

## **1982 World Cup, Spain**

ALTHOUGH THE 1982 World Cup was played in Spain, I spent almost all of it in France. I was eleven years old and my parents had elected to devote the summer to driving around the small towns of Brittany and Normandy in my father's big old brown Audi. We had neither a destination in mind nor any kind of plan. This was fortunate as my dad could not read a map. That never stopped him from pretending he could, however. We spent hours marooned by the side of French farm-country backroads, with my father spreading out an impressively large road-map across the hood of our car whenever we were lost, which was often. He obstinately refused to ask locals for directions, and we ended up just rolling lazily, and circuitously, from village to village.

My poor, game mother was heavily pregnant with what would turn out to be my little sister. Mum was understandably, deeply uncomfortable, armed only with a small arsenal of compression socks and her natural willingness to suffer. Yet, at a certain point in the afternoon it would always become too much, at which point she would inevitably sigh, snap, and

inform my father she was at her breaking point. This was the sign for him to pull over in whichever village was nearest, then march into the lobby of a random sleepy, dusty guesthouse and demand two rooms in his finest pidgin French. Despite the fact we had not booked, there was always space. Indeed, we were often the only guests in the place. My father would stride back outside proudly, often accompanied by several puzzled porters in his slipstream, confused because my dad had asked for help fetching “les fauteuils” (armchairs) from the trunk, instead of “les valises” (the suitcases).

As a Liverpool kid, who had barely traveled outside of Britain up to then, I found rural French life to be invigorating. This was Northern France out of central casting. Quiet, still, timeless towns in which the only action was a cluster of old beret-wearing men lazily playing boules in the town square, while sipping on calvados. I was tickled by the custom of having a public urinal in the center of each, with the day’s newspaper pinned up so you could speed-read the news as you went about your business.

All of this, *and* nightly World Cup action. Much of which we would watch over the course of dinner in some French inn with its dazzling array of delicacies. Liver pâtés. Horse meats. Tripe sausages. Each one a conceptual terror for my limited and English-trained palette but inarguably ravishing to the taste buds. Then, dessert, which would involve some patisserie-action, unleashing dizzyingly intricate, delicate fruit-filled pastries in an infinite number of glazed shapes and sizes.

For the World Cup, it felt as if every French restaurateur had the same idea of jerry-rigging some kind of public television-watching contraption set up in their establishment. To watch football abroad—even with a restaurant full of strangers and

as foreigners to boot—added another dimension to the experience. I was used to encountering football live in stadia with English people, for whom the act of watching the game was inseparable from draining six-packs of beers. In France, the experience was far quieter, yet far more intense. Lots of men sitting and seething in silence, furiously drinking tiny coffees while chain-smoking Gitanes. They largely followed along mutely, and if they had to speak, did so only in conspiratorial whispered tones in which we could pick up the odd word—about “le football,” “les tacles,” and “le ballon.”

The French restaurateurs would fill the silence by blasting the broadcast commentary out of their improvised speaker system, many of which looked like they had been requisitioned straight from the restaurant owner’s home record player. Loud Gallic goal-accompanying squeals of “Ouiiiii!” were the soundtrack to our summer. My ear had been attuned to English commentators, who favored a subdued, subtle unemotional style no doubt born of centuries of repression. The French commentators evidently had very different ideas, screaming over the game as if it were merely the supporting act to their frothy stream of consciousness. The fact I did not speak French and could not understand a word did not prevent me from reveling in it. The commentary was a stark contrast to the stoicism of the fans watching the broadcast alongside us. A patter so electric it made every game feel like twice the number of goals had been scored. Even the most mundane 0–0 draws felt like ecstatic 10–10 affairs when you had watched them play out on French television.

One night, my dad uncovered the difference between English fandom and French during a late postgame Bénédictine shared with a sad-eyed restaurant proprietor named Alain.

We English fans always believed our team were on a march of destiny, headed for inevitable glory, even though all evidence pointed to the opposite outcome. The French, according to Alain, felt the opposite. Victory was neither possible nor the point. His reasoning was admittedly roundabout, romantic, and hard to follow. Alain told us a story of a conflict in 1863 that, from the emotion with which he recounted it, felt as if it had happened yesterday. It involved the Battle of Camarón during which sixty-five men from the French Foreign Legion held two thousand Mexican soldiers at bay until they ran out of ammunition. With five men remaining and not a bullet among them, the Frenchmen swore to fight to the death, fixing bayonets, and attempting a futile charge. It took Alain time to explain the next point, but he was at great pains to tell us that the wooden prosthetic hand of the deceased platoon commander was recovered. Every year it is solemnly sent out on parade, a reminder of his death, the nobility of defeat, and the Legion's motto, "March or Die." "This is French glory," Alain told us solemnly looking down at his Bénédictine as he swirled it around in his glass. "Understand it and you will appreciate the essence of French soccer—it is better to lose with honor than to win without style."

"Defeat with dignity" were Alain's last words that night before he drained his glass. My dad muttered, "Damned Inferiority Complex," as he strode off with slightly drunken steps toward the car. I found Alain's portrayal of the French team as a small, gallant, fighting force for whom defeat was inevitable to be poetic but unrealistic. The French national team, though inexperienced, was one of the most elegant in the world, propelled by Michel Platini, a scrawny, mop-topped, and heavily stubbled creative genius, who looked more like a 1980s

Madison Avenue account executive than a world-class athlete. Alongside Alain Giresse, Jean Tigana, and later Luis Fernández as “Le Carré Magique,” Platini was the transcendent heart of one of the most creative midfields to ever play the game.

All of this felt trivial to me at the tournament’s outset, however. The only storyline I cared about was this: For the first time in twelve long years and, indeed, the first time in my viewing lifetime, ENGLAND HAD QUALIFIED FOR THE WORLD CUP.

Yes, their arrival had been fortunate. The team had favored chaos over organization, barely surviving a kind qualifying group—despite losing to Switzerland, Romania, and a bunch of amateurs and semiprofessionals from Norway along the way. Win or lose, the English fans made their mark, rioting and fighting their way across Europe, leading some French politicians to call for them to be banned from the tournament for their violent threat. None of this mattered to me. All I cared about was that my heroes had made it. To watch the iconic English stars I worshipped on a weekly basis unite to form a super team was akin to witnessing a band of superhero Avengers Assemble while wearing cleats.

Ahead of the tournament, the England team went into the recording studio to croon the then prerequisite World Cup single, “This Time (We’ll Get It Right).” The song was a jaunty yet bold number that dominated the radio airwaves and fired up my imagination with images of glory conjured by the promise-filled chorus: “This time, more than any other time, this time, we’re going to find a way . . . To win them all.” In the run-up to the tournament, I spent a solid month in my bedroom playing that single endlessly on repeat to kill the boredom until the World Cup kicked off. I would stare at the players on the record

cover, running my fingers over them, telling myself these men were warrior-heroes whose vows of song I would be wise to treat as prophecy. I was a fanciful lad.

That summer, my pride and joy was a knockoff kit I had coveted at first sight after seeing it hanging on a stall at the local street market, then saved up seven months' worth of pocket money to buy. The jersey was bright white, the shorts were blue, and a proud bulldog wearing the very same colored kit had been placed where the official England badge was supposed to be. I adored that shirt, and although its polyester was itchy to the skin, I wore it nonstop, or at least, until my mother told me to put it in the laundry for hygiene-related reasons. To wear it felt empowering. Like I could run faster and kick harder. And like my English National Team heroes, *get it right*.

On vacation in France, I wore the kit for the entirety of the first week as we made our way through Normandy and Brittany. England experienced a promising start to their World Cup campaign, and though I kept this feeling to myself, I sincerely believed that my lucky shirt was at least partially responsible. In their opening game, the English shaggy-haired midfield talisman Bryan Robson needed just twenty-seven seconds to ghost in at the back post and acrobatically stab home before punching the air with a shocked fist of wonder. That the goal was scored against France both doubled the pleasure but halved my ability to scream out in celebration as I stifled a high-pitched squeal of delight at the back of the cellar-like restaurant outside of Rennes, in which we found ourselves eating along with three dozen seething Frenchmen. My mum had wisely insisted I wear a sweatshirt to cover my bulldog pride, and that decision was probably for the best as England ran out 3–1 winners.

A routine 2–0 win over Czechoslovakia followed. An open-

ing goal from Trevor Francis meant that England became the first European team to qualify for the second round with a game still to play. Their final group stage game against lowly Kuwait was now a formality, which was a relief as England labored in the Bilbao heat, conjuring just a single goal to maintain a perfect record and advance to play Spain and West Germany in this tournament's format in which teams progressed to play a "second group stage."

England's football had been cautious and conservative, yet I could not have cared less about the quality of play. "It's a results business," my father insisted as he ordered a celebratory cognac after the final whistle of the Kuwait game. Our team's perfect record fueled my dreams of an invincible World Cup journey. I had "This Time (We'll Get It Right)" taped on a TDK cassette and filled much of the time, until their next game against dread rivals West Germans, playing it in the back of the car, on repeat, on the radio-cassette player my brother had been gifted for his bar mitzvah. Without headphones.

The English always feared *and* loathed the West Germans but rarely more than in 1982. That year, the Germans' World Cup run had been achieved with conniving stealth and trickery that was extreme even by their standards. In their opening game, the Germans, then European champions, faced tiny minnows Algeria. African sides were not taken at all seriously, and the Germans swaggered into the game with extreme hubris. One of their players said before kickoff, "We will dedicate our seventh goal to our wives, and the eighth to our dogs."

Algeria emerged as 2-1 winners, one of the greatest shocks in World Cup history. I did not see the game, but I do remember the Frenchmen in the small town we happened to have chanced upon that night toasting German defeat as heartily

as if it were their own nation's victory. The subsequent results however left West Germany in their final group stage game to face Teutonic neighbors Austria, knowing that a 1-0 German victory would enable both teams to progress at Algeria's expense. To no one's shock, the Austrians leaked a goal ten minutes in and then both teams played as if they had signed a nonaggression treaty. In a macabre noncompetitive spectacle, the players conspired to ensure the ball rarely made it out of midfield for the remainder of the game, tapping it around aimlessly, without intent to wound. As outraged yet impotent Algerians waved banknotes from the terraces, one German fan, disgusted at what his own team had been reduced to, set fire to his own flag in protest. German coach Jupp Derwall only fanned the flames when he shrugged, "We wanted to progress, not play football."

I remember watching this game, and the cruelty of the injustice perpetrated on the Algerians was palpable. They had played audaciously without fear, only to be shafted by the collusion of two traditional European teams. I felt the agony of their fans, and a sense that there was a developing world of football that would not be long in coming. However, it was also an introduction to another theme that would dominate much of my footballing life: German inevitability. Watching this game was the first time I understood the Germans were a sinister footballing power for whom winning was all that mattered. Any which way. Negativity. Cynicality. Dullness. Neutralizing opponents. The outcome was assured.

The England-West Germany game was actually a dull one. Both sides played to avoid defeat, and both were successful in a physical grinding battle that each nation was delighted to emerge from intact, with a 0-0 draw. Germany then proceeded

to clip host Spain 2-1, which meant that England had to beat the hosts by two goals or more to proceed. On the day of the big game, I could not slap on that lucky kit early enough as we headed out to tour Dunkirk, spending a rainy afternoon walking around the harbor and beaches from which nearly 340,000 Allied forces had been evacuated during World War II. I don't know if it was the dodgy mussels I had gobbled down for lunch, or simply extremely elevated pre-match nerves, but my body was abruptly overwhelmed by the sudden need to go to the bathroom. Immediately. To my relief, the search for a public toilet was both frantic and brief. We were by the waterfront, and down some stone stairs I located the men's bathroom through a rusting gate. The place was dark and dank. It smelled sour, of urinal cakes and decay. But as Shakespeare wrote in *All's Well That Ends Well*, "he must needs go that the devil drives." I slushed my way through a layer of water coating the floor, kicking open the door to the toilet stall, with not a second to spare, before yanking down my shorts and experiencing the thrill of instant and explosive release the second my bum hit the seatless piss-covered rim.

The experience of immediate relief I felt morphed into a growing disgust as I sat there, and my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the space. It appeared as if this toilet had last been given a deep clean sometime around the dying embers of the Napoleonic Empire. The heavy stonework was damp, ancient, and moss covered. A mysterious stream of water trickled down the wall opposite me. The silence of the room was interrupted by my mother's voice from the real world outside, inquiring if I was okay. My work felt like it was done, so I replied in the affirmative and looked around for some toilet paper. A pang of horror gripped me as I realized there was none. In fact, this

bathroom seemed like it had most probably been “sans papier toilette” since 1873.

Another voice from outside. My dad’s this time, commanding me in vexed tones to hurry up. Desperate now, I waddled out of the cubicle in vain hope of discovering some hand towels with which I could improvise. There were, of course, no hand towels. There was not even a sink. My dad’s voice rang out again, this time as an order. I was caught between a rock and an extremely angry parent. That was never a choice. I did what I had to do. Reaching down to my precious England National Team shorts, raising them slowly, sadly, from around my ankles, back to full mast.

It was a sickening feeling, experiencing the single item of clothing I most cherished becoming tarnished by my own hand. I waddled outside and was greeted by a look on my mother’s face, which quickly turned from concern to empathetic shame. My dad was slightly less empathetic, bellowing “Have you *shat* your pants, Roger?” I tried to explain the technical realities of the lack of toilet paper in situ, but to no avail. It was widely assumed by my family that I had indeed shat myself. My mother quickly flagged down a French taxi, and I guiltily tried not to press my bum cheeks on the unwitting driver’s backseat as we hurtled toward the sanctuary of our hotel. As I soaked, humiliated, in a warm bath, I watched my mother stare at my prized England shorts, now lying as a scrunched-up ball, the once proud blue stained beyond belief. She picked them up between her thumb and forefinger and dropped them into a plastic bag. “Well, these are going straight into the bin,” she said, and before I could protest, they had been tossed into the bathroom garbage can, as I slowly lowered my body deeper into the now lukewarm water and looked up at the ceiling and realized that

without my lucky shorts, my beloved England National Team were almost certainly done.

That is called foreshadowing, and the agony I felt in that moment proved to be nothing compared to the thousandfold torment I experienced actually watching the game that night over dinner. England needed a victory by those two precious goals to progress. As they toiled against Spain in cauldron-like conditions at the Santiago Bernabéu in Madrid, my mother was legitimately worried the English players might melt in the 91-degree heat. As the minutes ticked away, England threw nearly every player forward in an ever more desperate attempt to score. The best chance of the night fell to Kevin Keegan, one of England's most prolific finishers. Exactly the man we would have chosen in that moment of national need, yet he got the mechanics all wrong, heading the ball meekly straight to a relieved goalkeeper. "If he didn't have a woman's perm, that would have been a goal," my father shrieked, suggesting that Keegan's thick, long-haired hairstyle, which was *de rigueur* for footballers in those times, softened contact between the player and the ball. England was out of the World Cup, and I had been reintroduced to the notion of national failure as a fundamental part of my British identity.

After the final whistle, our waiter smirked as he came to clear our plates postgame, muttering, "Angleterre sont un petit chien qui pense il est un grand chien." My father took about five minutes to translate that sentence using the mini English-French dictionary he carried around for these very interactions. "England . . . are . . . a . . . small . . . dog . . . that . . . thinks . . . it's . . . a . . . big . . . dog," he said in a voice that became ever more a whisper.

I felt a mix of shock, and personal guilt as I anger-ate an in-

tricate apple pâtisserie for dessert. My team, this English team of destiny, who had promised us they would “find a way . . . to win them all”—had been proven liars. However, they were leaving the tournament an unbeaten side, having conceded just one goal in the five games they played. Would they have won if I had not shat my shorts? Did that squalid incident cause the team euphemistically to do the same? The fact that the world will never know the answer to those hypothetical questions made the pain feel more personal. However, part of me embraced a very hard truth that night: Never trust the English National Team again.

Predictably, the Germans emerged from the group into the semifinals where they faced our gallant vacation host France, who had summoned some of the most beautiful football in the tournament, propelled by the creativity, flair, and elegance of the deceptively athletic Michel Platini. I used my father’s dictionary to translate the headline of the French newspaper *L’Équipe*, which hung over the public toilet in the village we were touring on the day of the game. “You can find three million French people who run faster than him, who can jump higher than him, but you could not find a man who can play football better than him.”

We watched the game in a bistro in Calais, which had classily hired a bugler to toot out a raspy version of “La Marseillaise” pregame. This was the night I realized that World Cup rivalries take on their nation’s histories. And France and Germany have more than a little history. Touring Calais during the day, we saw old buildings pockmarked by shelling from Allied bombing, reminders that the city had only been liberated from Nazi occupation thirty-eight years earlier. Looking at the craggy faces of many of our fellow diners that night, it was im-

possible not to wonder what emotions they were experiencing as their plucky players took the field in a game that had been billed a battle between the French “artistes” and German “automatons.”

If England had made a World Cup semifinal, the combined roars from every pub would have been vaguely audible around the world. The atmosphere in this French restaurant was tense to the point of silence. No one was eating. Everyone was smoking, and there was barely any celebration, even as Platini converted a penalty to equalize after the Germans had taken an early lead. The French, playing with freedom and verve, became ascendant, which only seemed to ratchet up the anxiety amongst my fellow diners and the bombast of the French commentator.

As I tucked into some liver pâté, Platini carved the German backline open with a poem of a pass. His teammate Patrick Battiston raced onto the ball, outrunning the defenders, charging in alone on a dash toward glory. The German goalkeeper Harald “Toni” Schumacher had other ideas. He sped out like an NFL safety, ignoring the ball, locked on only to his opponent, before launching himself into the air and exploding into the man with a sickening and brutal thud. With every subsequent replay of this sporting assault, the restaurant became ever more airless. A woman at the table next to me screamed and quietly began to sob as cameras zoomed into the poleaxed Battiston who lay lifeless on the field. Platini would later tell the French media he thought his teammate was dead. Medics ran out to administer oxygen to the unconscious man, and when he was finally stretchered off—with spinal cord injuries, concussion, and without two of his teeth—there would be further French agony. Everyone in the restaurant waited for the goalkeeper to

be red-carded for his attack, forcing Germany to play with ten men the rest of the game. When the Dutch referee refused so much as to award a foul, never mind issue a card, the collective sense of injustice felt like it was at levels of pain familiar only to poor Battiston in his moment of injury.

At the end of regulation, the score remained 1-1, so the game agonizingly hurtled into thirty minutes of extra time. Somehow the French summoned the focus to smash home two astonishing goals with a ferocity that felt like a venting of collective pent-up national anger. But instead of bunkering in defensively to kill off the game, France continued to will themselves forward, as if hell-bent not only on winning but humiliating their German opponents in the process. An enormously naive mistake. France was about to discover a sporting truth: Germany is at their most dangerous when two goals down.

Upon substituting in Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, a talisman who was returning from an injury, the momentum of the game changed. The Germans began to counterattack with an unerring, clinical ruthlessness. Rummenigge himself cut the lead to 3-2, causing someone behind us to shout "Sangfroid," which I honestly did not know was a French word. Almost immediately after the restart, it was Rummenigge again who was instrumental as Germany leveled the score on an audacious bicycle kick by the acrobatic Klaus Fischer. What was shocking to witness was the lack of mourning from the French in this second. The Germans scoring two goals in six minutes was less an agony, more a reassuring fulfillment of their national self-image of predestined French doom. A moment which set up the World Cup's first-ever penalty shoot-out, and the subsequent inevitability of Gallic vulnerability and German superiority.

Penalty kicks are always an agony to live through for any

football fan. An individual battle of nerves between shooter and goalkeeper more akin to Russian roulette than the collective game of football that preceded it. Worse for the French shooters was that they would have to face the very goalkeeper, Schumacher,\* who had just callously hospitalized their friend and teammate. France shot first. The teams missed one penalty kick apiece through five rounds. The game became sudden death. Maxime Bossis, the brave anchor of the French defense, drilled his shot toward the left corner, only to have Schumacher hurl himself across the goal to save it, raising his fist as a symbol of indestructible indomitability in the heat of the Seville night. When Horst Hrubesch scored to finish the game, the Germans mobbed their goalkeeper, who shouldn't have even been on the field.

This match had just delivered every single human emotion inside little more than 120 minutes. The French team had been mugged. They had come within twelve minutes of a World Cup final appearance. Yet the atmosphere around us from our fellow diners was oddly spirited. It was as if losing again, and being cheated by Germany in the process, was reassuringly familiar. That was who they were, and what they did as Frenchmen. I thought back to the stories Alain, the cognac-swilling restaurant proprietor, had regaled us with earlier in the trip. The narrative of the Battle of Camarón, the legionnaires, and that wooden prosthetic hand. "Defeat with dignity" were his words, and that was what we had just witnessed. The agony and injustice of defeat to the Germans was the perfect apogee of French glory. Platini and his team had lost with honor as tragic

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\* Schumacher would later beat Adolf Hitler in a French newspaper's poll of the nation's most hated historical figure.

heroes. As the tables in the restaurant were pushed to the side, and the diners started to sing and dance, they embraced the team, which had confirmed the nation's destiny: to come up short but always to delight.

The French could draw solace from the fact that they had exhausted their opponents. The Germans faced Italy and were picked off 3-1, in a one-sided final, the defining memory of which was Italian midfielder Marco Tardelli sprinting away and roaring after netting Italy's second goal, as if releasing a lifetime of sacrifice and aspiration in that moment. I did not see it as we were on the ferry back to England. The last moment of World Cup action I glimpsed was in the window of a Calais sport shop I forced my parents to take me to on our last day whilst hunting for a replica French kit to replace the English one I had soiled earlier on the trip. The store was predictably sold out, but I marveled at its window display, which consisted of a small television set and a VCR that had been set up to play the moment of Battiston being crushed by Schumacher on a loop. The television had been dressed in a black scarf of mourning, and there was a small crowd of French people who stood staring at it in silence, nodding at each other with appreciation.