



The Win We Needed

In a time of national division and dwindling faith in our institutions, this World Cup loss feels heavier than it should.

Something has always fascinated me about how football matches can become more than meets the eye.

I've never really been a sports fan like Hunter - much as that would probably disappoint him - but something about it just never clicked for me in the way that writing and music have.

Despite football not being one of my many *things*, once I observed on my evening news session that half time had started, I figured it was a perfect moment to take a wander.

I sauntered casually across the road to watch the second half with my father-in-law. He's just turned seventy. None of us truly know for certain how many World Cups we'll get to observe. I guess that's the thing about getting older, you become blissfully aware of the sand left in the hourglass, and more still that once the grains have fallen through, there is no hand to turn it back over.

Life becomes less about counting tournaments and more about counting opportunities.

"The last time we won, I was ten years old!", he tells me with the type of tone that belies a shock that he's made it this far, as he is equally too that England have not won the world cup from a game of our own invention for sixty years. He even remembers the entire side that brought it home back then too.

I couldn't help but immediately be drawn in by his enthusiasm, and get invested in the spectacle, hoping we win this semi-final and hopefully the cup.

He deserves it. Just like so many others do right now.

Ninety minutes can feel like a lifetime, even though it isn't long at all really. But it's certainly enough time to have the nation come together, set aside their differences and unify over what I can't argue really is a beautiful game.

Gordon's goal solidified that for me.

But then, the onslaught began.

Argentina seemed to dominate possession of the ball, with no real chance for England to get a foothold - forcing England to play defensively, and stay pinned to their goal...

The opponent was clearly emboldened by our goal and the bastards were ready to get even.

One goal.

Damn...

Two goals...

Fuck...

Extra time comes and goes as quickly as the breath in which it was announced.

Then, the whistle blows to signify the end, not just of the match, but of dreams of it coming home in twenty-twenty six.

Then came the banner - as if to add insult to injury.

A white cloth stretched out across the Argentinian team carrying the words: "The Falkland Islands are Argentinian."

Politics had found its way onto the pitch once again. It felt unnecessary.

England had already lost.

Besides, for all their gusto, they seemed to have forgotten that the last time Argentinian's waved a white flag so prominently in 1982, it didn't have any writing on it...

I walked home slowly. Vigilantly aware that there was no wind. St. George flags hung limp like dead cats strung up on poles - banners of pride reduced to mere forgotten Halloween decorations.

The streets were quiet in suburbia. The houses strobed briefly as they were bathed in the pulse of blue lights, as a cruiser silently but swiftly drives by. Anger may not be present here, but I suspect it is elsewhere.

I spared a thought for the women who, if previous tournaments are anything to go by, would spend part of their night speaking to police officers or support workers after football-related domestic abuse.

My miserable mind continued to wander across the darkness, as house windows dimmed, as woeful English men, women, boys and girls dragged their weary heads to bed.

These tournaments mean more to this nation than I believe we're willing to admit. Even to someone like me, a fan from the distance who lacks enthusiasm to take it any further than the odd occasional watch, that's really just an excuse to spend more time with my father-in-law.

I am a patriot, but only really of the veteran class.

It strikes me now that these games are more than mere escapism - they are a moment for a country to share in optimism.

Perhaps that's why these tournaments now carry such emotional weight. They arrive after years in which optimism has become rationed. We've lived through pandemic restrictions, political upheaval, rising living costs and a revolving door at Number 10. Very little has felt stable for quite some time. Football, for a precious few weeks, offered some much-needed hope.

For just a few weeks we collectively remembered what it felt like to expect something good to happen. But that night the feeling escaped us again.

The day after the loss arrived. Work still needed attending. Bills still needed paying. The tabloids were full of photographs of the Argentinian banner. A football match become something else entirely as historical wounds reopened. The politicians went back to arguing in parliament. Fans remembering what it feels like to be forgotten.

For ninety minutes they believed there might be a better ending.

The country didn't need another trophy. It just needed a win.

Unity was already starting to be seen in the post-game discussions. Yet, instead of it being focused solely on celebrating and applauding our lads best efforts, we did what seems to come all too naturally to us English these days - coming together to criticise and look for someone to blame.

The manager.

The substitutions.

The players.

It's saddening how extraordinarily uncomfortable we are with disappointment.

We seem to now lack the ability to process failure, so we prosecute it, forgetting that it will always be present and part of the road to success.

If it isn't our football managers, then it's our politicians. We do in football as we do in politics. We've churned through Prime Ministers in much the same way we've churned through football managers, only to wonder why stability never seems to arrive.

England is tired, so nobody gets extra time and nobody gets forgiveness. We lose sight, in our rage, that demanding immediate change can become the very thing that prevents long-term success.

Surely we would want Thomas Tuchel to stick with it for another four years, and use the lessons of this blunder to strengthen our resolve, refresh and update our playbook to

then march into the next World Cup campaign, ready to finally bring it home.

But I doubt this will happen. This loss will demand blood sacrifice by way of resignations.

I hope for our sake that we can maintain our sportsmanship, despite the match conclusion feeling heavier than a football match outcome deserves.

We needed an uncomplicated evening. A reminder that joy can still belong to everybody.

That night's loss was that of a chance, however fleeting, to remember what it feels like to be truly together.

I don't know how many more World Cups I'll get to watch with my Father-in-law, but I hope the ones we do get to see end differently. Not because England needs another star above the badge, but because, for ninety minutes, we remembered what it felt like to stand together - that would be the real victory.

What would be even more beautiful, is if that feeling transcended the game and continued in our daily lives long after. A realisation that, perhaps, the feeling we've been searching for has been here all along.

England didn't just lose a football match.

It lost, for another four years, the feeling that tomorrow might get better.

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