maschio. Once again, Ken gave him a stern look and nothing more. The police had to restore order on the pitch a further three times in the game, so much so that the Chief of Police in the stadium was awarded the Man of the Match prize for setting up Chile's second goal. It was hardly football's finest hour.

These World Cup failures were in sharp contrast to the domestic game, which was going from strength to strength, with teams such as AC Milan and Internazionale starting to dominate European Football. Italy the country was also prospering from an economic standpoint. Significantly, it was one of the founder members of the European Community.

International football, however, continued to humiliate. England 1966 was no exception. Italy was in the same group as North Korea, a world leader in oppression but a minnow in football terms. The soccer fraternity was shocked when the two times winners were beaten by the team from the Far East, 1-0, the goal scored by Pak Do Ik, who no doubt returned home after the finals to a hero's welcome and a luxury lifestyle of two bowls of rice a day. Italy never recovered and, once again, went out in the group stages.

However, in 1968, after either failing to enter or qualify in 1960 and 1964, the Italians hosted the European Championships. Now the football supporter, at least in relation to the game, is a very conservative beast. Any proposal to change the rules is greeted with a chorus of disapproval, with pundits and expert summarisers clamouring to give good reason why the status quo should remain - I like some of the early Quo but they really should have learnt a fourth chord. Present day examples include outlawing the tackle from behind, refining the offside rule, and changing the recipe for the pies at Wigan. The Luddite is alive and well, wearing a scarf, an anxious expression, and bawling at the man in black at every opportunity - that's the referee and not Will Smith or Tommy Lee Jones, and I would not recommend shouting at the latter in any circumstances. So to those who bemoan the unfairness of play-offs, Champions League qualification, and the penalty shoot-out, let me take you back to the '68 Euros to prove that some, if not most, of these changes are for the better.

Italy made it to the semi-finals to play the USSR, who had the legendary Lev Yashin in goal and a back four whose secret weapon was Cold War military artillery. After only five minutes of the game, the Italian forward, Gianni Rivera suffered a crunching tackle or some sniper action from the Soviet right back, and he was unable to carry on. This was a time before the rules allowed substitutes, and so the hosts had to play the remainder of the game with only ten men. The Italians showed their defensive prowess and held out for a nil-nil draw after extra time. The penalty shoot-out was still a figment of the imagination in the late 1960s, and so how do you think the tie was decided, a result that would send one of the teams to the biggest game in European football? In the event of a tie, unbelievably, the result was to be determined by the drawing of lots.

Drawing lots of what, the more literal thinking reader may ask. Lots of trees? Lots of houses with a sun in the sky? Or perhaps a green field with lots of stick men playing football? However, I have to disillusion those of you on this flight of fancy. I am afraid there was not some kind of painting competition at the end of the game in which Rolf Harris adjudicated, though that would have been fairer, as it was the toss of a coin that decided the tie. If it had been artistic prowess, at least teams could have included a player who, although not a wizard on the field of play, did have a degree from Art School and would therefore be the Ace in the Hole in the event of a draw.

And so it came to pass in the Neapolitan heat of the 68' Euro semi-final that the two captains and the referee left the pitch and went to the dressing rooms to toss... this is such an easy line, I will let you insert your own response here. Now, this is just my theory without any basis, but I think that the protagonists used a two-headed coin to ensure that Italy won. With a crowd of 68,000 screaming Italians versus half a dozen KGB agents, the reverse result may have been somewhat inflammatory to the fiery Latin temperaments, ready to ignite on the terraces of Naples. It would be the last time that tossing a coin would have a part to play in deciding a major tournament. At the 1970 World Cup, FIFA introduced substitutes and penalty shootouts. Italy went on to beat Yugoslavia in the '68 final, though it took a replay - no coins that day - two days after the first final had finished in a 1-1 draw.

However, there is more to this final than replays, something that plagues *Calcio* to this day. An investigation into one of Italian football's senior officials, Italo Allodi, accused him of corrupting Herr Dienst, the Swiss referee who officiated in the final against Yugoslavia. Footage shows a clear foul by the Italian Ferrini, which the ref did not punish, leaving Italy free to equalise and then take the final to a second game. Italy as a country had a poor reputation for crooked politicians, their club football was increasingly being subject to

investigations about bribes, and now the national team was in a 1930s déjà vu scenario with corrupt officials.

TOTONERO & REDEMPTION

Two years on, and the 1970 World Cup belonged to Brazil with their delightful play and mesmerising skills. Whenever the Mexico '70 final highlights are aired, the Italian beaten finalists are made to look like whipping boys in the 4-1 defeat. Yet this *Azzuri* team was a talented bunch and very unfortunate to meet the Brazilians on a day when everything clicked for the South Americans, including Joao Havelange's dodgy hip.

The 1970 World Cup was the beginning of the end for the 'Mexican Generation'... so called because of their inclination to wear sombreros and eat fajitas. The deterioration in *La Nazionale* coincided with the 'Years of Lead', more than a decade of social upheaval arising from the terrorist inspired activities of left and right political groups, the 'lead' derived from the number of bullets used during the turmoil. The Italian team's fortunes reflected these darker times, as they failed to qualify for the 1972 European Championships. At the 1974 World Cup in Germany, they went out in the first round after losing their final group match to Poland. Once again, match-fixing accusations arose when members of the Polish squad complained that Italian representatives had tried to bribe them to lose. It was rumoured that the protagonist at the heart of things was a certain Snr Allodi.

The team then failed to qualify for the 1976 European Championships, and things were looking bleak. However, for the '78 World Cup in Argentina, the Italians unveiled a new generation of players, including striker, Paolo Rossi. The young team started very strongly in the finals, beating France, Hungary and hosts Argentina, and but for two second half goals from the Netherlands in the final game of the second group phase, they might have made the final. It had been a welcome return to form.

Argentina had been a relative success, but the new decade started badly for Italian football when the *Totonero* scandal broke. This involved widespread match fixing and illegal betting activities, relating to games in *Serie A* and *Serie B*. At the end of investigations, the Italian Football Federation relegated Milan and Lazio, docked points from another five teams, and banned a number of managers and players. This included a four-year ban for Enrico Albertosi, Italy's goalkeeper from the 1966 and 1970 World Cups, and a two-year ban to the world's highest paid footballer, the starlet from Argentina '78, Paolo Rossi.

A few months later, Italy hosted the European Championships. There were only eight teams in the finals, and the two that topped their groups played the

final. Italy could only finish second in Group B and so faced Czechoslovakia in the play-off for third place. The double-sided coin could not help this year because the game went to penalties. Remarkably, the first seventeen penalties hit the back of the net in the shootout before Fulvio Collovati, the big lad at the back, missed. Italy had lost.

For the 1982 World Cup in Spain, Rossi was available again, having served his ban, but the Italians started slowly in Spain, drawing their three group games. Critics rounded on the manager and his team's uninspiring performances, but it was just enough to take them through to the second group stage, where they would have to beat Zico's Brazil and Maradona's Argentina. Unsurprisingly, expectations were low. A 2-1 victory over the Argentineans meant they were one game away from the final. Up to this point, the Brazilians had won all five games, and they were favourites to win the competition with their fluent attacking style, a stark contrast to the defensive approach that characterized the Italians. In the game, Italy took the lead on two occasions, both goals scored by Rossi, but Brazil managed to equalise both times. With the tie balanced at 2-2, Rossi scored a third to send Italy through to the final against West Germany.

The defining image of the final is the face of Marco Tardelli after scoring the goal that gave them a two-goal cushion. It has been said by footballers that scoring a goal is better than sex, and by the look etched on Tardelli's features as he raced to celebrate suggested he was showering in a fountain of his own jizz. The game ended 3-1 and Italy were the World Champions of 1982. They had been far from the best team in the tournament, but they were the most organised. It was a triumph for the pragmatist.

After the success in Spain, the remaining years of the 1980s were somewhat barren. The team did not qualify for the 1984 European Championships and could only make the group of 16 in the Mexico '86 World Cup, although at the 1988 Euros, the team fared better, making the semi-finals, where they lost 2-1 to the Soviet Union.

However, hopes were high in 1990 when Italy was once again the host for the World Cup. The nation demonstrated its rich cultural heritage with the famous Three Tenors Concert, held in Rome on the eve of the tournament. It was a time to thank FIFA for not selecting the second placed USSR as hosts. In place of Pavarotti, Domingas and Carreras, we would have had three Russian peasant women playing with their balalaikas... and yes, I am sure some of you have downloaded that video from the Internet.

The Italia '90 finals were the dullest ever, and perhaps should have been coined 'The John Major Finals'. Goals were scarce, yellow and red cards were as common as the nightclubs in Ashton-Under-Lyme, and penalty shoot-outs

decided many of the critical games, as teams played safety first to hold out for a draw. The *Azzurri*, who had benefitted so spectacularly from the coin toss in 1968, now fell victim to the cruelty of the match decided on penalties, although admittedly not as cruel as heads or tails, Chris Waddle's mullet, or Gazza's Fog on the Tyne vocal. After winning their first five games without conceding a goal, and seemingly in the slipstream heading for triumph and success, Italy lost in the semi-final to Argentina on penalties, Maradona converting the deciding spot kick.

After the finals, FIFA vowed to make teams more offensive, so they provided each nation with a copy of the complete works of Bernard Manning. They also changed the rule so that a win earned three points rather than the customary two. Nonetheless, there was a satisfying symmetry that the last major football tournament, set up to reward a defensive strategy, should be held in Italy, the nation that had perfected the style of football known as *Catenaccio*... which was essentially score one goal and then use Antonio the bricklayer to build a wall in front of the goalposts.

MOGGIOPOLI & GLORY

Despite FIFA's best efforts, four years later in USA '94, the final was a drab stalemate, still scoreless after extra time. It was a case of *déjà vu* for Italy as their chances of lifting the World Cup Trophy were dashed, when they went out on penalties, this time to Brazil. At least the corruption scene was reasonably quiet at this time in Italy, although it was enlivened by the accusations made against Torino officials that they had provided referees with prostitutes to help them progress in the UEFA cup. In reply to the usual chants of 'Are you blind ref?' the official could have said, 'Well so would you if you'd shagged as much as me last night!'

During the '90s, Italy continued to disappoint in the Euros, not qualifying for Sweden '92 and home early at Euro '96. However, at the '98 World Cup in France, the team did make the quarter-finals, where they played the hosts, with another loss on penalties after a 0-0 draw. Two years' later and even those who still resented the influence of the Roman Empire had to feel some sympathy for the Italians. At Euro 2000 in Belgium and Holland, Italy had won all their group games and then dispatched Romania and the fancied Dutch to reach the final against the World Champions, France. Thanks to a Delvecchio goal, the team was literally seconds away from winning the trophy. Then in the 94th minute, just as the French fans were starting to leave the stadium to bag a seat on the coach away from farting Claude, Sylvain Wiltord equalised. Fifteen minutes

later, and David Trezeguet had scored a golden goal to destroy the dreams of the Italians.

The golden goal was an attempt by football's policy makers to avoid the lottery of the penalty shoot-out. It created a sudden death scenario in extra time - an idea greeted enthusiastically by Iraqi and Libyan delegates at the time - where the first goal scored would win the game. There were two problems with the idea. Firstly, teams became ultra-defensive, with a much greater emphasis on not conceding than scoring. Secondly, it was a shit way to end a game. When a golden goal went in, the game just died. It was as though the floodlights had failed.

The golden goal would not last, and the old penalty shootout would return though not before Italy was the victim again, this time in the 2002 World Cup, losing controversially to Guus Hiddink's South Korea. The Italians were highly critical of the referee's performance, and whilst many would say, it was the pot calling the kettle - I have never actually heard a pot talk though I have heard a kettle whistle - subsequent events are on the side of the *Azzuri*.

The official in charge of the game was Byron Moreno from Ecuador. After the finals, Moreno was given a twenty-match ban for allowing over thirteen minutes of undesignated stoppage time in a game, during which Deportiva Universita de Quito score two goals to win the match 4-3. The Ecuadorian Football Federation suspended him again, after he controversially showed three red cards in a game. At this point, he retired. And there's more. (By the way, how shit was Jimmy Cricket?). In 2010, U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency arrested Moreno at New York's JFK airport for smuggling heroin in his socks, quite possibly South Korean football socks. Convicted, he is now serving time for the felony in state prison.

Following another inauspicious European Championship in 2004, the year of 2006 turned out to be the most momentous in the history of *Calcio*. The build up to the finals could not have been worse. Just one month before the start of the tournament in Germany, Italian football was rocked by the biggest scandal to hit the game since... well take your pick. This was a big one, so big it got its own name, *Moggiopoli* or *Calciopoli*. I know that is two names but Sting has two - Sting and C*nt - so that's OK. It was actually named after the General Manager of Juventus, Luciano Moggi.

In this latest crisis, Italian police had uncovered a major network of collusion between Italian League teams and refereeing organisations, in which team managers were able to influence the appointment of particular officials then bribe them to produce a favourable result. In a series of harsh punishments, Juventus were stripped of their 2005 and 2006 league titles and relegated, while

deduction of points were handed out to AC Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio and Reggina. This was after successful appeals to reduce the original verdicts. Initially, as well as relegation, Juve officials were sentenced to watch back to back episodes of *Scotland Yard Casebook* from the 1950s starring Edgar Lustgarten, good for accentuating the importance of law enforcement but also the duller TV ever produced.

The ghost of Byron Moreno in South Korea was laid to rest, as Italian Football hung its head in shame... or did it? Probably not, as it turns out. In the 1990s, the Italian political system had started to cleanse itself, following public disenchantment with huge government debts and an endemic system of corruption known as *Tangentopoli*. The Christian Democrat party that had ruled for almost half a century disbanded, and alternating centre-left and centre-right coalitions governed the country. It was to be a new beginning and an end to corrupt government.

The new beginning delivered massive public debt and Silvio Berlusconi, a man with an impressive back catalogue of Mafia involvement, tax irregularities, falsified accounts, and bribery of the police and the judiciary... apart from that, he was as clean as a shirt washed in Persil. He would lead the government on three separate occasions. Now if the Italian people were ready to apply that kind of laissez-faire attitude to their politicians, the fallout from the *Moggiopoli* scandal was never going to leave lasting scars. Italians seem to have an innate acceptance of match fixing, something to be tolerated and then forgotten.

It was, therefore, no surprise when Italy had a barnstorming World Cup in 2006. I was in Sicily at the time, and it was fantastic to soak up the atmosphere, as the *Azzuri* got closer and closer to lifting the title again. It was the Taormina Film Festival at the time, housed in the town's wonderful Roman amphitheatre with its stunning panoramic views of the Mediterranean. Yet it could not compete with the small screen set up in the Town Square for the locals to watch the next World Cup encounter of the boys in blue.

The draw was kind to Italy. After a straightforward group stage, knock-out victories against Australia and Ukraine took them to a semi-final against Germany the hosts. Two late extra-time goals won it for the blues, sending them to the final in Berlin versus France. In the final, with the score at 1-1 and ten minutes left of extra-time, France were dominating play and looking the more likely winners, until Zinedine Zidane tried his hand at impersonating a barge pole on Marco Materazzi. The ref had no option other than to flash his red card. The game went to penalties. Italy won 5-3, and the *Azzuri* were World Champions for the fourth time. Italian Football stood proudly at the top of the tree, while at the same time, languishing amongst the slime and slush of the

ground occupied by the *Moggiopoli* scandal. The paradox was a perfect match for a nation whose football history had been an amalgam of brilliance and shame.

At the 2008 Euros, the team limped to the quarter-finals, where they were beaten on penalties, this time to the eventual winners, Spain. And at the World Cup of South Africa 2010, Italy had a poor tournament, finishing bottom of the weakest group that included Paraguay, Slovakia and New Zealand. However, the team responded to these disappointments by comfortably qualifying for Euro 2012, finishing unbeaten at the top of their group. And as they were doing so, their fortunes took an upturn when another *Calcio* scandal emerged... yes I know this is getting boring but not half as boring as Edgar Lustgarten, one of the few people whose blue movie name and actual name are the same. The latest affair, *Scommessopoli*, was another one involving players, managers, club officials, referees, match fixing and betting rings... the usual suspects. Perversely, this was great news for the team's prospects at the Euro 2012 finals. It was a repeat of 2006, the year they won the World Cup.

Pundits focused on the dual threats of Spain and Germany, but few predicted Italian success. They should have known better. Italy got off to a great start, drawing with the Spanish, and although there were a few squeaky bum moments, they made it to the quarter-finals to meet England, the English celebrating the fact that Italy was not Spain. However, as Roy Hodgson's men gave Italy an abject lesson in playing football, Prandelli's team reciprocated with an object lesson, the Pirlo way. The Juventus midfielder was as majestic as his opponents were pitiful. Suddenly, the media were taking Italy seriously, but in their path to the final stood the Germans. 'Oh well, better luck next time' was the consensus before Italy took to the field to destroy the dreams of the Deutschland boys with a comfortable 2-0 victory. Against the odds and all expectations, the *Azzurri* were in the final, in a repeat of their opening game of the tournament against Spain.

Scommessopoli had emerged at a time when the Italian team was not at its best, positioned lower in the FIFA rankings than normal. It was 2006 all over again. That had to make them favourites to win the final, didn't it? In the end, history failed to repeat itself. Italy met Spain on the wrong day. The Spanish were irresistible; already 2-0 up when Motta pulled a hamstring and reduced the Italians to ten men. The final score was 4-0, a simple case of beaten on the day by the much better side. But the footballing nation of Italy has genuine pedigree, and it won't be long before they win another championship.

You don't agree?

Fancy a bet?

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND



World Cup Appearances: 3

World Cup Best: Quarter-final - 1990

Euros Appearances: 2

Euros Best: Round 1 - 1988, 2012

SEPARATE TABLES

The Republic of Ireland team ought to be shit. Of all the finalists in Euro 2012, their domestic league is ranked the lowest in the UEFA coefficient calculation, beaten by such non-qualifying luminaries as Belarus, Slovakia, Georgia, Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina... essentially those countries that give each other 'douze points' at the Eurovision Song Contest, proving that the Irish League is the soccer equivalent of Jedward. Any Irish team managing to progress to the third qualifying round of the Champions League is judged to be a miracle on par with the Knock Shrine or the face of Jesus on the ketchup bottle top discovered by a five year old boy from Munster called Seamus. By any measure, the League of Ireland Premier Division is weaker than the piss of a binge drinker after his twentieth pint of Carlsberg Special.

One of the problems for Ireland is that their national sport is not football. The game favoured by the majority in the Emerald Isle is hurling, which involves the use of a 'hurley' to bash a little ball around... incidentally, this has nothing to do with Shane Warne's beau, Liz, taking time out to get revenge on Hugh Grant's private parts for his lewd behaviour with Gordon Brown, or was it Divine? And that is a forename, not an adjective. The hurley in this sporting context is a wooden stick shaped like an axe and held by players who try to score points by launching the ball over Rugby posts or get even more points by hitting the back of the net in a football type goal. It is surprising that, for such a tough game, teams wear no protection other than a plastic colander on their heads, but this comes in handy at half-time if anyone in the team wants to rustle up some pasta as a quick snack.

Given that hurling is a game with an incredibly long history, about three thousand years all told, it is little wonder that the new boy called football had to learn to play second fiddle to its Gaelic elder. The Republic of Ireland national soccer team duly accepted this natural order and deferentially took its place in line... or it did until Jack Charlton came along.

The origins of the Republic of Ireland's football team date back to the 1920s when the partition of the country took place. The Irish Football Association correspondingly split into two, with the Republic team taking on the name of the Irish Free State, entering the 1924 Olympics and 1934 World Cup. However, such were the politics at the time that this led to the odd situation where both Ireland IFA (Northern) and Ireland FAI (Republic) selected their squad members from the whole of the country. Even more bizarrely, some players like Con Martin represented both teams at the same time, even in the same tournament, as happened in the 1950 World Cup qualifiers.

They do not make them like Con any more. You will be hard pressed to find a more versatile player. In representing the national teams and clubs such as Leeds United and Aston Villa, he played centre forward, centre half, right back, left back, left half, inside forward, and for a season at Villa Park, he was goalkeeper. He also played Gaelic football for Dublin and was probably a tiddlywinks champion as well.

By 1950, FIFA had had enough of anomalies like Con, and they had a point. If the two Irish teams were drawn in the same pool, it created the possibility of Con scoring a goal and then celebrating the moment by berating the right back for schoolboy defending. Thereafter, the national football teams were renamed Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Con would have to choose between one and the other. He chose the Republic and probably thought he had made the wrong choice given the lack of success that followed, though he ought not to have been too hard on himself. Deciding between the two was like expressing a preference for eating horseshit or donkey dung.

The Republic failed to qualify for the 1954 World Cup, out gunned by France, and then England did the same to them in 1958. When UEFA introduced the European Nations Cup in 1960, the FAI clearly thought this was their chance to get the Irish boys on to the big stage. Not all European countries were keen and so the tournament was limited to the seventeen who expressed a wish to participate. This meant there had to be one pre-qualifying game to get the field down to the magic number of sixteen... yes I know the magic number is normally three, but hey this was the start of the free and easy 60s so chill man. With none of the luck of the Irish, the draw paired the Republic of Ireland with Czechoslovakia, a strong side who would reach a World Cup final within the

next two years. Predictably, the Irish lost. They had yet to break their major tournament finals duck.

A miserable '62 World Cup qualifying campaign followed, the team losing all its games, but then in 1964, there was a change in their fortunes, as they reached the quarter-finals of the European Championships. Presumably, this must have been the first year that hordes of good natured, pissed supporters with red hair, freckles and green scarves invaded the host nation to cheer on their team, produce record takings for the local beer sellers, and win the best-behaved fans in the finals. Unfortunately not... it was only when the last four teams remained that UEFA brought the teams together for the 'finals'.

BIG JACK & THE PLASTIC PADDIES

After more failure for the '66' World Cup in England and the '68 Euros, the FAI made the strategic decision to appoint their first manager to have total control over the selection of players. His name was Mick Meagan, and during his time in charge, he acquired a shocking record... and I do not mean that he went to his local music shop and bought 'Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep'. His Republic of Ireland team failed to win any of the twelve games with Mick at the helm and within two years, he had gone. His replacement did little better and the FAI even appointed a caretaker for one game, a guy called Sean Thomas, who I assume took time off from his janitor duties at the local school to oversee a 1-1 draw with Norway.

However, when the FAI appointed the Leeds midfielder, Johnny Giles as the new player-coach, things started to look up, not least because the Irish had produced a genuine class player in midfielder Liam Brady. This improving Irish team was unfortunate to be drawn against a strong Soviet Union side in the 1974 World Cup and 1976 European Championship qualifiers, and finished second to them in both campaigns. After failing to reach the '78 World Cup finals in Argentina, and at the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland, the draw for the 1980 Euros paired the two Irish teams together in the same group. Old Con Martin must have been struggling to know which team to support. For the Republic, the campaign ended in humiliation, finishing third behind England and Northern Ireland. Johnny Giles hung up his boots and his suit for the national team. Following further aimless achievement in the 1980s, someone in the FAI suddenly asked the question, 'What about Big Jack?'... the tea lady serving biscuits and PG Tips at the time answered 'Isn't that Sheila's fella, the male stripper with the giant snake?'

Big Jack, so called because his forename was Jack, and he was as tall as a giraffe, was an England legend, having been part of the World Cup winning side

of 1966. Whereas Bobby Moore, Alan Ball and Martin Peters had brought finesse and refinement to the team, Jack brought the brawn and the clod hopping via an uncompromising approach predicated on stopping the opposition scoring at all costs. He was the nightclub bouncer of the squad. If he had been a brand amongst the Christian Diors and Martini Rossos of his teammates, he would have been Ronseal.

Jack enjoyed success as a club player with the equally uncompromising Leeds United of the 1960s and early 1970s and took that success into management, most notably at Middlesboro. In 1985, the Football Association of Ireland appointed him to manage the Republic's national football team. Jack had been an obvious choice for the job, despite his lineage being pure Geordie and about as Irish as a suntan. The big man was a lover of fly-fishing, and he liked to do this in Ireland more than anywhere else. This made him effectively Irish, didn't it?

The first thing he did as manager of the 'Boys in Green' was to exploit FIFA Article 18 of the governing body's constitution. This stated that 'any person who is a naturalised citizen of a country by virtue of that country's laws shall be eligible to play for a national or representative team of that country'. Irish citizenship rules have always been more relaxed than most due to its history of mass emigration. This effectively meant that if you were (say) Dutch born and bred but you owned an Irish Setter, you were in. Jack therefore raided the other home nations in search of players with an Irish granny or, at the very least, a picture of a leprechaun on their bedroom wall and recruited a large number of 'plastic paddies'. Players such as the free scoring John Aldridge and wily midfielder, Ray Houghton, joined the squad as part of this revolution. The impact was immediate, because in 1988, the Republic qualified for their first major tournament at the European Championships.

In a twist of fate so beloved of football commentators and scribes, their first game in Germany '88 was against the old enemy and Jack's spiritual home, England. The transformation courtesy of stretching Article 18 like the elastic on Dennis the Menace's catapult was complete by the time of the contest, with only three Irish born players in the starting eleven. The Republic won the game 1-0, a cake and eat it result, with the joy of victory and the humiliation of their long-standing adversary from across the Irish Sea. Although knocked out in the group stages, they very nearly progressed to the quarter-finals at the expense of the eventual winners Holland, beaten by a goal in the last ten minutes of their encounter.

The improvement sustained itself when the team qualified for the Italia '90 World Cup and, remarkably, they reached the quarter-finals, where they lost out to the hosts by a narrow 1-0 score line. It was 'remarkable' in the sense they

failed to win a single game in Italy. The team drew each of its group matches before beating Romania on penalties, thanks to the heroics of the politically incorrect goalkeeper, Packie Bonner, and the winning penalty taker, David O'Leary, presumably more relaxed than most thanks to some good shit provided by his dad, Timothy. In five short years, Big Jack had taken Ireland from nowhere to the quarter-finals of the biggest football tournament on the planet, and half a million Dubliners acknowledged this fact, welcoming back their green-shirted footballing heroes on the team bus that toured the streets of the capital.

EFFING & JEFFING

Jack did not rest on his laurels, as he continued to scour other countries for talented players with some linkage back to Irish citizenship, even if this was as tenuous as favourite colour green, a membership card for The Pogues' fan club, or maybe a rogue ginger pube. Although the Republic just failed to qualify for Euro '92 finals, they did remain unbeaten in the qualifying rounds. However, two years later, and Jack and his boys were off to the United States of America, the home of baseball, to participate in the 1994 World Cup. The team got off to a great start by beating the finalists-in-waiting, Italy, 1-0 in their opening game and managed to get past the group stages, before exiting in the group of 16 after defeat to Holland. But USA '94 for the Republic will be best remembered for the outburst of John Aldridge directed towards a fourth official holding a numbered paddle like the poor man's Len Goodman in the group game against Mexico.

The striker had to wait over six minutes to enter the field of play as a substitute, long after the replaced Tommy Coyne had left the pitch. You can find the actual language used by Aldo on YouTube, but to give you an idea, it went something like, 'I say old chap, you are taking rather a long time with this change, yer f***ing tw*t'. Big Jack was later nominated for best supporting role in the 'abusive tirade' category at that year's Sepp Blatter awards... at least, I think he did. Within a few minutes of finally getting on, Aldridge scored a vital goal that ultimately helped the Irish get to the knock-out phase.

After narrowly missing out on qualification for Euro 96, Jack retired to be replaced by the Barnsley chopper, Mick McCarthy, a man so dour, the Samaritans were normally put on standby outside the Irish dressing room to deal with an any negative, emotional fallout from one of Mick' inspirational half-time team talks. Despite continuing the 'Plastic Paddy' strategy, Mick was not able to repeat Jack Charlton's success and the Republic began to descend the FIFA ratings like a rat down a drainpipe. However, in 2002, there was a reprieve for Mick, when his side qualified for the Japan/South Korea World Cup, achieved in

the most testing of conditions with a semi-final play-off game against Iran. The Irish won the first leg at home 2-0, and in the return match in Tehran, managed to survive exposure to weapons of mass destruction and 100,000 chants of 'Death to the Western Imperialist Guinness Drinking Pig', thereby limiting the Ayatollah's men to a solitary goal and progressing to Japan.

Before anyone kicked a ball in the finals, the Ireland camp was making the headlines. The frustration of captain and firebrand, Roy Keane, at what he considered the amateurish preparation of the FAI, boiled over into a stream of vitriol directed at McCarthy and his paymasters. It was fair to say that the Manchester United man was not the biggest fan of Big Mick, calling the manager a 'f***ing w*nker'... though personally, I do not see fishing winker as that offensive, but there you go. He also suggested he 'stick the World Cup up his arse' and then 'up his bollocks'. Mick the blunt Yorkshire man - with a liking for potatoes, his own passport to Article 18 - interpreted the challenge literally. After a public falling out, which ended with Keane sent home in disgrace, the mono-toned manager obtained a replica of the World Cup Trophy and injured himself as he thrust the cup in places it ought not to be thrust. In spite of this spat, Ireland had another successful tournament, finishing second in their group to progress to the last sixteen, where they narrowly lost out to Spain on penalties.

After 2002, it was downhill for the Republic's football team, pre-empting what was going to happen to the country itself from 2007, as the Celtic Tiger lost the lustrous sheen of its coat and turned into a moth-eared stray moggy. The Irish failed to qualify for subsequent finals, though came very close in 2010, just missing a place on the plane to South Africa due to the dexterity of the world's greatest exponent of handball, Thierry Henry.

However, the Emerald Isle houses a resolute populous, and so the people and players picked themselves up and got on with the next challenge. The disappointment was soon forgotten when Ireland made it to Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine under the guidance of experienced Italian old hand, Giovanni Trapattoni, paid an annual salary equivalent to fifty per cent of the country's GDP. It was a reminder that the Republic of Ireland was not a shit team... that is, until they played in the finals.

Specialising in conceding a goal quicker than your granddad can finish his early morning piss, the Irish lost their first match 3-1 to Croatia. Next up was Spain, the current World and European Champions, in a game that was the most one sided thing since my mum's toast from the 1960s... she only toasted one side of the white processed bread, calling it 'French', an insult to the home of gastronomy. The Spaniards won the game 4-0 in a breathtaking display of possession football, outclassed in the way my mother would be in the kitchens of

Maxim's de Paris. They were the first team eliminated, and so only played the last game against Italy for pride. A 2-0 defeat, finishing with ten men, meant it was the wooden spoon for the boys in green and a depressing end for their visiting fans in Poznan... well, not quite.

Say what you like about them, but there cannot be a nation on earth as indefatigable as the Irish. For the last twenty minutes of the Italy encounter, thousands of ROI fans sang their hearts out in a rendition of 'The Fields of Athenry'. Obviously, being pissed was a contributory factor and the song would not be one of my desert island choices, but it was still a fantastic happening to observe.

The FAI premier league is now on the way down after a false dawn of progress. Financed by a collection of credit cards, clubs have experienced real financial difficulties, with a few demoted to lower divisions. This is not really a surprise when you see that the average attendance for an Irish Premier League game is about 1650 spectators, a couple of stray cats and a few cockroaches by the burger stall.

The Ireland national team continues to punch well above its weight, mainly thanks to Article 18 and the liberal definition of Irish citizenship. While it is difficult to imagine that the team will ever hit the dizzy heights of success under Jack Charlton, achieving a FIFA ranking of six, maybe they do have a wildcard up their sleeve. In a twist of irony, Big Jack is now officially Irish, having been granted the very rare honorary Irish citizenship by the government, and so is available for selection under FIFA's Article 18, though the fly-fishing might also get him in.

Come on Jack, you can still do it... well you did used to play like a pensioner.

CROATIA



World Cup Appearances: 3

World Cup Best: Semi-final - 1998

Euros Appearances: 5

Euros Best: Quarter-final - 1996, 2008

A CHEQUERED BEGINNING

It should not come as a surprise to anyone watching Croatia that it became an independent football nation in the early 1990s, which has nothing to do with an assumed knowledge of recent Balkan history and everything to do with the team's shirt. A red and white chequered monstrosity based on the newly created flag, it might have looked the part in an era when teen pop dominated the music charts and designers behaved like demented children, adopting multi-colours and random shapes and patterns as their norm, but today, it looks like a chess board with tonsillitis.

Sartorially, the Croatians may have been on a loser from the start, but its football team took off like the Challenger space rocket. Entering the FIFA rankings at one hundred and twenty five in 1993, a mere five years later, the team was an astonishing number three. This appeared to be something like Terry from East 17, the one who looked liked a plasterer, sang like a plasterer, and danced like a plasterer, leaving the band to go and outsell every artist on the planet other than Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston. However, Croatian football heritage goes back a long way, and so to the seasoned observer, this was less of a surprise.

At the time of the first ever World Cup in 1930, when goalkeepers dressed and played like Buster Keaton, Croatia was part of Yugoslavia, and even though the Yugoslavs competed in the finals and finished fourth, the team comprised only Serbs. The Croatian players refused to take part, because their Football Association had transferred their headquarters from Zagreb to Belgrade. This clearly weakened the depth of the squad. The point is evidenced by surviving film footage and photographs of the games that show the first choice eleven with a twelfth man who is about four foot tall, wearing the clothes of a Cossack, and a fez on his head like Tommy Cooper... yes, you might think he's a mascot, but I think you'd be wrong.

Croatia existed as a separate Fascist state for a brief time during the Second World War, and a football team duly played a small number of friendlies, but at the end of the hostilities in 1945, the country became part of Yugoslavia again in the new Communist Republic and ceased to have its own football identity. For almost fifty years, the Yugoslav team played in many World Cups, European Championships and Olympic Games. In the space of two years in the early 1960s, they won the gold medal in the Rome Olympics, finished runners-up in the European Championships and came fourth again at the World Cup. They were one of the best teams in the world, and Croatian players were a major part in this success.

However, when Communism started to implode, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the escalating production of the world's shittiest cars including the Yugoslavian Yugo, Croatia moved to declare independence in 1991. The football authorities followed suit, and within two years, FIFA had recognised the Croatian Football Federation. The chequered shirts were in business.

GOLDEN BOOTS AND GOLDEN BALLS

When Yugoslavia had won the U20 World Youth Championship back in 1987, a fair number of the squad was Croatian. These same young players formed the nucleus of Croatia in the 1990s. A combination of their technical gifts and team ethic created against the backdrop of military conflict with Balkan neighbours meant that Croatia hit the ground running and qualified for Euro 96 as top of their group, beating Italy on goal difference. In the tournament itself, they reached the quarter-finals, losing 2-0 to Germany. The Germans went on to lift the trophy.

The World Cup of 1998 proved to be their finest hour. In the qualifying stages, Denmark, helped by the talents of the Laudrup brothers, pipped them to first place in the table, but victory in the play-offs against Ukraine saw them make it to France. At the finals, they came second in their group behind Argentina and met Romania in the group of 16, which they won 1-0. In the quarter-finals, they exacted revenge over Germany by beating them 3-0, and in the semi-final, they were less than forty-five minutes away from the final when they led France by a Davor Šuker goal. But two goals from France's secret weapon, Lilian Thuram - you might not remember Lil but she was better than she sounds - changed things round, and the hosts were able to go on to the final where they were ultimately crowned World Champions. Croatia beat the Netherlands in the third place play-off and Golden Balls Šuker picked up the Golden Boot... which he may well now have melted down to craft his own line of traditional Croat jewellery, available on all good market stalls in the rural Balkans.

After the giddy heights of France, there was somewhat of a decline in the fortunes of the *Vatreni*. Croatian coach, Miroslav Blažević, knew the writing was on the wall for his team as many of the golden generation had retired from international football, and he did likewise. Mirko Jozić took on the team and in a group tighter than my wedding suit - 28" waist trousers that lifted and separated - Croatia could only finish third behind the Republic of Ireland and, their most political of opponents, Yugoslavia, who topped the group.

Things improved with the qualifying campaign for the 2002 World Cup. The team remained unbeaten and won the group, ahead of Belgium and Scotland. In Japan, despite a win against Italy, losses to Mexico and Ecuador saw them

eliminated. Jozić left, replaced by Otto Barić, but the decline continued. An unconvincing qualifying campaign for the 2004 Euros ended with a play-off victory over Slovenia. However, in Portugal, Croatia again disappointed, eliminated in the group stage. The arrival of Zlatko Kranjčar for the 2006 World Cup changed the outlook for the better. In a strong qualifying phase, they finished top of Group 8 without losing a game. Unfortunately, Kranjčar could not carry this form through to the finals and his team went out in the group stage.

The last game in Germany '06 between Croatia and Australia is now infamous for the one and only time a player has received three yellow cards on the field of play. Graham Poll, the English referee, was the culprit, overdoing the cautions awarded against left back, Josip Simunic. The hapless official explained later in his autobiography that he had attributed the second booking to the number three, because the Croat sounded as Aussie as Sir Les Patterson. Call me an old stick in the mud, but whilst Simunic was born down under, I do think Mr Poll ought to have used his eyes to identify the perpetrator rather than play a game of Blind Man's Bluff.

It was around this time that trouble started to follow the team due to the misbehaviour of some of their fans. There were predictable issues such as racism, but also an excessive use of flares. Those of you with a leaning towards fashion may be visualising a sea of Croatian scarves, chequered shirts, and split-knee loons, perhaps causing havoc as fellow spectators tripped over flares so wide, the wearer had seemingly sown two yacht sails to form his trews. However, these are the wrong trousers; in fact, they are not trousers at all. These flares are the hand-held pyrotechnics that make the terraces seem like Bonfire Night.

In case you get the wrong impression from such crowd disturbance stories, I want to defend the Croatian people. Apart from perhaps the Irish and those nice guards in Guantanamo Bay - or was that in a film I saw produced by the Pentagon and directed by Donald Rumsfeld? - I do not think I have ever met such welcoming people. When holidaying there recently, the taxi driver on a fixed fee who took us from Dubrovnik Airport to our hotel stopped at a scenic spot for us to take photographs of the Old Town and then refused to take a tip. After my weedy 'Are you sure?' was drowned out by wife's assertive 'No, we insist,' he took it, but reluctantly. Nothing was too much trouble for our hosts all the time we there, and I came away so impressed by them as a nation. They are a good lot, those Croatians and I will not have a bad word said against them... well not many.

[I'M A ROCK N' ROLL STAR](#)

After the 2006 World Cup, the Croatian Football Federation put the old maxim 'You are only as good as your last game' into practice. Kranjčar was out, and his replacement was one of the playing heroes from France '98, Slaven Bilić, an appointment that signalled a sustained change in the fortunes of the football team.

For the Euro 2008 qualifying stages, Croatia was in the same group as England, managed by Steve McLaren. Bilić was no ordinary coach. He was fluent in four languages, had a degree in law, and played guitar in a rock group called Rawband who had a number one hit in Croatia with '*Vatreno Ludilo*', translated as Fiery Madness... presumably a song warning about the futility of arson. In contrast, Steve's CV could only boast a cycling proficiency test certificate. Their respective playing careers also provided a stark comparison. Bilić played at the highest level, in the Premiership, the *Bundesliga*, and was a star of France'98, where he played in the World Cup semi-final. His English counterpart played for Hull, Bristol City and Oxford. In hindsight, it is easy to see why the guitar wielding coach outwitted his opponent with the umbrella, leading his side to top of the group and to a double over the pitiful boys from Blighty.

In the Austrian finals, Slaven's team came flying out of the blocks, winning all group games including victories over Germany and the hosts. In the last minute of extra-time of the quarter-final against Turkey, Ivan Klasnić scored a goal that seemed to have put the Croats through to the semis. However, with the last kick of the game, the Turks equalised to take the game to a penalty shoot-out. Croatian hearts failed to recover from the late late blow and the team missed three of its four penalties to lose.

Croatia had a decent qualifying campaign for South Africa '10 but failed to make it after two defeats to England. But the good times returned in the 2012 Euros campaign when they exacted revenge over Turkey by winning a play-off tie 3-0 on aggregate, all the goals scored in Istanbul. And in Ukraine and Poland, they were unlucky not to reach the quarter-finals, after finishing on four points following a victory over Ireland and a draw against Italy. Bilić resigned to take up a career in club management, but he and his team left with heads held high.

At the time of writing, Croatia are number eight in FIFA's World Rankings, quite an achievement for a country with a population of just over four million, and one that is still awaiting entry to the European Union. As part of the former Yugoslavia and more recently as an independent nation, they have a rich football tradition and a heritage of which they are justifiably proud. As for the red and white chequered shirt, however, it is time for heads to hang in shame.

Group D

UKRAINE



World Cup Appearances: 1

World Cup Best: Quarter-final - 2006

Euros Appearances: 1

Euros Best: Round 1 - 2012

THE BRIDESMAID

The Ukraine football team, more than any of the other former Soviet Republics, received a bad deal after gaining independence. The history of the USSR team was not exactly littered with players from the likes of Belarus, Latvia or Moldova. There was even less representation from the five 'Stans'... 'Laurel, Holloway, Unwin, Baxter and, to a much lesser extent, Boardman?' I, of course, refer to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In contrast, the Ukraine was more often than not the main provider of members for the Soviet squad. In the last throw of the dice for the CCCP boys, when they almost got a double six in the 1988 Euros, eight of the eleven starting players in the final were Ukrainian. Yet FIFA treated Russia as the continuum of the previous USSR registration, inheriting the ranking history that had been earned as much by the 'Yellow Blues' as anyone else.

When allocated their rank in 1993, FIFA placed Ukraine at 132, little wonder that the team struggled to qualify for major tournaments, disadvantaged by their seed... the story of my life. It led to a reputation as the 'nearly men' of tournament football... I was known as a bit of a 'nearly man' when I played regular football, in that I nearly hit the corner flag every time I took a shot at goal. But the tag attached itself to the Ukrainians because of the number of major tournaments in which they finished runner-up in the qualifying group, only to lose the two-legged play-off and thereby miss the finals.

Their first competitive games as an eligible, independent country came in the qualifying stages for Euro 96, when drawn in the same group as Italy and Croatia. It was always going to be a daunting task for them to get to the finals

ahead of these teams, and this proved to be the case. For France '98, there was another tough draw, this time matched with Germany and Portugal. To their credit, Ukraine managed to finish second, behind Germany, to set up a play off encounter with Croatia, but they lost this 3-1 on aggregate.

It was the same old story for Euro 2000. Runners up in the group table, followed by defeat in the play-off, this time losing to Slovenia. Nonetheless, it had been a very satisfying campaign for Ukrainians. The draw paired Ukraine and Russia in the same group, their old masters expected to come out on top. Kiev played host to the first game between the pair, the encounter attracting 82,000 fans. And by the end of the game, the home supporters were celebrating a famous 3-2 victory over the Russians. In the return game in Moscow, with fifteen minutes to go, Russia scored to take the lead. Ukraine needed to find an equaliser. If they did, they would finish second and qualify. The crowd had already started whistling - I think Roger Whittaker must have still been massive at this time - when, with only three minutes left on the clock, Andriy Shevchenko, a prodigious talent, scored for the Ukrainians. It was too late for the Russian players to respond, and they were out of the European Championships. While the same fate would apply to Ukraine after the play-off, the sense of satisfaction from eliminating the Russians on their home soil left a very pleasing taste indeed. Vladimir Putin must have choked on his cornflakes and vodka.

OLEG-MANIA

Ukraine had developed into a talented football side and soon climbed the FIFA rankings. For the 2002 Japan World Cup qualifiers, they lost the opening match at home to Poland, and it proved to be crucial. The nearly men did not lose another game but still finished second in the table behind Poland. It was time for another play-off and time for another defeat. Of all the teams to face in this situation, the last choice of any team would be Germany. However, following England's 5-1 victory in Munich, the English went through as Group leaders, releasing the wounded Germans to the play-offs. The 'f' word in Ukrainian is 'ebat', and there would have been an awful lot of 'ebatting' on hearing the draw. They lost the tie 5-2 on aggregate, Germany helped by a couple of Ballacks... that's the footballing insider's term for two goals by Michael Ballack.

Guess what happened in the qualifiers for Euro 2004? Second in the group and knocked out in the play-offs? Well, no actually. They got tonked, well beaten by Spain and surprise table toppers, Greece, who went on to win the overall tournament. It was a retrograde step and the Football Federation resisted the temptation to recruit a foreign manager and plumped for another Ukrainian, Oleg Blokhin. With a name like that, he ought to have been a stopper in defence,

ready, willing and able to mobilise a right leg or a left leg to get in a block. However, he was actually a highly successful striker for Dynamo Kiev and the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s, winning the *Ballon D'Or* of 1975, ahead of a couple of lads you might remember, Franz Beckenbauer and Johann Cruyff, second and third respectively. The fans and the press did not greet Blokhin with universal acclaim. His coaching career had never been anywhere near as distinguished as his playing days. Yet Oleg defied his critics. In a group that contained Turkey, Greece and Denmark, Ukraine distinguished themselves by becoming the first team to qualify for the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany. The nearly men had made it.

The Yellow-Blues had a favourable draw with Tunisia and Saudi Arabia both in the same group. After a bit of a pasting at the hands of Spain in the opening game, losing 4-0, they won their other two games to move to the knock-out stages. In the group of 16 game, they met Switzerland in a match that went to penalties. The Swiss had evidently analysed the penalty-taking prowess of England, with constant re-runs of Gareth Southgate's Euro 96 miss, following this up with a careful study of the Diana Ross spot kick from the opening ceremony of USA '94. The boys from the land of the cuckoo clock proceeded to miss three penalties in a row to put Ukraine into the quarter-final. The dream ended there with a 3-0 defeat to champions elect, Italy, but it had been a great achievement.

A POLITICAL FOOTBALL

The team that had entered the FIFA rankings at one hundred and thirty two was now at number eleven. Putin was not amused. However, Vlad's day would have brightened on recalling the Euro 2008 qualifying draw, made six months before the Germany World Cup. Ukraine had the misfortune to be in the same group as France and Italy with only two places up for grabs. The thought seemed to demoralise them, as they went on to finish only fourth in the table, beaten to third place by Scotland. This was all too much for the authorities back in Kiev who gave Oleg Blokhin the boot. Normal service was resumed for the nearly men in the 2010 World Cup qualifiers. It was another tricky draw with England and Croatia amongst the teams to play, and Ukraine managed to finish second in the group with only one defeat, away to England. In the play-offs, paired with Greece, that's right, they lost the tie on aggregate.

Fortunately, there was no lasting damage caused by this latest setback. In 2007, UEFA awarded the hosting of the 2012 Euros to the joint bidders, Poland and Ukraine, so qualification was assured... or was it? As early as 2008, Michel Platini issued a warning to the Ukrainian organizers to accelerate their

preparations for the finals, with a clear inference that UEFA would move games to another country if progress lagged. The following year, Platini suggested that most of the games could take place in Poland, and in 2010, there was even talk of Germany or Hungary taking the place of Ukraine. The problem for the host country was the political instability, with a backdrop of election irregularities, tetrachlorodibenzodioxin poisoning, assassination attempts, imprisonments, hunger strikes, all involving presidents and prime ministers. Then came terrorist acts and security concerns, serious enough for UEFA to put Spain on standby to step in as hosts. Yet, despite all these negatives, Ukraine held on to host the finals, thereby ensuring automatic qualification.

In an attempt to turn the clock back, albeit only about six years, the Football Federation of Ukraine had re-appointed Oleg Blokhin to the role of head coach in 2011, a decision that looked as good as my son's idea to invest in an Icelandic bank the day before it went bust. Ukraine went on a run of four consecutive defeats in friendlies against France, Sweden, Uruguay and the Czech Republic. However, Oleg kept his cool and their form going into the Euros was on an upward spiral, with four wins and one draw, the latter a 3-3 with Germany, in which the Germans had to come from 3-1 down.

As a co-host of the tournament, Ukraine was a great success. As a participating team, less so. They started well with a memorable victory over Sweden courtesy of two goals from the talismanic Shevchenko, now in the twilight of his career. But defeats to France and England meant they were eliminated, and the hopes of the Ukrainian nation deflated like a crinkled balloon punctured by a dog's jaw.

One man was happy. Vladimir Putin wore a smug grin on his face wider than the Urals... not that you could tell, now that he is going for the Joan Rivers' natural look.

SWEDEN



World Cup Appearances: 11
World Cup Best: Runners Up - 1958

Euros Appearances: 5
Euros Best: Semi-final - 1992

SPLASH MOUNTAIN

In writing this book, I have consciously tried to avoid national stereotypes. It would have been too easy to say something like, 'When playing Germany, the English substitutes have to stand up because the Germans arrive early to put towels over the seats on the bench'. Likewise, to invoke the cliché of the Swedish as boring would have been lazy... or maybe not.

The research for the Sweden national team initially unearthed very little of any distinction. They were finalists in 1958 when hosts, which is the nearest to any kind of glory. Sweden has a good record in the history of international football, not brilliant, but not awful. There have been no bribery scandals, self-destructing star players or narrow-minded, parochial federations, perhaps proving the point that stereotypes are based on fact. However, scratch beneath the surface and there are a few points of interest. Therefore, let us take a journey, perhaps not a roller coaster, more of a Sunday afternoon spin in a Volvo, as we look at Swedish Football. We will take in the sights of Hitler on the right wing, Cuban and Hungarian Folk Dancing at the '38 World Cup, Garrincha pre-dating Disney with his own version of 'Splash Mountain', the impact of Abba's wardrobe on my puberty and dress sense, a champion pie-eater, and a dream World Cup result for the spread-better. See what I mean, boring.

The *Svenska* nation must have thought that international football was a piece of piss after their first ever game in 1908 against Denmark, which they won 11-3. However, five games later, and five defeats later, including a 12-1 loss to Great Britain at the Olympics, things had been brought back down to earth. Nonetheless, the Swedes developed into an effective unit and were good enough to win an Olympic bronze medal in 1924 and to qualify and play in the World Cups of 1934 and 1938.

The *Blagult* reached the semis in the latter thanks mainly to Adolf Hitler... just to clarify the point; they did not employ the German Chancellor on the right wing as a dribbling wizard. It was more practical than that. Hitler had engineered the transfer of Austria under the rule of the Third Reich, and FIFA responded by removing the Austrians from the '38 World Cup. This enabled Sweden to go straight to the quarter-finals, where they met a team making its only ever appearance in the finals, Cuba, only playing because all the decent South American sides had boycotted the finals for being held in Europe again. The Swedes won 8-0; the Cubans unable to defend for toffee, but boy did those boys know how to dance the Rumba. Unfortunately, Sweden then lost the semi-final

to Hungary 5-1, underestimating the footballing prowess of the Magyars, having assumed their outfield players would concentrate on their traditional folk dancing steps.

After winning the Olympic Gold in London 1948, the Scandinavians headed to Brazil for the 1950 World Cup. This was the only time in FIFA history that there was not a final, as the winner was to be the team that topped the final group of four. Sweden was in the mix, but their hopes took a hit when Brazil hammered them 7-1 in front 138,000 partisan fans. They then lost 3-2 to the eventual winners, Uruguay. Nonetheless, the amateur Swedes had fared well to finish third in the tournament.

The team failed to qualify for the 1954 World Cup, but there were no such problems four years later, because Sweden was the host. The pragmatic football association of Sweden, *Svenska Fotbollförbundet*, took the step to allow professionals to play for the national team, heightening the expectations of the fans. And but for a seventeen year old making his debut on the international stage, who went by the name of Pele, they might have won.

The Swedes emerged from the group stage that included the mighty Magyars from Hungary, and then beat USSR and Germany, the reigning world champions, to reach the final. Despite taking an early lead against the Brazilians, the flair and brilliance of the South Americans won the day, and Brazil won 5-2, which included two Pele goals and a number of set ups from the greatest dribbler of all - yes, even better than Hitler - the prolific Garrincha. The winger enjoyed his time in Sweden so much, that he came back the following year on a club tour with his Botafogo club side and impregnated at least one of the local young Swedish women... this is where the prolific tag was truly earned, as it is rumoured that he went on to father thirty six children in total. Clearly, there was another form of dribbling, let us call it a biological dribble, over which he had less control.

WHO ATE ALL THE PIES?

Garrincha certainly capitalised on the '58 World Cup but the same cannot be said about Sweden, as they subsequently failed to qualify for any of the World Cups or European Championships in the 1960s. However, they fared much better in the 1970s, the decade when ABBA exploded on to the music scene with Bjorn, Benny, Agnetha, Frida, and Owe. Not many of you will have heard of Owe Sandstrom, but I have always liked to give credit to the man I consider to be the fifth member of Abba. This was the designer of the girls' outfits and I hold him dear for two reasons. He aided my journey through puberty and taught me there was someone with a fashion sense worse than me.

Sweden qualified for each of the World Cup Finals in 1970, 1974 and 1978, fortunately not wearing any of Owe's creations - I dread to think of the national first XI playing in all-in-one yellow and blue Lycra, which would have been his inkling. In 1974, just a month after Abba had won the Eurovision with 'Waterloo', the Swedes finished a very worthy fifth, the only team to hold the great Netherlands team to a draw before their final loss to West Germany. In Argentina '78, the Swedes hit the ground running with a 1-1 draw against Brazil but lost their next two games and had to head home.

Before the end of the decade, club side Malmo FF was trailblazing Swedish football by making the final of the European Cup, losing out 1-0 to Nottingham Forest and a Trevor Francis goal. What price a repeat of that final in our lifetime? I guess we are more likely to see Keith Harris & Orville marrying in a civil partnership.

With the onset of the 1980s, Abba came undone through divorce and the ambitions of Benny and Bjorn to write a bit of a shit musical about a board game - for those who are not fans of musical theatre it was *Chess* and not *Hungry Hippos*. Co-incidence or otherwise, the fortunes of the Swedish football team nosedived in parallel to the demise of the Fab Five - I told you I would not forget Owe - as they failed to qualify for any of the World Cups or European Championships in the 1980s. However, it was not all bad for the Swedes. A young Sven Goran Eriksson took his IFK Goteborg side to a UEFA Cup triumph in 1982, a feat repeated five years' later in 1987.

The 1990s started well for 'The Blue-Yellow', qualifying for Italia '90, but they went out in the group stage, losing each game by the same score line of 2-1. Then in 1992, thirty-two years after their introduction, Sweden took part in their first European Championships. Mind you, they were the hosts, and so it was hardly an achievement to celebrate with klaxons and horns. Yet the championship did signal the start of a purple patch for the national team, as Sweden reached the semi-finals, narrowly losing 3-2 to the newly unified Germany.

This momentum carried into the qualification stage for USA '94, finishing top of their group, and in the finals, they made it to the knock-out stages. In the group of 16 game, they beat Saudi Arabia, the Saudis clearly impeded by a few of their lads kneeling on their prayer mats in the second half. In the quarter-finals, the Swedes overcame Hagi's Romania on penalties, before losing out 1-0 to favourites Brazil in the semis, the Brazilians only scoring after Sweden had been reduced to ten men. Sweden finished as top scorers with fifteen goals and they ended number two in the FIFA world rankings. It had been a great competition for the Swedes and for one in particular, Tomas Brodin.

Two years' earlier in the Euros of 1992, Brolin had been the nemesis of the English team, scoring a goal that effectively eliminated Graham Taylor's side. A squat forward, in a similar mould to Gerd Muller, he had an excellent USA '94, scoring vital goals and successfully assuming penalty-taking responsibilities. FIFA were impressed, because he was the one Swede to be included in the Tournament's All Star XI. Brolin was soon picked up by Premiership team, Leeds United for £4.5m and is still considered today to be one of the worst ever pieces of transfer business. Three years after signing for Leeds, having only played a handful of games, he retired from football. If Howard Wilkinson had found a copy of the Swedish equivalent of Shoot magazine from about 1995, he might have had second thoughts.

PLAYER: Tomas Brolin

AGE: 25

TEAM: Parma

LIKES: Playing Football, Eating Pies

DISLIKES: No Pies in the Pantry

BEING BORING

The revival of the national team in the early 90s had occurred at a time when Swedish pop was once again at the top of the charts, with Per and Maria from Roxette power popping it around the globe. Then just as the duo's star was on the wane, so the football team started to struggle, failing to make either Euro '96 or France '98. But come the 2000 Euros and 'Lordy Lordy!' the team with a shocking history of qualifying failure for European Championships had made it to the finals in Holland and Belgium. The Swedes achieved this in style, with victories in every game other than a 0-0 with England at Wembley. Furthermore, they had only conceded one goal. Unfortunately, despite the talents of Freddie Ljungberg and Henrik Larsson, the team was unable to carry this form into the finals, and they failed to progress to the knock-out phase.

The team was back at the World Cup for the 2002 finals in Japan and South Korea. In a difficult group, they finished first above England, Argentina and Nigeria. This led to a Group of 16 game against Senegal, the African team that had shocked France with a 1-0 victory in the tournament's opening game. Unfortunately for the Swedes, the Senegalese continued their impressive form with a 2-1 victory, the winner a golden goal in extra-time.

By Euro 2004, the Swedes had cracked how to qualify for UEFA's flagship competition, making it to Portugal, where they reached the quarter-finals, before losing out to the Netherlands on penalties. However, many remember the

competition for something else as regards the Swedes, and in the case of the Italians, through gritted teeth. In the final game of the group stage, a 2-2 result between Sweden and Denmark would see both Nordic countries proceed to the knock-out stages and Italy eliminated. The result was one of which the Italian fixers would be proud, a 2-2 draw. Regardless of whether there was any kind of collusion, sub-conscious or otherwise, there was an irony that Italy, with its murky match-fixing CV, had played the part of the victim, in this instance.

Sweden continued to reinforce their reputation as one of the more consistent European teams by qualifying for the Germany 2006 World Cup, eliminated in the Group of 16 by Germany, and Euro 2008, where they went out in the group phase, losing out to Spain and Russia. Although beaten to South Africa 2010 in a close group by Denmark and Portugal, they made it to Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine. The country added colour to these finals, and I am not just talking about the yellow shirts.

Their fans always travel in large numbers to away games and tournaments, and as early as the 1912 Summer Olympics, they were singing in large numbers 'Go Sweden, being in good spirits is what does the trick!'... God, don't you think the old songs are the best? In 2006, they were voted the best fans based on their numbers and good behaviour, which is measure of the maturity and self-assurance that has always pervaded Swedish society. They didn't disappoint in the 2012 Euros, unlike their team.

Sweden's squad was the oldest in the tournament and a couple of goals for Ukraine from fellow geriatric, Shevchenko, one of which deflected off Olof Mellberg's Zimmer frame, resulted in a 2-1 defeat in their first game. It was a nauseating occasion for the TV viewer. With both sets of fans sporting yellow shirts, the stadium resembled a large bowl of syrupy custard. Despite England's altruistic attempts to collapse in the second half, the Swedes lost their second game 3-2 to the English and were out. They recovered some pride with a 2-0 victory over France in their final game, but it was too little, too late.

These are tricky times for Swedish football. Their club teams are struggling to make any inroads in the major European competitions and there have been one or two unsavoury incidents with spectators using firecrackers that have led to abandoned games, hardly in keeping with the fans' normal reputation. Nonetheless, Sweden is a great example of a civilised society to which its football team is a reflection. The national team might struggle to be contenders for major titles, but it will usually be in contention. However, don't expect too many fireworks in this regard. The stereotype for being boring may have still have some foundation.

FRANCE



FIFA World Ranking: 14

World Cup Appearances: 13

World Cup Best: Winners - 1998

Euros Appearances: 8

Euros Best: Winners - 1984, 2000

JUST A MINUTE

There is no longer any place for racism in comedy. Even if you hanker for the old days when every other joke had a black guy with genitalia the size of the Eiffel Tower, you would be a pariah, and rightly so, for expressing your views. Yet comedians, even the liberal satirists, tend to vent their race spleen these days by taking the piss out of the French. It always gets a laugh and even a ripple of applause. Yet why the French? Is it too lazy to regurgitate the stereotype about the unfriendliness of the nation? Have you ever been on holiday to Welsh-speaking Gwynedd? From my own experience, a shopkeeper in Caernarfon makes the Parisian equivalent seem as jolly the Laughing Policeman on happy pills and Red Bull. So what of the French football team? Have they helped make the French more endearing or have they made matters worse? The answer is a bit of both, because for every articulate, forward-thinking, visionary such as Arsène Wenger, there is a bumbling idiot of a Raymond Domenech.

One of France's earliest matches took place in 1908, losing 17-1 to Denmark whose Sophus Nielsen scored ten of the goals. The game, above all, demonstrated the French love of dairy products. Clearly, the savvy Danes had set up a cheese stall near the halfway line with a nice selection of Camembert, Brie, Boursin and Roquefort. The French defence, completely distracted, gave free reign to the Danish forwards to hit the back of the net. This calamitous defeat would explain why Paris later celebrated failure at the 1934 World Cup with such fervour and joy.

Like Brazil, France have entered every single World Cup competition from the inaugural event in 1930, but unlike the South Americans, success has been

patchy... patchier than a dog called Patch wearing a patched up dog coat and an eye patch. *Les Tricolores* - sounding like a magician from Batley - were eliminated in the first round at Uruguay '30 and reached the quarter-final in 1938. Yet the 1934 World Cup is what stands out. France was in a qualification group of three, including Germany and the minnows of Luxembourg. The Germans beat the men from the Grand Duchy 9-1 and then France did the same, 6-1. Because two teams qualified, the French and Germans did not even bother to play each other, as their position was unassailable. The finals, held in Mussolini's Italy, saw France knocked-out in the first game by Austria, losing 3-2 after extra-time. By any measure, 1934 had not been a model of achievement for *Les Bleus*. Overcoming the bankers and farmers from Luxembourg and succumbing to the Austrians in the first round did not sound like cause for celebration. Nonetheless, four thousand fanatical Parisians greeted the team when they arrived home from Torino. I am not sure if an open top bus was involved, but it does seem a bit strange to the impartial observer. However, this team had suffered that 17-1 defeat to Denmark a few years before. The bar, cheese stall notwithstanding, was never going to be set too high.

When football returned from its war imposed break at the 1950 World Cup, things did not start too well for France, and it led to a kind of 'Hokey Cokey' approach to the tournament. They initially played three qualifying games against Yugoslavia and lost 3-2 in the play off, and so they were out. Then FIFA offered them a place, rendering all the efforts against the Slavs a complete waste of time. The proposal came due to other nations withdrawing from the competition, including Scotland whose administrators had done nothing to detract from the country's parsimonious reputation, pulling out, effectively, on financial grounds. Brazil was a long way and those fares and hotel bills were 'terribly expensive'.

France had been 'in', then 'out', and now they were back 'in'. Regrettably, as far as French fans were concerned, the Chairman of the Scottish FA at the time, called something like Jock McMingebag-Tightarse, was evidently moonlighting as financial adviser to the French over the trip to the land of the Samba. The *Federation Francaise de Football* took heed of the Jocks and withdrew from the tournament. France was 'out' again. It had been a case 'In-Out-In-Out' and now people waited for the 'Shake it all about', but that would have to wait another seven years for Jerry Lee Lewis to oblige with his 'Whole Lotta Shakin Goin' On'.

However, the French showed a real desire to compete when it came to the 1954 World Cup. The underlying improvement in the quality of the French squad was apparent in the qualifying stages, as they finished top of their group with four wins out of four, twenty goals scored and only four conceded. Names

so French that they seem to drip onion soup in garlic were on the score sheet, like Ujlaki, Glovacki, Cicci and Piantoni. France was enjoying the first wave of its golden generations, with other players making a big impact such as Maryan Wisnieski (she sounds gorgeous), Thadee Cisowski and Raymond Kopaszowski. You will be forgiven for thinking that I have strayed to the Polish national team, but the French were benefitting from the influx of immigrant families with talented footballers ready to represent their adopted home at international level.

However, there was Just Fontaine, a man as French as a *Gauloises* cigarette... aside from the fact he was Moroccan, born in Marrakech. He was like the pop star Prince, in that I think he only really had one name, Fontaine. When answering the casual question about his first name, he would answer with 'Just Fontaine', and so 'Just' stuck. Fontaine was a prolific goal scorer and his thirteen goals at the '58 World Cup is still a record today. Before his heroics in Sweden, there were the '54 finals in Switzerland. Sadly, they did not make it out of their group, a crucial loss to Yugoslavia proving to be their downfall.

THE MAGIC SQUARE

The '58 tournament hosted by the Swedes was a good one for the French. Having sailed through the qualifying stages in a similar vein to four years' before, *Les Bleus* comfortably made it to a semi-final against Brazil, who had a certain seventeen year old called Pele... another player with only one name.

'What do we call you?'

'Pele.'

'Just Pele?'

'Yes.'

'Like Just Fontaine?'

'Eh?'

Actually, Pele's full name was Edson Arantes do Nascimento, but he had one eye on the future and he thought Pele would fit better on the back of a shirt.

In the game itself, France was still in the match at 2-1 down until Pele blasted in a thirteen-minute hat-trick in the second half. The final score was 5-2 to Brazil, and the French dream was over, although there was the bonus of spanking West Germany 6-3 in the third place play-off, with 'Just' Fontaine bagging four goals to get his record tally.

The team took this form into the newly created European Nations Cup in 1960. It was a Frenchman, Henri Delaunay, who had had the original idea for a European Football Championship, as long ago as 1927, but like a fat pigeon with no wings and webbed feet superglued to the ground, it never got off the ground. Thirty years later, with Delaunay as dead as his dream, his son promoted the idea

to the newly formed UEFA. The Euro suits liked the proposition, and so in 1960 it took place with France selected as hosts.

In the first round against Greece, the French scored eight. In the quarter-finals against Austria, they bagged nine. And against Yugoslavia in the semis, they managed four... the only problem being that Slavs managed five. With only fifteen minutes to go, France had been winning 4-2, but three goals conceded in four minutes turned the result on its head. The blow appeared to cause terminal damage.

The 1950s' flame of excellence briefly flickered as *Les Bleus* got off to a good start in their '62 World Cup qualifying campaign, but two defeats to Bulgaria saw them eliminated and with it, the last embers extinguished. The golden age of the Moroccans, the Poles and the Italians was over. Years of stagnation and failure followed with more managers than onions around the neck of a striped tee-shirted French stereotype on a bicycle. Between 1962 and 1980, France only qualified for two major tournaments, the World Cups of 1966 and 1978, and in both cases, they were on the plane home before you could say 'Jacques Robeenson'.

However, the 1980s - or more specifically Italy, Africa and Spain - provided France with another golden generation of players that would transform the country's fortunes. They had one of the most gifted footballers of this era, Michel Platini, the son of Italian immigrants who was the playmaker... and to remind our less informed aficionados of the game, this does not mean he would perform impromptu dramas in the middle of a game inspired by Proust, Chekhov and Shakespeare. Then there was the Sudanese player, Jean Tigana, a tireless central midfielder who would run from box to box all day long, some blaming an early career working in a Cornflake factory. And there was the Spanish Defender, Luiz Fernandez, as French as paella and bullfighting. If you added to this mix of talent, the unusual ingredient of a player with pure French lineage, Alain Giresse, you had the *Carre Magique*, the 'Magic Square'. Again for those readers more conversant with Ali Bongo, Sooty and Paul Daniels than Noël Le Graët the President of the French Football Federation, it did not mean that this group of players entertained the crowd with death defying tricks of referees sawn in half and disappearing corner flags. These footballers played with a rare level of skill, energy and inter-dependency that served *Les Tricolores* very well indeed during the 1980s.

The improvements became obvious in the '82 World Cup in Spain. In the qualifying campaign, tighter than an unmarried woman's snatch, France just about emerged with Belgium to go to Spain, leaving the Dutch and the Irish behind. In the first game of the finals, the team could not have had a worse start -

well I suppose Joe Dolce still singing 'Shaddap you face' over the loud speakers would have made things worse - when their English opponents scored after only twenty seven seconds. The French went on to lose the game 3-1, but still squeezed through to the next round, where the fates were on their side. Matched with easy opponents in Northern Ireland and Austria, they cruised to the semi-finals to play West Germany. Despite taking a 3-1 lead in extra time, the Germans showed typical resolve to draw level by the final whistle and then win the game on penalties. The French went home to lick their wounds, which for Patrick Battiston involved a life support machine of sorts, following Schumacher's attempt at a wrestling dropkick that would have made Big Daddy proud.

The next major tournament was the 1984 European Championships, and as hosts, the French enjoyed the luxury of automatic qualification. The Platini team was reaching its peak and the 'omens' were good... although by *Omen IV*, I think the franchise had overstayed its welcome. France won all three of its games in the group stage with Platini scoring seven goals including two hat-tricks. This set up a semi-final against Portugal in one of the all time great games... just ask John Motson. He commentated on the game with such excitement; he seemed to ejaculate more than just a few words and clichés. France equalised six minutes from the end of extra time and then scored a last minute winner, inevitably from Platini. The French were in the final, and Motty had a smile on his face and a dry cleaning bill to pay. In the final, they played Spain, and despite going down to ten men when Yvon 'Danny' Le Roux was red carded, they finished 2-0 winners. France had finally won a major tournament, in many ways thanks to the record tally of nine goals in the tournament for Michel Platini.

[SINGING LES BLEUS](#)

Such was their form, *Les Bleus* went into the '86 Mexico World Cup as favourites. With their group containing two poorer teams in Hungary and Canada, they easily reached the knock-out stage. As it turned out, in order to get to the final, they would have needed to beat Italy, Brazil and West Germany. They did well to get past the first two, but their old nemesis in the form of the Germans, yet again, spoilt the party. It was the end of the Platini era and another downward spiral ensued. It would be a decade before France won another game in the finals of a major competition.

There was certainly heartbreak during the period, especially in their attempts to qualify for USA '94. In pole position to reach the finals and needing only one more point to qualify, they had two home games left, both easy wins on paper. The first against Israel, who were propping up the group table, resulted in a 3-2

defeat, the winner scored in the last minute of the match. No matter, the French had another chance to make amends with the home tie against Bulgaria. A draw was good enough, and with seconds to go, the score was one apiece. Then France squandered possession, the Bulgarians broke forward like greyhounds out of the traps, and with the spirit of Corporal Jones from *Dads Army* invading the French defence, Bulgaria hit the winner with a mere two seconds to go. France was out, and a footballing nation distraught.

The manager, Gérard Houllier blamed David Ginola. The Fédération Française de Football blamed Gérard Houllier, replacing him with a man whose parents loved backgammon so much they christened him 'Love Backgammon'... if you added a few Roman numerals to the name, you had Love Backgammon III, which gave you a member of The Four Tops. To be fair, this Love Backgammon was better known by the French translation of Aimé Jacquet, and from the depths of the Bulgarian despair, the new man helped France embark upon the most glorious chapter in all of their footballing history.

French club football was on the up in the 1990s. After being one of the lesser providers of teams to European competitions, France supplied the winners of the 1993 UEFA Champions League, Olympique de Marseille whose team included the slap head goalkeeper, Fabian Barthez and Didier Deschamps 'The Water Carrier'. Despite a match fixing scandal that saw them demoted the next year to the second division, their success was indicative of the improving underlying health of football in France.

The timing of Jacquet's appointment was therefore good, and he was able to meld the talents of one or the two of the old hands with new guns coming through the system including a gifted player of Algerian descent, Zinedine Zidane and a great defender from Guadeloupe, Lilian Thuram. The new manager invoked the age-old approach of starting by tightening things up at the back. After the liposuction came football and a concentration on defence. If you do not concede a goal, you do not lose, and you have more chance of winning... hardly rocket science, but often overlooked. In the qualifying stage for Euro 96, they kept six clean sheets in the first six games, though four of them were goalless draws. Mr Backgammon was not endearing himself to the fans and the press, but it was effective and as well as qualifying for the tournament in England, they recorded their biggest win in history by beating Azerbaijan 10-0. In the finals, the nil nil draw proved to be France's downfall, with scoreless games in the quarter-finals against Holland and the semi-final against the Czech Republic. Their luck in the penalty shoot out deserted them, and they failed to make the final.

TOP CHIENS

It was only when the team starting to gain momentum in the finals of the '98 World Cup that fans believed Jacquet may have been the right man after all. France was the host and so had automatically qualified, leaving plenty of time for those important things like designing the mascot for the finals. It was typical of the French that the official mascot called *Footix* was a cock... as I say, only the French. New talent such as Thierry Henry, the son of immigrants from Guadeloupe and Martinique, had further strengthened the squad, and they easily made it through to the knock-out stages. Here there were a couple of close shaves against Paraguay and Italy, but after gaining revenge over the Czech Republic for Euro '96 in the semis, they were in a World Cup Final for the first time in their history, where they were to play Brazil who had the prolific Ronaldo.

At the time of France '98, I was on a family holiday at Disneyworld in Florida. With meticulous planning on my part, we actually flew at the same time England were playing Argentina in the group of 16 encounter, where Beckham was sent off and Michael Owen announced his arrival on the international scene... I still believe his use of the stadium PA for self-promotion was wrong. On the coach transfer to the hotel, the driver turned on a small TV at the front of the vehicle, and in the land of baseball and American football, England's game appeared on screen. The picture was terrible, fading in and out of focus like Shane McGowan opening his eyes after a bender, but I thought I could see a score line of 2-2 and that it was extra-time. By the time we reached our hotel room, I desperately searched the three thousand channels on the TV for the game and just got the picture as David Batty stepped up to do a Gareth Southgate. I have had better starts to a holiday.

We stayed at Disney for two weeks at their All Star Music Resort, and the first week was great. The enjoyment in the second week week lessened with the arrival of a few hundred Brazilian teenagers who came to stay. Let us just say they were irritating enough to turn me into a Frenchman on 12th July 1998. However, France did not need my help that day. The Brazilians handed things to them on a plate, and we are not talking about a Brazilian buffet.

A few hours before kick-off, the medical team gave Ronaldo a pain-killing injection, Xylocaine, to his troublesome knee. Ten minutes later, he was fitting. He soon lapsed into a sleep. When awoken, he had medical tests and declared himself fit to play, but this was after the announcement of the team line-up without his name. Manager Mario Zagallo then gambled by changing his team selection to include the striker, but it backfired. Ronaldo was lethargic and his teammates seemed to lack heart, as though more concerned for the welfare of

their young teammate. France trotted out comfortable 3-0 winners, despite playing with only ten men for the last quarter of the game. While Brazilian Officials tried to cover up the Ronaldo debacle by explaining away his fit as masturbation that had gone wrong when someone walked in with a pork pie, thereby creating foaming at the mouth, France, and a little part of Disneyworld celebrated. Mr Backgammon had won the ultimate prize for his country and had proved his many doubters wrong. He resigned a few days later.

In Euro 2000, France survived a tricky qualifying group that including Russia and Ukraine, and in the finals proper, the draw placed them into that year's 'group of death' with the Netherlands, Czech Republic and Denmark, three teams with European Championship pedigree. Yet this was a strong France team, and they made it through to the quarter-finals, where they beat Spain 2-1 to set up a semi-final with Portugal, who they also beat 2-1, this time with a controversial penalty from Zidane making the difference. In the final against Italy, it took a last gasp equaliser from the French to take the match into extra time, during which David Trezeguet's golden goal won it for *Les Bleus*. France was now both the World and European champions and ranked number one in the world. There was only one way things could go.

The team had a disastrous 2002 World Cup in Japan, eliminated in the first round without even scoring a goal, and despite a strong start at Euro 2004, like many others that year, they fell to a 1-0 defeat at the hands of Greece. The latest manager Jacques Santini was gone and the Fédération Française de Football panicked, appointing Raymond Domenech, France's very own Mike Bassett.

After an undistinguished career in French club football management, the FFF gave Domenech the job of looking after the U21 team with mixed results. In 1996, even though his team finished third in the UEFA European U21 Championship, he had a particularly good crop of young players such as Claude Makélélé, Patrick Vieira, Sylvain Wiltord and Robert Pires, who would successfully make the transition to the senior side. A similar outcome in 2002 bolstered his CV from wafer thin to thin. He then found himself in the right place at the right time to get the big job. What made him stand out from the normal head coach material, besides having eyebrows like a *Thunderbirds* puppet, was the use of astrology in picking his team.

He admitted that he had a distrust of Scorpios, and so natural talents like Pires were ostracised. He also thought that Leos made bad defenders, which was never going to help the selection chances of William Gallas, Gaël Clichy, and Mikaël Silvestre, all lions of the zodiac. I could add to Domenech's theory. Given his birthday is 24th January, I would suggest that Aquarians make shit football

managers. He is one of the few people in football to whom you could say, 'You're talking through your anus' (read Uranus), and he would take it as a compliment.

His team made a slow start to the 2006 World Cup qualifiers, but give credit where credit is due, he did persuade some quality players to come out of retirement, in particular, Zidane their talismanic midfielder, and this changed things around so that the team reached the finals. In Germany, the quality of the France squad compensated for their manager's idiosyncrasies to beat Spain, Brazil and Portugal on the way to the final against Italy, a game that will always be remembered for the implosion of the masterful Zidane. The score was 1-1 and the game was in extra-time when, responding to a verbal jibe from Marco Materazzi for (I think) insulting his mother and criticising Algeria's entry into the Afro-vision Song Contest, Zidane head-butted the chest of his opponent, leaving the Italian pole-axed and the Frenchmen dispatched to the dressing room for an Eddie Waring style early bath. It would be the last second on a football field for one of the greatest exponents in the history of the game. It was unquestionably great drama yet unbecoming of such a talent. The ten men of France held out until the end of extra time for a draw but lost on penalties.

THE HARDER YOU FALL

With Zidane in retirement, the shortcomings of Domenech were becoming obvious, particularly to astrologists, who could see it written in the stars. Although the team reached the Euro 2008 finals, they lost twice to Scotland in the qualifiers, which was almost impossible to do because the two Scottish managers were Walter Smith and Alex McLeish, both of whose approach was more defensive than a child discovered stealing sweets. In the Austrian/Swiss finals, they endured a miserable tournament, finishing bottom of their group with only one goal scored.

Domenech blamed the early exit of the French on the impartiality of the referee, a pre-determined edict that UEFA did not want France to progress in the tournament, and the fact that the position of Venus in relation to Uranus was detrimental to his country's fortunes. When questioned on live TV about the team's inglorious exit, he displayed the sensitivity of a night goggles salesperson at a Royal National Institute for the Blind convention. He turned to the camera and said, 'My only thoughts from now on are about getting married to Estelle. I would like to ask for her hand.'

Estelle was his long-term girlfriend, and millions of French people yearned for her to say, 'Piss off! After that display, you've got to be joking.' He was as much destined to get the sack as a castrating surgeon but somehow survived to take the

team into the 2010 World Cup, an event that would prove to be an all time low for the national team.

Les Bleus qualified for the finals in controversial circumstances when Thierry turned into Serge Blanco, controlling the ball expertly with his hands before passing to William Gallas to score an extra time winner against the Republic of Ireland. The luck of the Irish had finally expired and Domenech's team was going to South Africa. In their first game, the French were lucky to come away with a draw against the ten men of Uruguay, but it was the next match against Mexico when things went *seins jusqu'à*... that's 'tits up' to you linguistic monophobes, or more accurately, those without access to Google Translate.

At half time, Nicolas Anelka, the son of Martinique immigrants, launched into an expletive driven tirade against Domenech. The forward had snapped at his manager, out of pure frustration... only in football is frustration 'pure'. One theory is that the eccentric coach had accused the number 21 of being a weak, over-emotional Pisces who was showing typical indecision in his forward play. His star sign with its two fish swimming in opposite directions symbolised this point... or maybe he just accused the forward of stinking of fish. Whatever the cause, the team's star striker was pulled off, so to speak, at half time, when the score was 0-0. The French went on to lose the game 2-0.

Qualification to the knock-out stage was now out of their hands and when Anelka was sent home on the cheapest flight available, perhaps Cuban Airways, all hell let loose. The squad rebelled. Captain Patrice Evra argued with the fitness coach, the team director resigned, and the players went on strike, an action vehemently opposed in the first instance by Franck Ribéry and Sidney Govou... these two had recently been accused of having sex with underage prostitutes, and it was perhaps understandable that they initially misinterpreted the 'Down Tools' call to action.

With politicians and the French Football Federation involved, the team did eventually play their final game against hosts South Africa but lost 2-1 and were out. Raymond Domenech, in his last action as France manager, refused to shake the hand of South African coach, Carlos Alberto Parreira. It was nothing to do with the game. Once again, it was in the stars and all about fish. Parreira, like Anelka, was a Pisces. Three months later, World Cup winning defender, Laurent Blanc replaced Domenech, and Anelka plus a number of other players received bans. Blanc then unilaterally dropped every one of the South Africa squad for his first game in charge. It was a sorry end to a sorry state of affairs, but Blanc steadied the ship, helping the team qualify for Euro 2012.

Yet at the finals in Poland and Ukraine, it was a case of *déjà vu*, which translated into English, means *déjà vu*. A draw against England, a victory over

Ukraine was followed by defeat to Sweden. They qualified for the quarter-finals as second place finishers in Group D but had to face Spain. At the thought of the inevitable pending defeat, the squad began to squabble and implode, culminating in a 2-0 loss and Samir Nasri's foul-mouthed tirade against a journalist. Sami then went home, cooked himself some French Fries and pissed all over them. The enigma of France showed no signs of abating. Laurent Blanc soon resigned.

Did you hear the one about the Pole, the Italian, the Belgian, the Algerian, the Moroccan, the Guyanese, the Sudanese, the Spaniard, the Senegalese, the Martiniquan and the Guadalupano? No, it is not a Jim Davidson joke. The answer is they all played for the French national football team. France's best players from their three golden generations, Just Fontaine, Michel Platini and Zinedine Zidane were all from immigrant families. Given the multi-cultural history of *Les Bleus*, there is a clear irony that today's comedians pick on the French as the fall guys for their, admittedly, racist-lite material.

Yet ironically, French football recently became embroiled in a race row. Politicians on the far right have always complained about the lack of representation for white, indigenous French players in the national team, but instead of dismissing such first degree racism with the contempt deserved, the *Fédération Française de Football* were caught considering the introduction of quotas for non-white youngsters entering football academies, and Laurent Blanc was initially implicated. Somewhere along the line, the country that has trail-blazed multiculturalism in the football context is losing its way on the issue.

If the more liberal thinkers get their way and France remains as open to other nationalities as it always has been, *Les Tricolores* will continue to be one of the top sides. Adopting the parochialism demanded by the far right, however, will undoubtedly damage the fortunes of the national team. For France's sake, you have to hope that Blanc's successor can break out of political shackles and adopt the forward thinking approach of his erudite compatriot, Arsène Wenger. Otherwise, the comedians will be able to justify their French jibes. Who knows, the French might even end up with Jim Davidson as their manager, and after Raymond Domenech, that is not as far fetched as it ought to be? Jim should check his horoscope.

ENGLAND



World Cup Appearances: 13

World Cup Best: Winners - 1966

Euros Appearances: 8

Euros Best: Semi-final - 1968, 1996

THE COLONIAL LEGACY

The England team is a Charles Dickens novel and a midwife undertaking industrial action, all rolled into one, engendering great expectations but delivering nothing. With the notable exception of Wembley 1966 - those halcyon times when World Cup Willie was a mascot rather than a quick shag during extra-time - there is an unwavering history of failure and under-achievement for those playing under the flag of St George. On the other hand, is it under-achievement? Perhaps it is fairer to evaluate the mindset of the typical English fan as one so dripping in delusion, it feeds a very unreasonable expectation that their team will triumph. Thus, when the substitute winger with cramp in both calves sends his penalty into earth orbit to lose the game and seal elimination from the tournament, the fan reacts like a spurned lover, full of anger, hurt, betrayal, piss and vinegar.

There might be one or two Scots who are now dribbling porridge oats down their fronts, as they punch the air with joy on reading this, but to provide some balance and crush the sporan a little bit, England are consistently one of the top ten sides in the FIFA rankings. They are a very good team with very good players, and so it is not quite the same as the merry fans of San Marino thinking that the 11-0 reversal to the Netherlands is the turning point, and they are destined to go on and ultimately be crowned champions of Europe. The English players apply their trade in the highest quality, most competitive domestic league in the world, which must equip them with the skills and experience needed to deal with the technical and psychological demands of international football. Yet success remains as far away for England as Pluto is from Uranus... and that's a Disney cartoon I would like to see. So why is the England team, perennial failures? Why do the fans live on Cloud Nine? The answer is rooted in a combination of colonialism and shouting.

Britannia did once rule the waves. It was when Great Britain was at the forefront of the industrial revolution, and inventions such as the steamship, the telegraph and, to a lesser extent, inflatable trousers, paved the way for the creation of a global empire that, at its peak, ruled one fifth of the world's population and covered one quarter of the land on earth. From the beginning of the nineteenth century up until 1914, the country was the world's super power, and its ruling classes developed an unshakeable attitude of superiority as an inevitable consequence of this dominance. Humility and subservience were not the defining characteristics of the British, unless you were working class, in which case they were your only characteristics, apart from a tendency to stink of shit. Yet by the end of the Second World War, the battered and bruised Britannia that emerged was effectively bankrupt, though fortunately, America offered a mortgage with Sir Laurence Olivier as collateral. The world order changed, the USA assumed the mantle of global supremacy, and the Home Nations could only gorge on humble pie.

The English soccer authorities, full of self-importance for having invented Association Football, adopted these imperialist attitudes of pre-eminence and treated overseas teams and tournaments as something to wipe off their brogues. Although England joined FIFA in 1908, the FA's relations with football's world governing body were always a bit strained. They resigned in 1928, thereby missing the first three World Cups.

England did not enter the World Cup competition until 1950 after rejoining FIFA, twenty years after its inaugural event, and they came late to the European Championship party, not appearing until 1968. In the same vein, most English club sides initially refused to enter European club competitions for it not being in the best interests of British football to indulge Johnny Foreigner. Inevitably, this impeded the development of British football so that, even today, it lags behind 'lesser' nations in terms of technical and tactical prowess.

SHOUT ON SIGHT

So what about the poor, traditional England supporter, tarred with the same brush of pre-disposed superiority? Well, it is not easy for this fan. In addition to his - I use the male gender as he is more susceptible - questionable DNA inheritance, he struggles to string two words together, has a compulsion to paint the flag of St George on his face, and has to self-manage an involuntary aggression commensurate with that of a pit bull terrier fed on live rats. It all leads to an unquestioning faith in the ability of his team's country to conquer all. In some ways, it is a shame, because it always ends in disappointment.

Yet it is not just about these old colonial influences, which have proved as difficult to shake off as a square inch of cling film from your bottom. The other thing that differentiates the English in terms of developing of young football talent is the shouting. Have a look at this traditional job specification for a junior football coach in England:

ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS:

Ability to shout very loud

DESIRABLE REQUIREMENTS:

Ability to shout extremely loud

That's about it. If you want to hear some high volume yelling, your top three choices are to go to the Town Crier of the Year Contest, visit my Aunt Lil's neighbours - who make John & Mary from *Father Ted* seem like love's young dream - or attend to any junior football game. At the latter, you will hear a cacophony of bawling from the manager, his assistant with a personality disorder, and a collection of dads and the odd mum. There are so many of these deluded parents who see their child as the next Wayne Rooney, even if the only chance for the young'un to emulate the England striker will be in ten years time when he shacks up for the night with Old Margie from Birkenhead's red light district.

To be fair, things may be very different in the world of girls' football, which has shown a rapid expansion in the last decade, something that has to be a good thing. But my musings are based on the boys' game, including my own experiences playing as a teenager, my traipsing around the football fields of the Wirral to watch my youngest son play, and my current observations from taking the dogs for a run and a crap around the local park.

To my eyes, not a lot has changed in the last forty years at the grass roots level. It is still beyond the comprehension of the average English coach of young teams to adopt an approach based on the children simply having a good time. I watch in resigned despair, as I see eight year old lads stretching their hamstrings at the start of training, running around the field for a couple of laps, before listening to a lecture on the effectiveness of the 4-4-1-1 formation in the modern game, particularly when combined with remote controlled electric shock treatment for misplaced passes and goals conceded. Finally, for the final five minutes of the session, someone finds a ball to practice kicking it as high and as far as possible.

Then there is the assumption that these youngsters ought to have the testosterone driven aggression of a Ron 'Chopper' Harris', Norman Hunter, Roy Keane and Nigel de Jong, even though they still believe in Father Christmas. Before the onset of puberty, it is simply not normal for young boys to act like Stuart Pearce in the presence of raw flesh. Other nations have recognised this, coaching young players with an emphasis on enjoyment, ball skills and diving. We could learn so much from our fellow Europeans, or even Tom Daley.

It is no surprise that as a consequence of this shouting and the combative coaching, young English players who make it to the professional level tend to be big hearted, full of fight and passion, but technically inferior. Pundits and phone-in addicts, bemoaning the number of 'foreigners' in the leagues, miss the point on two levels. Firstly, they are there because they are better. And secondly, in the long-term, this is a good thing for the game. Kids copy what they see on TV and at matches. If their role model is Luis Suarez or Carlos Tevez, then... whoops, I think I have just turned down a cul-de-sac. But you get my drift, don't you?

I said 'poor' England fan for a reason. He is a product of his legacy and has had to endure much suffering in the arena of international football. When the result came through that England had lost 1-0 to the USA in the 1950 World Cup, there was general disbelief. Most people assumed that George Formby or Mr Pastry - younger readers will think this is the CEO of Greggs - had telegraphed the result and missed the '1' in front of England's '0'. The Americans were soccer virgins, their leather balls unmolested, and their squad patched together like Charlie Chaplin's trousers, including a goalkeeper who played baseball and drove a hearse, though presumably not at the same time. The dismay of the English fans at this result was understandable, although there was a supreme irony in the reaction to this 'humiliation'. The well-oiled British propaganda machine had always played down the importance of America in bringing World War II to a end and bankrolling the country when it was on 'the bones of its arse' (copyright Harry Redknapp) in 1945.

If the USA score had been a wake up call, the games against Hungary in the early 1950s were the four-minute warning. In 1953, the geniuses of Puskas and Hidegkuti overran England and ran out 6-3 winners, the first ever loss at Wembley. The FA considered this a one-off, anticipating a resumption of the natural order after the return match in Budapest, the following year. The team lost this game 7-1, which is still England's worst ever result. The English centre back Syd Owen - not the Eastender's actor, though he might have done a better job - said 'It was like playing people from outer space'.

In the 1954 World Cup, England did better, their task helped by the availability of the great Sir Stanley Matthews, then a sprightly eighty-six year

old, and by the bizarre system where they only had to play two teams in their group of four, thereby avoiding twice world champions and seeded team, Italy. The English topped their group after a 1-0 win against their Swiss hosts to progress to the quarter-finals, where they lost 4-2 to the reigning world champions, Uruguay.

Four years' later in Sweden, England was in a tough group with Brazil, USSR and Austria. The Munich Air Crash in February of that year had weakened the English squad and the team could only draw all three of its group games, including a scoreless game against the Brazilians, the first ever game in World Cup history to end without any goals. If a young Pele had not been a substitute that day, the result may have been different. The English then had to play USSR in a play-off for the quarter-finals, which they lost 1-0.

In Chile 1962, a 3-1 win over Argentina was enough to earn a last eight encounter with Brazil. The England team included a few names soon to be legends including Bobby Moore and Bobby Charlton, but the South Americans had Garrincha, playing at his peak, and he scored two goals to help his team to a 3-1 victory and send Walter Winterbottom's men home.

ALFRED THE GREAT

After the 1962 disappointment, the FA had a rare moment of change orientation and appointed a manager who, for the first time, would have control over team selection. The man was Alf Ramsey who had won the first division league title with unfashionable - the team's kit in '62 was so last year - Ipswich. He was a terse, serious kind of guy whose approach to the media would see him pilloried these days. Yet he was unquestionably a great football manager of his time, his tactical awareness emanating from the Hungarian ignominy at Wembley in 1953, when the left back had played the final game for his country. The new man succeeded where others had failed, strengthening the resolve of the team by engendering a strong bond of collectivism. He was more stick than carrot - the Profumo type Tory MP preferred both to be honest - but he was very effective nonetheless in creating an 'us against the world' dynamic, making the whole greater than the sum of the parts. His appointment also came with a honeymoon period, the stuff of nightmares for the randy bridegroom, but breathing space for a national football coach. The FA still considered the European Championships to be beneath them, and so it was only friendlies and the home internationals for Alf and his team in the first few years. Furthermore, FIFA had selected England to be the host nation for the 1966 World Cup, which granted automatic qualification. Alf had time to shape his best team, which he did and did in style.

If Dr Who was asked to choose the best year to land his Tardis in England, there is a good chance he would pick 1966, and Swinging London in particular. Before the more sexually adventurous amongst you start to fantasise about mini-skirts, Rolling Stone songs, and car keys thrown onto the Habitat coffee table, this was a different kind of swinging. The capital was at the centre of an emerging world, where the emphasis was on the young, the modern and the new. Post-war austerity had had its day, and youth culture was becoming part of the mainstream, propelled by music, TV and fashion. In July 1966, when the Kinks were singing about a 'Sunny Afternoon', the sun did shine, and it was time for the World Cup.

The '66 team was one of England's best, including three players, Gordon Banks, Bobby Moore and Bobby Charlton that would make anyone's all time great England XI... though competition is tight for places with automatic inclusion for Michael Ricketts, Geoff Thomas and Brian Deane. The team playing under the flag of St George had a shrewd man at the helm. They were the host nation. They were to play every game at their home ground of Wembley. And it was sunny. This was England's chance for glory, and though they started slowly with a 0-0 draw against Uruguay, wins against Mexico and France booked them a quarter-final against Argentina. They squeezed through to the semis 1-0, having played most of the game against ten men, following Rattin's sending off for impersonating a war mercenary, a young Gordon Ramsey and then a heartbroken Juliet. A 2-1 victory over Portugal followed, and they were in the final.

So much has been written about England's 4-2 win over West Germany that beautiful London day in July 1966. It was a glorious day for the land of hope and glory, even if the Azerbaijani linesman scored the decisive goal in retribution for his USSR, beaten by West Germany in the other semi-final. England lifted the Jules Rimet Trophy and a nation rejoiced. Unfortunately, this moment replenished the traditional sense of superiority of the English fan. It created the conditions for nearly half of century of disappointment and hurt.

England joined the 1968 European Championship, as did Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, on the proviso that the four countries could have their own cosy qualifying group. UEFA agreed, thereby easing the way for two home nations to reach the finals. Despite being beaten at Wembley in 1967 by Scotland 2-3, when the Scottish fans celebrated by dismantling half the stadium, England qualified and reached the semi-finals, where they were to play Yugoslavia, an easy win was on the cards, by all accounts. Sir Alf - he was knighted in 1967 - organised the teams' preparation for the semi by playing a gruelling friendly against West Germany a few days before and then making a leisurely trip to Italy

with no real time to practice. It was the approach of a Sunday league team, and the neutral was not surprised to see the Yugoslavs win 1-0.

On to World Cup '70 in Mexico, and England qualified by right as champions and were ready to conquer the world again. The nucleus of the side was the same one from '66 and hopes were higher than a San Francisco hippy. There were some high points, most notably Banks' unbelievable save from Pele – Carlsberg would say 'probably the best ever' - but England's Mexico' 70 is best remembered for all the wrong reasons. Bobby Moore's infamous false arrest for stealing a gold bracelet, Alf Ramsey substituting Bobby Charlton when 2-0 up against the Germans in the quarter-final, only to lose the game 2-3, as England fell apart in the absence of the man with a comb over. It also did not help that England's keeper, Peter Bonetti, standing in for Banks who had the galloping wotsits, played the last quarter of the game like my Auntie Val... 'Ooh, that ball looks very heavy, I must dive out of the way of it, or I might get hurt.' The English team was on the way home. It was Bobby Charlton's final game in what turned out to be the last flickers from the great generation of '66.

Sir Alf hung around to oversee the dual disappointments of failing to qualify for the European Championships of 1972 and the 1974 World Cup. He resigned, and although not quite a broken man, he would end up largely forgotten by the time of his death in 1999.

UNTIL WE'RE KNOCKED OUT

The years 1971 to 1979 were more barren than a council estate of sterilised mothers. Sir Alf's successor, Don Revie, was unable to repeat the achievements of his club career with Leeds United, the national team not embracing his style of dominoes, opposition dossiers, and naked massages by the man himself... the latter sounds like a joke, but it's not. For the rest of the decade after Mexico '70, no English team played in the World Cup or European Championship finals, further proof that the 1970s were shit. Three day weeks, strikes, power cuts, only three TV channels, IMF loans, oil crises, Gary Glitter, but worst of all, apart from Gary, every other June was spent in despair as you watched the international competitions unfold, without an English centre back slicing the ball hopelessly out for a throw in.

Things started to change for the better when the FA appointed Ron Greenwood as the new manager. Ron transferred his West Ham's team attractive style of play to the England set up and became one of the more successful coaches, though he was liable to moments of confusion. He once said that 'playing with wingers is more effective against European sides like Brazil than English sides like Wales.' Suffice to say, geography was not the young Ron's favourite subject at school.

After ten years in the wilderness, England qualified for the European Championships of 1980. With two groups of four, each providing a finalist, the defeat of Greenwood's team to hosts Italy meant they could only finish third in their group. Qualification to the World Cup in Spain '82 followed, where the English team had the best possible start, Bryan Robson scoring within the first minute of the game against France. England won all three initial group games to move to the second group phase, matched with West Germany and Spain. After a draw against the Germans, victory against Spain would mean a place in the last four. With just over a quarter of the game to go and the score still goalless, one of the best footballers of the previous ten years made his only ever appearance in a World Cup. His name was Kevin Keegan.

Kevin Keegan had twice been European Footballer of the Year in the 1970s and had won many domestic and European honours with his club sides, most notably Liverpool and Hamburg. Yet his international career was as glittering as a turd baked in the Arizona sun, reflecting England's turgid qualification record. Sod's law resulted in a back injury for Keegan in the lead up to Spain '82, his last chance on football's biggest stage. He travelled with the squad but struggled to reach match fitness. In a desperate attempt to play, he secretly hired a car and drove from Spain to Germany to see a specialist. I can only assume he was in an Audi and not an Austin Allegro, which might have caused the injury in the first place. He made it back to Madrid in time for the decider against Spain, and Ron Greenwood named him as a substitute. Unfortunately for Keegan, his short time on the field did not end in glory, although there was time to miss a sitter before the game finished 0-0. England had failed... a case of so near yet so far.

Bobby Robson took over the helm after Spain, who in common with Alf Ramsey cut his teeth in management with Ipswich Town. His first qualifying campaign, for the 1984 European Championships, was a real disappointment, ending in failure after a home defeat to Denmark saw the team finish second in the group behind the Danes. Supporters feared that the bad habits of the 1970s had returned. However, two years later, and Robson was heading to the World Cup in Mexico, though a couple of games into the finals, he was probably wishing he had done a Don Revie. There was a 1-0 defeat to the striking Portuguese and a 0-0 draw with Morocco, England's plight not helped by Gentleman Ray Wilkins turning into a nightclub bouncer and Captain Marvel, Bryan Robson, trying to play with his arm hanging off. It was thanks to one-half of excellence from the crisp-loving Gary Lineker against Poland that the team managed to advance to the knock-out phase with a 3-0 victory. A win over Paraguay and it was a repeat of 1966, a quarter-final against Argentina.

This was a mere four years since the Falklands War and so there was more to this game than usual. It is remembered for more than the 2-1 Argentinean victory, with indignant fans claiming that the famous 'Hand of God' incident robbed them of World Cup glory... yes, and I am the right testicle in the scrotum of Prince Charles. Argentina outclassed England, and in Diego Maradona, at the absolute top of his game, had the best player in the tournament by a long stretch. His solo goal in the same game is one of the all time greats, waltzing past Reid, Fenwick and Butcher, all admittedly running at the pace of a pregnant mum in the egg and spoon race, before rounding Shilton to side foot the ball home. Regardless, the injustice of their first goal propelled the suffering of England's fans to a new level, and supporting England was now a fully-fledged act of masochism.

Euro '88 was a disaster, with three games played and three games lost. Bobby Robson's tenure was not yielding the success the FA expected, and so the hype lessened as we entered World Cup Italia '90... only kidding. The resilience of the English fan and media is such that the slate always gets wiped clean, allowing renewed optimism to take hold. The English were going to Italy to win, despite the fact that before the tournament, the team had been woeful. They started the finals slowly, limping through to each next stage with a scattering of lucky penalties and late goals. Amazingly, they found themselves in the semi-finals, playing their old nemesis, West Germany.

The big plus for England was the emergence on to the world stage of a major new footballing talent, the brilliant Paul 'Gazza' Gascoigne, a young man so unrefined; anthropologists were thrown into turmoil about the merits of the established socio-economic scale. Ultimately, England failed again in a penalty shoot out, after the game finished 1-1 at the end of extra-time, though success was always an outside bet with Peter Shilton in goal, then about seventy five years old and further impeded by having his boots super-glued to the turf. The English, as beaten semi-finalists, ended Italia '90 as one of the best four teams in the world... or did they? A more considered assessment of the finals would say that an average team had the luck of the cup and overachieved.

The British public loves a plucky loser, and so the players were welcomed home like heroes, something hard to imagine occurring in other countries of a comparable size to the UK. And therein lies yet another paradox of the English psyche. We love to lose probably more than we love to win, provided it is a heroic endeavour. It is yet another recipe for failure, and England produce perfect results every time in this sense. In a classic Freudian moment, Shilton let slip the true English mentality in major tournaments.

'You've got to believe you're going to win. And I believe we'll win the World Cup until the final whistle blows and we're knocked out.'

DID WE NOT LIKE THAT

By the time of the 1992 European Championships, bread and butter manager, Graham Taylor, was in charge of the national team. 'Did we not like that' scream a million fans, scarred by the memories of his time in charge. It was another example of a competent and successful club manager unable to transfer his skills and approach to the international stage. I suppose playing Italy, Germany and the Netherlands is a little different to pitting your wits against Swindon Town, Oldham Athletic or Wimbledon. It was no surprise to the neutral that in Sweden '92, England failed to win any of their three games, scoring only one goal and finishing bottom of their group. Taylor, today an erudite pundit, had this to say after one of the games. 'We could have done without half-time coming, but you've got to have half-time.' The words did not help.

The press and the fans were unimpressed and when the team failed to qualify for USA '94, it was the end of the road for Taylor and his sidekick, Phil Neal, who had developed a nice line in impersonating a parrot by repeating everything his manager would say... sorry, what's that Phil? Oh, 'you had developed a nice line in impersonating a parrot.' See what I mean? The whole sorry debacle was captured in the pioneering the fly on the wall sports docu-soap, *Do I Not Like That*, the programme chronicling - with the emphasis on the chronic - the national team's disastrous World Cup qualifying campaign, with draws snatched from the jaws of victory, effing, jeffing and Phil the parrot. It made unbeatable and unbearable TV. Ricky Gervais must have been watching and making a few notes.

Qualification for Euro '96 was a breeze, as England were hosts, though some fans still carrying the scars of the Taylor/Neal years expressed relief that the dynamic duo were no longer in charge, feeling that their presence might have even jeopardised the automatic qualification position. The new manager was part-time lounge singer, author and wide boy, Terry Venables. The FA had been reluctant to appoint the former Barcelona coach, such were his previous business dealings and so, even before a ball was kicked in the finals, Venables announced that he was leaving the England job after the finals.

This turned out to be a bit of shame because England played well in the tournament, most notably in the 4-1 demolition of the Netherlands in the quarter-final. In the semi-final against Germany the ghost of penalties past came back to haunt the English. After the first five spot kicks had been converted by both teams, El Tel looked for the most suitable player to take a sixth and found him in

Gareth Southgate, the central defender whose penalty record was one taken, one missed. His record was soon two taken, two missed. A nation mourned.

Then came the Hoddle years, when the new manager was the spiritual mentor, Eileen Drewery. Her first task, with help from her assistant Glen Hoddle, was to help England get to France for the '98 World Cup finals. The qualifying campaign ended memorably with Terry Butcher hemorrhaging half his blood supply in a 0-0 draw in Italy, which sent them to the finals as group winners. In France, it was the usual good and bad. There was a young Michael Owen exploding on the scene, a trademark David Beckham free kick to seal victory against Colombia to reach the group of 16 and a trademark, unjustified sending-off when Beckham's boot brushed Simeone's leg, the Argentinean reacting as if his limb had been severed by a guillotine. There was the late disallowed goal by Sol Campbell, the plucky ten men fighting to the end of extra time, and the inevitable exit on penalties, the crucial miss being David Batty, a penalty virgin. Eileen and her assistant were gone in just over six months, after the FA objected to Glen's claim that disability was payback for sin in a previous life... with my hearing deteriorating slightly, I now realize I must have stolen half a sausage in an earlier incarnation.

His replacement was Kevin Keegan. His perm had lost some of its curl and colour, the singing career had never taken off, but the former player was enjoying a successful career in club management. However, he was a reluctant recruit to the top job and results did nothing for his self-esteem. A succession of draws seemed to have killed off hopes of reaching the Euro 2000 finals. The only hope was for runaway leaders Sweden to beat Poland in the final game of the group, but there was little incentive for the Swedes. Nonetheless, a 2-0 defeat for the Poles resulted in an unlikely qualification ending. England was on its way to Belgium and Holland, where the team's performance did not disappoint the cynics... before a tournament, you can count the cynics on one hand in England. From 2-0 up, the team lost 3-2 to Figo's Portugal, a win over the worst German side in history was followed by a 3-2 defeat to Romania, a last minute penalty conceded by Phil Neville being the clinching moment. It was another failure.

A few months' later, in the final game held at the old Twin Towers Wembley Stadium, England played Germany in a 2002 World Cup qualifier. The Germans won 1-0 to spoil the party, and Keegan resigned immediately after the game, claiming he was not up to the job. Such humility is rare in football and although he is to be congratulated for it, the fact it was true lessened the impact. Kev returned to Spain to play golf and tend to his perm.

[SVEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR](#)

Now at this point, you might have expected the worn-down England fan to have a layer of cynicism thicker than a Michael Barrymore fan, a cynicism necessary to give immunity from the trauma of regular disappointment. Unfortunately, this was not to be, for at this moment in English football history, a crop of genuinely talented footballers provided fresh hope and false hopes. This was the so-called golden generation with David Beckham, Steven Gerrard, Michael Owen and Frank Lampard under Sven 'Shagalot' Goran-Eriksson. The FA brought in Sven on a contract worth more than the combined value of the North, and it was controversial with the traditionalists who did not want a foreign coach. Unfortunately, this argument ignored the fact that, like motor cars, we had stopped producing decent homegrown examples, many years ago. Howard Wilkinson, caretaker before Sven, was the Morris Marina of football. His Swedish counter-part, was more Ferrari, or perhaps Lancia.

Eriksson's rein was controversial, but he delivered a moment, second only to the '66 World Cup victory, for the England fan, a 5-1 victory over Germany in Munich. However, this only topped up the delusion factor, and the team's supporters believed once again, world domination was around the corner. The result did lead to qualification for the Japan/South Korea tournament but the finals produced the usual ragbag of failed promises, this time with broken metatarsals taking centre stage, particularly that of David Beckham. Nonetheless, Sven continued an impressive record in competitive games reaching the quarter-finals against Brazil, losing the game 2-1 when Ronaldinho lobbed David Seaman from about forty yards, the big keeper handicapped by the weight of his ponytail that kept him anchored to the floor.

At the 2004 Euros in Portugal, the most prodigious talent of them all joined the golden generation. It was Chris Whitfield... well; it was in my recurring dream. In reality, the tournament belonged to an eighteen-year old Wayne Rooney, until that old bogeyman, the broken metatarsal intervened. The young Scouser was the standout player of the tournament, scoring four goals and helping England to the last eight. Rooney limped out of the quarter-final against the hosts with only a quarter of the game gone, and his team leading 1-0. The game ended 2-2, before England lost on penalties yet again. The question 'What if?' was never more appropriate for the England fan.

The 2006 World Cup in Germany was seen as the best chance of glory for the maturing team and the last chance for some individuals, most notably David Beckham. Portugal in the last eight was the first real challenge they had faced, and the task became tougher when Rooney was sent off after provocation from his Manchester United teammate, Ronaldo. In a repeat of France '98, the ten men of England held out for a draw until the end of extra-time, only to lose on

penalties. This year's 'I'm shit at spot kicks but I'm up for it' was Jamie Carragher. After the Liverpool defender's miss, Ronaldo dispatched his attempt to send England crashing out. For the third consecutive time in a major tournament, a Phil Scolari managed team had defeated Sven Goran-Eriksson in the quarter-finals. The few weeks spent in Germany had been a fantastic success, though unfortunately, only for the WAGS on their designer shopping trips. The team had been shit.

The FA did not renew Sven's contract, appointing his number two - meaning he was shit - Steve McClaren in his place, a man as out of his depth as a non-swimmer in the Pacific Ocean, without water wings or trunks. Pitched against Gus Hiddink's Russia and Slaven Bilić's Croatia in the Euro 2008 qualifiers, the going got tough for the former Middlesboro manager. Unlike Billy Ocean though, when the going got tough for Steve, Steve lost the plot. After allowing the press and media to choose his starting lineups throughout the campaign, he finally exerted his authority for the crucial final game, a home tie against Croatia.

Mac gambled by playing Scott Carson between the sticks, an inexperienced keeper with margarine-fingers. Carson, almost as pitiable as McClaren, played a blinder - in that he played like a blind man - conceding an early goal from which England never recovered. They lost the rain-sodden game and England and McClaren, with an omnipresent umbrella on the night, were out of the Euros. It seemed the FA had found a worthy successor to the England days of Don Revie and Graham Taylor. The hapless manager had been unwittingly honest about his own shortcomings when he admitted that 'I do not read the papers. I do not gamble. I do not even know what day it is!' England fans already knew the last bit. McClaren had to pay the price and the FA sacked him, though I believe he received a new umbrella as part of his severance package.

Following Mac's calamitous reign, a re-evaluation of Sven's time in charge suggested he had done a decent job. The dissenting voices who bemoaned the foreign coach were silent. The FA took advantage and recruited the highly experienced Italian manager, Fabio Capello, in a pre-credit crunch contract, he earned over £6m a year. Other than the financial bonus paid to an investment banker, is there an example of easier money? Capello came to the job with an impressive CV, but it contained a blatant deceit. His assertion to be fluent in English was like Barry Chuckle claiming to have had more bed partners than Russell Brand. Clearly, he had picked up a few words from the *Benny Hill Show* and then filled his diction with 'errrrrrrrrrrr' to maintain fluidity. It made for awkward press conferences, so God help the team talks.

Capello promised more than a Fry's Turkish Delight and although the team qualified impressively for South Africa 2010, something was not right. The foundation stones of Italian football culture were authority and discipline, young players in particular treated like boys at a traditional grammar school. After the *laissez-faire attitudes* of Sven and Steve, the old-school types welcomed Capello's no nonsense approach. I thought it was a cultural mismatch, and that his time in charge was an expensive mistake. This proved to be the case in the finals, where most of England's players looked lethargic and leggy. The team scraped through to the last sixteen, despite some spirited opposition from Slovenia and Robert Green Ironically, their 4-1 defeat to Germany in the group of 16 game put the fans out of their misery, such was the relief when it was over.

The team under Capello qualified for Euro 2012, but the Italian was soon gone in a dispute over John Terry's suitability as captain. The FA considered that the Chelsea defender's alleged racism, history of infidelity, nightclub brawls and parking in disabled spaces, was not befitting of an England Captain. Fabio, being a bit of an old-timer, disagreed and lost his job, in time replaced by the vastly experienced Roy Hodgson. Roy's language skills are at the other end of the pole to those of Capello. He is fluent in five languages and has over thirty years of management experience in Europe, including international level, an obsession with two banks of four and a scarcity of trophies and championships.

Euro 2012 was incredibly predictable. Seldom has watching an England team been such painful viewing. Outclassed in every game including the encounter with lowly ranked Ukraine, they spluttered and coughed their way to a quarter-final against Italy. The match was a crystal-clear representation of the English players' technical inferiority, a point brutally reinforced by the most damning statistic of all. The player that made the most passes for England was goalkeeper, Joe Hart... oh dear, this was like Ringo Starr being the best vocalist at a Beatles concert. Even more predictable was the team's exit from the tournament. They lost, yet again, on penalties.

It is hard to see England succeeding in a major football tournament again. Even if changes are made at the grass roots level for the coaching of youngsters, the weight of expectation will still weigh heavier than eleven Pavarotti tenors on a sled being man-hauled to the North Pole. The hope for England is not that they suddenly embrace success, but the fans get a long overdue reality check and forget those Dickensian unrealistic great expectations. Only then, might the whole overcome the sum of the parts to pull off a surprise victory. However, do not hold your breath... unless you are a traditional England fan who sees no end to his suffering, in which case, holding your breath might just be the long-term cure for your condition that you have been seeking.

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