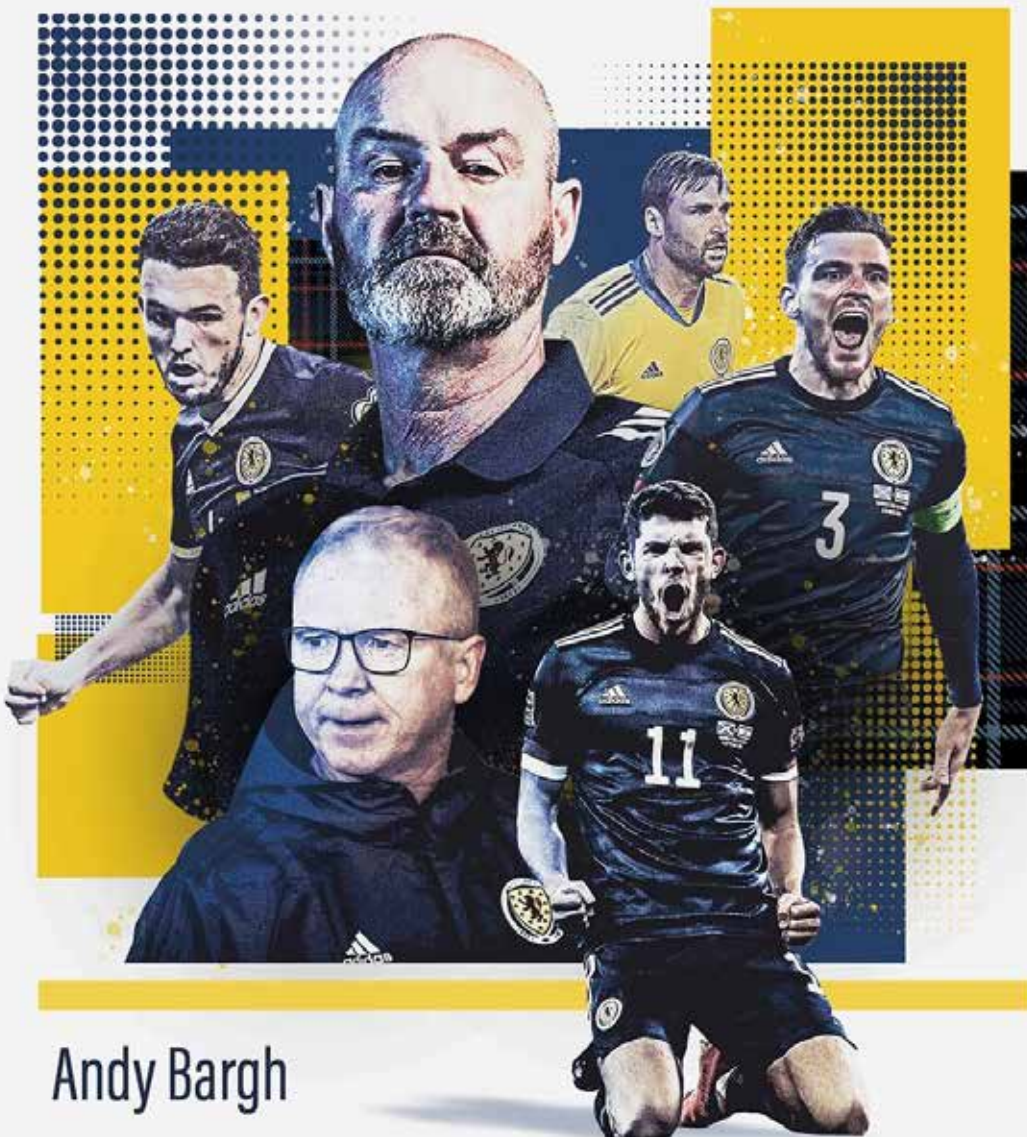


A NATION AGAIN

The Inside Story of Scotland's Journey
to the European Championship



Andy Bargh

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A transition begins

THE BALL took two bounces, thundered off the base of Jan Oblak's left-hand post and nestled in the corner. Scotland were 1-0 up in the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana and on course to qualify for the 2018 World Cup play-offs thanks to the instinctive zen of Leigh Griffiths. A win was necessary to guarantee second place in the group behind runaway winners England and although a draw might get the job done, manager Gordon Strachan selecting himself in the starting line-up seemed more likely than that scenario given our qualification rivals Slovakia were playing Malta, who sat 182nd in the FIFA World Rankings.

Expectations and hope among the Tartan Army were high with Scotland on a six-match unbeaten run, the most recent of which had been a torturous but seismic 1-0 win at home against the Slovaks a few days previously to take us two points above them in the table. In the dying embers of that encounter, Slovakia captain Martin Škrtel turned Ikechi Anya's cross into his own net and the Hampden crowd erupted into an outpouring of delight and relief. 'Scotland are leading, Scotland are believing!' exclaimed Sky Sports' Scotland commentator, Ian Crocker. 'Keep dreaming, keep dreaming after all!' Nobody wanted to leave Hampden at full time while Gala's 'Freed from Desire' reverberated around the Mount Florida for what felt like hours. 'Martin's on fire,

Scotland's gonnae qualify!' was the chant, and we meant it. We really, really meant it.

That was Scotland's fifth goal after the 86th minute at Hampden during that campaign. James McArthur had rescued a point in the last minute of normal time against Lithuania, Chris Martin scored an 88th-minute winner against Slovenia and Griffiths scored that iconic free kick double to put us 2-1 up versus England before Harry Kane provided a moment of footage that might come in handy for MI5 should anyone in the home end ever prove tough to break during an interrogation.

Little was routine but this was a team seemingly built on perseverance and a willingness to play for Strachan, who was approaching the end of his second full qualifying campaign. The previous one, for Euro 2016, saw Scotland fall at the penultimate hurdle with a 2-2 draw at home to Poland when an increase from 16 to 24 teams at the finals meant a third-placed finish in the group would be enough for a play-off. With the Republic of Ireland playing the reigning world champions Germany, a win against Poland should have taken Scotland two points above their neighbours with only Gibraltar – who had therapists freeing up their diaries when they scored their first ever competitive goal to temporarily make it 1-1 at Hampden earlier in the campaign – standing in their way. In the end, Robert Lewandowski scored with the last kick of the game to equalise and the Republic of Ireland took care of their own task, magnificently beating the Germans 1-0 and pouring cold water on Scotland's firewood. A scunner.

The last time Scotland travelled to Slovenia in a competitive game there was a rout. Darren Fletcher, James McFadden and Paul Hartley each scored crackers in a dead-rubber qualifier for the 2006 World Cup. That result provided a springboard for the squad, led by the triumvirate of Walter Smith, Ally McCoist and Tommy Burns, to leave France

and Italy's dignities dangling by a thread during Euro 2008 qualifying. On this occasion, the reward for beating Slovenia wasn't just boosted morale, it was a potential ticket to Russia for the greatest footballing event on earth.

Griffiths's 32nd-minute goal was the first the Slovenes conceded at home during that group. Their Ballon d'Or nominee Jan Oblak is regarded as one of the best goalkeepers in the world and kept 59 clean sheets in his first 100 games for Atlético Madrid, but such was the clinical nature of Griffiths's tightly angled shot, the ball was in the net before he could react. The travelling support, shoulder-to-shoulder behind a row of saltire-clad hoardings, lost the plot. Limbs.

Scotland were in control but the squad's ability to cope with pressure at critical moments had been under almost annual scrutiny. Roman Bezjak scored in slow motion from set pieces twice in the second half and although Robert Snodgrass scored with a couple of minutes remaining it was too little too late and, with Slovakia swatting Malta aside 3-0, Scotland had recorded a tenth consecutive failure to qualify for a major tournament.

The Republic of Ireland had qualified for three major tournaments since Scotland rocked up at France '98. Jealousy is an ugly trait but any Scot could be forgiven for being transparent with envy in 2016 when the Republic progressed from their group and were joined in the finals by their northern neighbours, along with Wales and England, leaving Scotland at home, sent to our room and grounded for a month as punishment for losing to Georgia. How did the Republic and the home nations, England aside, do it? Better organisation? Belief? Did they run harder, faster and for longer? Boast superior DNA?

Well, it was worth considering according to Strachan, who pinned part of the blame on Scotland's genetic misfortune and the physicality of the tools at his disposal, 'We had to pick a team to combat their height and strength. Genetically, we

are behind; in the last campaign we were the second smallest, apart from Spain. Nobody can tell me that, apart from one player [Josép Iličić], they are technically better than our players but, physically, we have a problem. Maybe we get big women and men together and see what we can do.'

The feasibility of Tinder creating parameters for height, weight, heritage and natural sporting ability seem fairly thin, ironically, and Strachan's comments caused not just a splash but more of a cannonball in the Scottish media. A BBC 'reality check' study found Strachan's team had an average height of 180.1cm, or just under 5ft 11in, around an inch shorter than Slovenia. Scotland were in the top ten smallest teams according to the International Centre for Sport Studies (CIES) with Cyprus, Israel and Armenia with Spain above them in the list. However, CIES explained that the average height of footballers doesn't always work on the same scale as national averages. The centre cited the Dutch, who have the tallest men in the world, but have one of the shortest national teams in European football as well.

Portugal, from one of the geographically smallest countries in qualifying for Euro 2016, went on to win the tournament. Nobody is suggesting Scotland should be targeting that feat; with a population nearly double the size of Scotland's, beautiful weather, different cultural habits and Cristiano Ronaldo supported by a stellar cast, they operate in a different stratosphere to us but that, along with Spain's all-conquering team that won three tournaments in a row between 2008 and 2012, proves height is not necessarily a decisive factor in the ability of a team to win games of football. Serbia had the tallest average height in the run-up to Euro 2016 and we all know how their attempt to reach the next European Championship ended.

Protocols for UEFA fixtures allow for the travelling team to fulfil their media duties first so they can get home quicker, but such was the devastation of the draw in Ljubljana that

Strachan took an extended period of time with his forlorn squad before appearing for the press conference. Slovenia boss Srečko Katanec had just completed his last game in charge of his country after four years, and swooped in Strachan's absence to converse with the room of journalists, a process that normally lasts for ten minutes.

When Strachan emerged and headed upstairs with his SFA colleagues to answer questions from the vultures ready to pick at the bones of another lifeless qualification carcass, Katanec was still in a conference that was nowhere near finishing. With it being the end of a campaign and his last game he wallowed in spotlight, leaving a gutted Strachan twiddling his thumbs for longer than necessary before the spotlight shifted to him; a blinding light in the face of a man who had come so close to crossing the play-off threshold for the first time in 15 years but fell at the final hurdle. This was a man who deeply cared and was heartbroken for his players, 'No one is hurting like the players, it's impossible. The fans can't hurt like that. I can't. There shouldn't be any talk about what I'm thinking or what I'm doing at this moment in time because I am just looking after them. I have never been in a dressing room as silent as that.'

It was the last time he answered questions from the media as Scotland manager with confirmation of his departure from the job he held for nearly five years coming four days later. That announcement almost came 11 months earlier after a 3-0 defeat to England in a World Cup qualifying match at Wembley, but the result didn't tell the whole story of that game, with the hosts fortunate not to concede an equaliser to Daniel Sturridge's opener. Grant Hanley comfortably cleared the crossbar with a header from seven yards, James Forrest horribly dragged a shot when it looked easier to hit the target and Robert Snodgrass's close-range shot was blocked by John Stones as it travelled towards the back of the net. A clinical England got their second through Adam Lallana

before Gary Cahill scored the third. A trio of headers, all wonderfully taken.

Thanks to an encouraging performance, Strachan was given a stay of execution after a board meeting and trusted to turn the campaign around despite garnering four points from the opening four games. Stewart Regan was chief executive for the entirety of Strachan's tenure:

Like any manager, his job depended on results. We started the campaign poorly with a lot of criticism about performances and as it came to the halfway point we had a review of Gordon's position to decide if we wanted to change. We wanted to give Gordon the chance to turn it around. We backed him for the second half of the campaign and to be fair to him he did a great job. The team played with confidence, he brought in a few new players, changed things round a bit, and the team started to perform. In the second half of the campaign he got more out them than he did in the first, no one can dispute that.

Turn it around he did, but not quite enough; Scotland went six competitive matches undefeated in 2017 and etched a few iconic Hampden moments into folklore along the way. It's just a shame all they count for in the end are memories. His imminently ending contract would have been automatically extended to cover the play-offs should Scotland have beaten Slovenia, and then again for the World Cup if qualification shockwaves were to reverberate around the country. It wasn't to be and it ended via 'mutual consent' over a conference call on 12 October with then-SFA president Alan McRae and Regan, who looked back:

We took a decision to back him and it was on the condition that if we qualified he'd get another

contract. He wasn't sacked, his contract was until the end of the campaign and he didn't deliver so we had to look elsewhere. In club football, if things are going really well then you review someone's contract before it runs out in order to keep them for another season or two but it's different in international football because it depends on campaign to campaign and if you've had two failures in a row, unless there's a really significant reason why it wasn't the manager's fault, you're minded to make a change and bring someone else in for a fresh approach.

Players were said to be disappointed with the decision and former captain Scott Brown poured his opinion into the public domain, calling it a 'sad, sad, sad day' and adding, 'We all had faith in Gordon and believed in making the Euros. Fourteen points out of 18 in 2017. Momentum was on our side.'

Strachan said in a statement that being appointed Scotland manager was the 'proudest moment of my career' and two months later he admitted he 'couldn't watch' Scotland's November friendly with the Netherlands, for which SFA performance director Malky Mackay took charge on an interim basis. By winning one fewer than exactly half of his 40 games in charge, he could be forgiven for claiming at the time, 'Whoever comes in will never get any more out of the players than I did, they might get the same again but it won't be any more. The group can't be more united than it was; they had passion, they had a good shape and they stuck with each other. These players won't give him any more than they gave me. They can't.'

History is likely to look back on Strachan's comments as simply false given Scotland qualified for the very next major tournament, but there's also an argument that it's factually correct. Seven of his starting XI against Slovenia weren't involved in the squad for the Euro 2020 play-off final, with more than half of the entire group out of the present-day

picture for one reason or another. Perhaps Strachan was right, nobody *would* get more out of those players because they wouldn't get the chance to *give* any more. A transitional period was upon the nation, maybe not to the extent of the Berti Vogts era between 2002 and 2004 when 40 players were given Scotland debuts, but chances for untested players were immediately forthcoming. The glaring question was under whom would they be given the opportunity to change the fortunes of the Scotland national men's team?

In the long-term, it was unclear. David Moyes, Derek McInnes, Michael O'Neill and Paul Lambert were linked, with Moyes installed as the early favourite among many bookmakers. In the short term, Mackay was quickly given the responsibility of selecting a squad and managing them for the Netherlands friendly a month after Strachan's departure. He'd been in his performance director role for less than a year and hadn't managed a game since April 2015 when he was sacked by Wigan Athletic following a 2-0 defeat at home to Derby County. In a funny twist of fate, a then-uncapped Chris Martin scored the Rams' opener. He wasn't included in Mackay's squad and hasn't been capped since Strachan's final bow in Slovenia.

Mackay's remit as performance director centred on Project Brave and the SFA's strategy of 'best vs best' at youth level. He oversaw seven teams – men's under-16s, under-17s, under-19s and under-21s along with the women's under-17s, under-19s and A-squad – with talent ID, sports science and analysis just three of the branches stemming from the thick trunk of requirements and although Mackay's roots are in management, it was a position he thrived in before handing in his notice towards the end of 2020. A talent ID department was set up and a scouting department was born, with five spies based on either side of Hadrian's Wall, following a structure and process to unearth young talent with enough blue in their blood, as Mackay reflected:

There are 50 new caps at youth level in the last three years because we've actively gone into England and scoured for players that otherwise wouldn't have been picked up on. We now have regional scouts that go into Manchester United, Liverpool, Spurs and all the top teams so that if there are 15- or 16-year-olds who have Scottish blood it's flagged up and decide if we want them to train with us. We've got 1,300 players eligible for Scotland, between the ages of 14 and 35, in a database that we can monitor and if any of the managers or I want to know about one of them, we can simply pull up a full file, just as you would at a top English Premier League club. I felt that was really needed at an international level.

It's a wheel of the job Mackay felt was imperative to put in motion to Scotland's benefit years down the line just as he switched on the ignition for three Scotland regulars at the end of 2017. Celtic pair Callum McGregor and Ryan Christie (who was on loan at Aberdeen during that season) as well as Rangers' Ryan Jack had a combined total of no caps at the end of Strachan's reign. No Tartan Army members took to the streets to protest their omissions but it was symbolic of the gusts of change that were about to whistle through the Scotland squad when Mackay, and the subsequent permanent manager, took charge. Celtic players from Brendan Rodgers's unbeaten, treble-winning squad littered the Scotland team throughout 2017: Craig Gordon, Kieran Tierney, Scott Brown, Stuart Armstrong, James Forrest and Leigh Griffiths all regularly featured during the seven-match unbeaten run but there was no place for McGregor, largely due to the presences of James Morrison, Barry Bannan and Darren Fletcher. Mackay was in no doubt it was time for McGregor to be trusted in the centre of Scotland's midfield:

I suppose sometimes it's about timing. Gordon had a group of players that he had faith in and had served him well so bleeding some younger ones at such a crucial point wasn't something he wanted to do. I didn't speak to him about it but I watched Callum a lot and always saw someone who was so comfortable on the ball and I wanted as many players on the park that were exactly that. Going forward, that's the way you have to be for European football. That night I tried to get as many of those players on the pitch as I could. We were playing Holland, one of the most technically adept teams in Europe and if we kept giving the ball to them, we wouldn't see it again for ten minutes.

Jack wasn't picked to pull off one of the combative central midfield performances we've become accustomed to seeing from him at Rangers, but rather to slot in at right-back, a position he had an on-off relationship with at his previous club, Aberdeen. Tierney had given that position a go throughout 2017 because of the presence, form and experience of Andy Robertson and been part of a Scotland defence that kept four clean sheets in the final six games of the campaign, but he was anchored in a catch-22 situation between his burning desire to represent his country and his discomfort at driving on the wrong side of the road. Mackay explains:

I spoke to Kieran about it and he didn't feel comfortable at right-back so I asked him what he thought of being a left-sided centre-back and he was happy to give it a go. Ryan was delighted and honoured to be called up and said he'd play anywhere. He's grown into a terrific centre-mid but I'd seen him play right-back for the under-21s and knew he was capable of helping out in a position we didn't have

much depth in. I had absolutely no doubt that he'd be back involved in the squad in his usual position and it was important to get him included with the squad for the first time.

Mackay remembers correctly. Jack just wanted to peg his tent in the camp after a few call-ups that didn't bring a debut:

Malky was honest about struggling for right-backs but for me it was more about getting my foot in the door in changing times and testing myself at that level. I was honoured to get the chance to play for Scotland and I'd have played anywhere on my debut. It felt weird having my first cap back at Pittodrie but the experience was great and I wanted to progress from there.

Mackay was eager to bring McGregor and Jack into the fold but he was craving the call-up of Christie. The 22-year-old was halfway through an 18-month loan spell with Aberdeen during which he made 54 appearances and scored 13 goals. At the start of 2016/17, the Celtic pecking order left him starving for action as Brown, Armstrong and McGregor were prioritised along with Forrest, Tom Rogic and Patrick Roberts. The transition from boy to man started on the north-east coast as Christie thrived in a midfield including Graeme Shinnie and Kenny McLean, leaving Mackay certain he was ready to be included:

The one I was desperate to get involved was Ryan. I saw him come through at ICT [Inverness Caledonian Thistle] and was really impressed so spoke to Derek McInnes about his time at Aberdeen as he was playing sensationally. He's got a real intelligence about his game and I wanted him in the team. Very quickly we

saw clever touches at training and an X-factor about him in the final third.

Scott Brown spoke to Mackay and was keen to be involved with the squad but despite being unfit with muscular tweak, he remained to be part of the staff. Some of the rationale in his decision to hang around may have stemmed from the responsibility placed on Kieran Tierney's shoulders, or rather his left bicep: the captain's armband. Brown and Tierney developed a close bond at Celtic with the veteran a mentor for the young defender at club level. A weekly glance in the direction of the Parkhead club's Instagram or Twitter account was enough to be aware of the 'bromance' that had blossomed since Tierney's graduation to the first team in 2015. Bare arms and legs are mandatory at training sessions and games being played in near freezing temperatures.

The puzzle that was once Strachan's to solve briefly belonged to Mackay but he had a solution for getting Tierney in the same team as new Liverpool recruit Robertson. Paired alongside Christophe Berra in the first half and Charlie Mulgrew in the second, two centre-backs with more than a decade of Scotland experience under their belts, Tierney wore the armband – becoming the fourth-youngest player to do so with only Fletcher above him in the postwar list – another signal that this Scotland team was entering a transitional phase.

Tierney had already captained his boyhood club Celtic but described it as a 'surprise' to be given the armband against Netherlands for his ninth Scotland cap. 'It doesn't get much bigger than that,' he said afterwards. Mackay wasn't left in two minds about leaving Tierney in a state of mild shock, though:

I threw it on him that I wanted him to be captain but I thought it's a responsibility he might have for the next ten years. He was surprised but on the night for

me he was an absolute Rolls-Royce. He was stepping out from the back, playing passes and reading the game well. I told him how proud I was of him for his performance and how he handled the night. He's quiet but has natural leadership qualities through actions speaking louder than words, which is more common nowadays. He trains hard every day and plays harder on a Saturday.

Mackay's side, in a 4-3-3, read: Gordon; Jack, Berra, Tierney, Robertson; McLean, McGregor, McGinn; Forrest, Phillips, Christie.

Scotland played admirably in a fairly entertaining game against the sleeping Dutch giants, who'd also failed to qualify for Russia 2018, but couldn't capitalise on half chances for Forrest and Phillips while Ryan Fraser blew a great one to notch his first international goal after failing to catch his shot properly. Indeed, the Netherlands' first-half opener came from a lethal counter attack in the immediacy of Scotland failing to waltz through the door the Dutch defence had absent-mindedly left wide open. A ripple of audible disappointment filtered down the stands as Phillips failed to notice Christie breaking into the box through a gap built for a double-decker bus, the attack broke down in the next phase and the Dutch sprung. Memphis Depay started it and was there to finish, delivering a lesson in desire to McGinn and McGregor who were caught jogging back as the Lyon attacker nearly broke the sound barrier to get into a goalscoring position and tap home.

It finished 1-0 and Scotland's seven-match unbeaten run ended with more encouragement than disappointment thanks to the injection of new blood. The strong performance didn't change the SFA's stance on the possibility of Mackay being appointed as Strachan's successor and despite the relatively successful week, Mackay wasn't left with delusions

of grandeur that he'd suddenly be swimming in the pond the SFA board were fishing in:

Stewart called me in and told me they wouldn't rush the appointment. He asked me to manage the team for the November friendly and it was as simple as that. My boss was asking me to do something and fortunately it was a task I was unbelievably proud to take on. I was in a very important job as performance director and I think because I knew it was one game only it increased my love for the occasion. Pulling on the Scotland jersey for the first time at 32 years old was incredible but taking charge of Scotland, even for one game, is the highlight of my professional life and one of the best things I've ever done. The media blew it up into a scenario that didn't exist by suggesting I was blind to the fact I wasn't in the running.

Regan publicly admitted the day before the game that Mackay wasn't on the board's radar as a permanent option, which caused a slight stushie in the Scottish media. The reality was that the interim manager knew there would be no point ordering a batch of updated business cards bearing his temporary job title, a situation Regan was comfortable clarifying for curious Scotland supporters:

Malky was one of my senior management guys and we agreed he'd step in for one game. That was always the position. Some journalists tried to make it into a story that he'd been ruled out behind his back, but that wasn't the case. He'd been asked to take one match and did. Very well, I might add.

Fans knew Mackay wasn't on a starting block for the race to become the Scotland men's team's 23rd manager. McInnes,

O'Neill, Lambert and Clarke were among those coiled and, in some cases, eager to stretch their legs, but the board had a concrete instinct of their preferred winner. Would the target gratefully fly out the traps towards glory and into the Scottish FA's arms or was the nation about to witness a stumble of epic proportions?