



# ***When Football Came Home***

***England, the English and Euro 96***



***Michael Gibbons***

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# Introduction

**A**T 9.37pm on 26 June 1996 I was standing in the lobby of a hotel in Cardiff. There were only a few other English people in the sizeable huddle. An unfortunately-timed dinner and dance, that our school had arranged to celebrate the end of the sixth form, was going on somewhere else in the hotel. I was staring at a small television screen behind the reception area when Paul Gascoigne just fail to connect with Alan Shearer's cross against Germany in the semi-final of Euro 96. The pictures had no accompanying sound. Watching that moment with no Barry Davies or crowd noise to help rationalise the experience felt surreal, like seeing the Zapruder film for the first time. Only the reactions of the people gathered around me broke the silence.

About four months later I discussed that moment with a new friend I'd made at Swansea University. Rainer was from Germany, a Bayern Munich fan, and we played inter-mural football together in our first few weeks. When I missed a penalty in our very first game he shouted 'Southgate! Southgate!' down the pitch at me. Later we had a laugh about our game, and the one that had taken place in the summer. Rainer told me that he'd been a little nervous about coming to Britain, given what had happened that night. But he had also been excited.

In 1996 then the country – the world even – was under the spell of Cool Britannia, a movement spearheaded by a motley collection of figures from the British arts. They had gathered under one roof with a Union Jack flying from the mast, and embarked on a lost weekend that went on for around three years. Hindsight often judges the era unfavourably, but a generation

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that had emerged from the rubble of the 1980s in Britain helped to send an undeniable wave of optimism through the country. For a short while, anything seemed possible.

Even winning an international football tournament. Euro 96 took place in England at the height of the festivities, just as the 1966 World Cup had arrived during swinging London. The hosts had just over two years to get ready, and watched their efforts crescendo in the same summer as this great cultural resuscitation reached its peak. 'It just seemed that all those discussions you've ever had – "Wouldn't it be great if...?"' former *loaded* editor James Brown recalled in *Live Forever*. 'Well, that's what happened in the 90s. "If" happened.' At the European Championship, it was more a case of if only.

This is the story of England, and Euro 96.

# ‘And San Marino have scored!’

**D**AVIDE Gualtieri is 45 years old now, and works as a computer salesman. Every November, regular as clockwork, he fields a flurry of interview requests before returning to anonymity. He is the international equivalent of the non-league amateur that once came to the attention of everyone in the third round of the FA Cup. Gualtieri still keeps Stuart Pearce’s shirt that he swapped for his own at the end of the game. There is a plaque at the offices of the football federation of San Marino dedicated to his achievement. His name haunts English football. One night in Bologna, and *that* goal.

If 1992 was an *annus horribilis* for the Queen, it’s as well for her that she was hardly likely to seek solace in the England national team the following year. Their final game of 1993 was against San Marino, a tiny republic in northern Italy with a population that wouldn’t half-fill Wembley Stadium. They had never won a match. In the 22 internationals of their brief history San Marino had scored just two goals. England had been expected to face them with qualification for the 1994 World Cup already secured. However England’s stock had fallen so far they had become a laughing stock.

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England had stumbled so badly in Group 2 qualifying that they needed to beat San Marino by seven clear goals and hope that Poland, who had nothing to play for but personal pride, could beat Holland. Due to fears over English hooliganism the game was switched from San Marino's home ground in Serravalle to the Stadio Renato Dall'Ara in Bologna in northern Italy. Needing to thump minnows in a neutral venue and rely on favours from elsewhere. That it should come to this.

There was a cruel irony in England meeting their fate there. Just over three years earlier England had scored one of the most important goals in their history at that very stadium. In the last minute of extra time Paul Gascoigne floated a free kick over the Belgian defence to David Platt. He let the ball drop over his shoulder before hooking a volley past Michel Preud'homme to put England in the quarter-finals. After a heart-stopping game against Cameroon which they barely survived there followed an almost inevitably honourable defeat to West Germany in Turin. It was a campaign that had a huge knock-on effect for English football.

On their return to Luton airport a few days after losing the third/fourth place play-off to Italy, the England players were greeted with the fanfare normally reserved for world champions. As the open-topped bus weaved through the appreciative throng in Luton, entertained by Gascoigne wearing a fake plastic belly and breasts, there was the sense that the celebrating wasn't entirely unjustified. Apart from taking England to within a couple of penalty kicks of a World Cup Final, Bobby Robson had left Graham Taylor a good, proven international squad, which had created a powerful sense of hope.

England's international horizons have rarely looked as bright as they did when Taylor took over the job in 1990. It didn't last. Peter Shilton and Terry Butcher retired straight away. John Barnes and Gascoigne had perpetual injury problems, sidelining them from the action for lengthy spells. Age and injury had also pushed Bryan Robson to the end of the road. These factors are professional hazards for an international manager, but Taylor also weakened his hand significantly by making the decision to drop Peter Beardsley and Chris Waddle from the squad after a few

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games. The latter in particular was a staggering exclusion, given that he had propelled Marseille to a European Cup Final in 1991. Established world stars were replaced by the likes of Andy Sinton, Tony Daley, Geoff Thomas and Carlton Palmer.

Taylor also had a fractious relationship with Gary Lineker, his new captain and the darling of English football. Lineker scored the goal that took England by the skin of their teeth into the 1992 European Championship in Sweden, announcing that he would retire when it was finished. With only one defeat on his record at this point, Taylor was bullish heading into the tournament. 'Sit back, put your feet up and watch us win it,' he assured the folks back home. It was a disaster.

After goalless draws with Denmark and France, England needed to beat the hosts Sweden to progress. In the second half the game was locked at 1-1. Lineker, one goal short of Bobby Charlton's England goalscoring record, was substituted as the team looked for the goal to take them to the semi-finals. Sweden ran England off the park towards the end of the game and Tomas Brodin scored a late winning goal. Lineker cut a dejected figure on the bench, marooned on 48 international goals forever. *The Sun's* headline the next day screamed 'SWEDES 2 TURNIPS 1', with Taylor's face superimposed on the losing root vegetable.

Lineker trudged away from the international scene, but Taylor carried on into the qualifying campaign for the 1994 World Cup in the USA. Norway were in their group and a new, rising force in European football. A long-range goal from Kjetil Rekdal forced a draw at Wembley, a surprise uppercut from which England never really recovered. England went 2-0 up against the Netherlands at Wembley in April 1993 but managed to throw that away too, with Des Walker conceding a late penalty that allowed the Dutch to snatch a draw. For the previous year it had felt like Taylor's England had been sliding ominously towards a cliff edge. Now they went over.

Against Poland in Chorzów, England grabbed a late equaliser through Ian Wright to steal a draw, but had been all over the place. Walker and Chris Woods in particular were struggling for form and confidence. A few days later came the calamitous defeat that had been signposted for months. The Norwegians became



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the latest Scandinavian side to run England into the ground, murdering them 2-0 in Oslo.

Taylor had radically switched to a 3-5-2 in a bid to stop the rot, but the whole campaign went crashing through the floorboards. The players didn't seem to have any idea of what they were meant to be doing when set up this way – least of all Nigel Clough. He was sent on as a substitute after a bizarre exchange with Taylor on the bench, in which he stared in bewilderment as his manager tried and failed to communicate what he wanted.

The pressure was getting to Taylor. Criticism from the media was as fierce as anything Bobby Robson suffered in the 1980s. He would later speak of insomnia and pyjamas soaked with sweat, as the demands of the job and increasingly poor results took on a physical manifestation. Taylor was essentially a thoroughly decent man who was given the job in the wrong decade. He never quite had the full courage of his convictions to play the long ball game that had worked so well at Watford and Aston Villa, where his results – he finished second in the league with each club – secured him the England job.

It was England's results that were now the problem. On the back of the defeat in Oslo England went to play in the US Cup in the summer of 1993, an exploratory trip to America ahead of a World Cup that England were looking increasingly unlikely to reach. They couldn't win a game while there and lost 2-0 to the hosts, a historical echo of their famous defeat to the Americans at the 1950 World Cup in Brazil.

England were now on their worst run for 12 years, with widespread calls for Taylor to be sacked. A win over Poland at home in September 1993 provided a reprieve and kept the World Cup campaign alive. It set up a critical encounter with the Netherlands in Rotterdam. With both teams locked on 11 points and trailing behind group leaders Norway, it was virtually a play-off for a World Cup place.

'In life, there's so many opportunities, and they're always round about you,' Taylor told his players seconds before they went out to meet their fate. 'And there's too many people in life that never see them. And then there are those people who see the opportunities and don't want to grasp them. And then there's the

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other people who generally are life's winners, and they see the opportunities and they go looking for them, and when they see them they grasp them. And that's what you're facing now on the football field, isn't it? Go fucking take the opportunity. It's there for you. Wring every little bit out of it.'

The oration was magnificent, but destined to be not that of the triumphant general but of the captain who stays on the ship as it goes under the waves. In Rotterdam Taylor was genuinely unlucky, although the Dutch could point to a goal by Frank Rijkaard that was incorrectly chalked off. Both Paul Merson and Tony Dorigo twanged shots off the post. Most damagingly, Platt was fouled by Ronald Koeman as he raced free into the penalty area. What should have followed was a red card for Koeman; the referee copped out by awarding a free kick on the edge of the area and a yellow, to the disgust of Taylor and the England bench.

It is amazing how life can take another hoof at your molars while you're still nursing the first one. The Dutch won a free kick on the edge of England's area a few minutes after that controversy. Koeman, who should have been lounging in the bath and mentally drafting an apology to everyone in the Netherlands, floated it over the England wall. 'He's going to flick one,' Brian Moore had muttered several times on the ITV commentary, seconds before it slowly drifted into the England net. It was the most sadistic twist of the knife. Dennis Bergkamp scored a second soon afterwards and the jig was up.

England had a month to stew on the fact that they were virtually out of the 1994 World Cup before they faced San Marino in Bologna on 17 November 1993. It was an extraordinary night in European qualifying. Expectation and excitement gripped the continent, in Cardiff, Belfast, Paris, Seville, Milan, and Brussels. Everywhere, it seemed, but Bologna, where the atmosphere was an odd cocktail of a funeral and sparsely attended protest rally. The Stadio Renato Dall'Ara had a capacity of 45,000 but only 2,378 fans turned up, mostly Englishmen arriving in hope.

If Poland could go one up, who knew what might happen. A team with nothing to play for can be a dangerous team. The Dutch had lost in Oslo, and had drawn at Wembley. They didn't travel well. England, shambolic as they were, could surely hammer at

least seven past these minnows. There were a handful of straws to clutch at, enough for England fans to suspend their disbelief for as long as fate would allow it. That period of time turned out to be 8.3 seconds.

‘Welcome to Bologna on Capital Gold for England versus San Marino,’ began radio commentator Jonathan Pearce as San Marino kicked off, ‘with Tennent’s Pilsner, brewed with Czechoslovakian yeast for that extra Pilsner taste...and England are one down.’ While Pearce had been busy plugging the sponsors, a nightmare unfolded for his namesake Stuart, the England left-back and captain. The Sammarinese were used to using a kick-off as a rare chance to take a punt on a few probing passes into the opposition half.

They sauntered forward and played a diagonal ball down Pearce’s inside channel, which he cut off with ease. Pearce tried to nudge it back to David Seaman but under-hit it like a feeble golf putt. Gualtieri, at that point a clerk in a computer firm and San Marino’s right-winger, had gambled on a mistake. He ran by Pearce to slide the ball past Seaman for the quickest goal in the history of the World Cup.

It was a moment of tragic-comic farce, the unexpected but perfectly delivered pay-off at the end of a sitcom. ‘The press box collapsed with mirth,’ wrote David Lacey in *The Guardian*. England were a goal down in less time than it would take Linford Christie to run 100 metres. Taylor could do little but curse the universe. ‘When the ball went into the net,’ he reflected later, ‘I looked up towards the sky and just said quietly to myself, “God, please tell me what I have done wrong.”’ For Gualtieri it was life-changing. No clerk had stepped away from their work and achieved such instant global fame since Albert Einstein.

‘Sometimes I go on YouTube and watch it,’ Gualtieri told the Football Association’s website years later. ‘I still had hair, which cheers me up! I also have a VHS of the game. More often than you’d think, there are fans who come into my electronics shop and ask me for an autograph. There are some guys from eastern Europe who send me letters and e-mails asking for autographs.’

It was hugely appreciated by fans of the nation to England’s immediate north. T-shirts bearing the legend ‘GUALTIERI,

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8 SECONDS’ were conspicuous by their mass presence when Scotland went to play in San Marino in 1995. Claims that some of those fans tracked down Gualtieri to give him a gratis night out on the tiles are apocryphal, but his brother did reap the benefit when he went to Scotland on holiday years later. When his identity became known among the locals he was treated to a free dinner and drinks.

The goal changed Gualtieri’s world and shook England’s. They were so rattled they needed more than 20 minutes to compose themselves and equalise, slowly coming to terms with the most embarrassing moment in the national team’s football history. ‘You should have heard the language they used to each other,’ Gualtieri said later. The seven goals did arrive – four for Wright, two for Paul Ince, one for Les Ferdinand – and England were at least spared the further embarrassment of not qualifying because of Gualtieri’s goal. The Netherlands had comfortably won 3-1 in Poland.

England’s remaining dignity was instead stripped by the BBC, who switched their live coverage to Wales versus Romania in Cardiff in the second half. There were 32,000 complaints, and ultimately the Welsh didn’t qualify, but the simple fact of the matter was that they were a live proposition at that point. England’s campaign was dead. The last rites were issued in Bologna in an eerie, haunting atmosphere, as the tiny throng of fans sang ‘We want Taylor out’ in the cavernous, soulless stadium.

The inquest started immediately. Taylor refused to confirm if he would be resigning, insisting he would speak to the Football Association first. His contract ran up until July 1994, to cover the World Cup that had now disappeared from view. Blame was hurled around. Taylor accused those whipping up hysteria in the media of acting in self-interest rather than for the good of the game. Graham Kelly, the chief executive of the Football Association (FA), took a similar line, questioning whether managers, club chairmen and players had done everything they could to help the team.

‘If anything positive comes out of this,’ said Kelly, ‘it is the realisation that the game needs a shake-up. We have to let the dust settle. We need to take a long, hard look at the England

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set-up.' All of the usual suspects were lined up as English football braced itself for its once in a generation bout of self-loathing analysis. The clubs were too self-interested. Not enough England players went abroad to play. The coaching set-up is wrong. Kids are playing on full-size pitches too early. England doesn't play its natural game. England's game is antiquated and they should adopt a more continental approach. On and on it went. With no British teams going to America at all, FIFA president Sepp Blatter raised the awkward question that is routinely swept under the carpet – shouldn't Britain be represented by one national team?

It was the same, cyclical rhetoric that could have been heard when England failed to qualify for the 1974 World Cup under Sir Alf Ramsey, or the 1984 European Championship under Bobby Robson. The decades pass, nothing ever changes. Something seemed different about Bologna though. It felt like the nadir of England's football history. There would be a World Cup in the USA, a new frontier, and England wouldn't be there. The world game was changing, being shaped by other powerful forces, new chapters being written. Gualtieri's goal was a numbing full stop. *The Guardian's* headline the day after Bologna read 'ENGLAND BURIED IN A PAUPER'S GRAVE'.

There was a school of thought that English football's ills could be blamed solely on Taylor. That ignored a wider pattern of failure. After England's fans were relatively well-behaved at the 1990 World Cup in Italy, English clubs were readmitted into European club competitions the following season. They had been banned after continued English hooliganism culminated in Liverpool's fans rioting at Heysel in 1985, where 39 spectators died.

Prior to this English teams had secured a virtual monopoly on the European Cup. Between them Liverpool, Nottingham Forest and Aston Villa won six on the spin between 1977 and 1982 with Liverpool picking up another, their own fourth, in 1984. When English clubs returned things had clearly moved on without them. Manchester United and Arsenal managed to win the European Cup Winners' Cup, UEFA's tier three club competition, but English clubs were brutally exposed at the top level in the European Cup.

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Arsenal had the first crack in the 1991/92 season. They were knocked out in the second round by Benfica and missed out on UEFA's new wheeze, a lucrative group stage phase. Leeds United fared no better the following season. After luckily getting past VfB Stuttgart in a play-off after the Germans had beaten them but fielded an ineligible player, they were swatted aside by Glasgow Rangers in a much-hyped 'Battle of Britain'. Two weeks prior to Bologna, Galatasaray dumped Manchester United out in the second round, at that point the most famous result in Turkish football history.

These results were at odds with the new found largesse of English football as the formation of the Premier League in 1992 began to pump money into the club game. With the national team on its udders in the international arena too, English football looked insular and out of touch with the rest of the world. Something had to change because the continent would shortly be coming to visit.

In 1992 England had been one of five nations bidding to host the 1996 European Championship. It was another tentative step toward international rehabilitation, but a bold one. This was one area in which England were certainly keen to learn off their continental friends. 'We applied for the 1988 European Championship,' explained FA chairman Bert Millichip to *The Times*, 'but West Germany's presentation was far better than ours. That gave me an insight into what we had to do before we could think of hosting the event ourselves.'

Competing with England to win the bid for the tournament were Austria, Holland, Greece and Portugal. England had obtained the support of France early on in exchange for dropping out of the bidding for the 1998 World Cup, which the French duly won. Their main competition, the Netherlands, withdrew to enhance their bid for the European Championship in 2000.

Despite England's anxieties over the lingering ill feeling for their fans' behaviour on the continent throughout the 1980s, theirs was the outstanding bid. UEFA's award of the tournament to England on 5 May felt like the final act of forgiveness for the Heysel disaster. 'What more do they need,' said UEFA president

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Lennart Johansson, 'to know that their national game has been re-accepted?'

England's bid for the eight-team tournament had centred around using Wembley, Old Trafford, Villa Park and then one of Elland Road, Roker Park or St James' Park in Newcastle as their venues. The FA was estimating a £10m profit. Soon after, all of the logistics had to be doubled. The break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union had created new nation states, and new UEFA members, across eastern Europe. With 47 members, including 12 debutants, for the qualifying rounds for Euro 96, UEFA had little option but to expand the tournament to accommodate 16 teams. It would be the biggest European Championship of all time.

Though the FA rubbed its hands, it was with a sense of trepidation. The awarding of Euro 96 to England had been met with premature celebrations that the 'English disease' had been cured. 'If other countries now have a problem,' the FA's head of external affairs Glenn Kirton bragged in 1992, 'they come to England for advice.' In *The Times* Clive White stated, 'England's eventual victory over hooliganism – touch wood – is one of the great success stories of the last decade.' If he or anyone else caressed some mahogany in hope, it didn't work. A few weeks later, as the England team laboured at Euro 92 in Sweden, the England fans rioted for three consecutive nights in Malmo and Stockholm.

Johansson, a Swedish native, was understandably dismayed. 'This cannot go on year after year,' he said. 'I was in favour of bringing the English clubs back, but now I think the English government and FA need to reconsider the situation and see what they can do about the future.' The problem had been compartmentalised rather than eradicated, and it continued. In Rotterdam a year later the England fans were on the rampage again, with over 1,000 deported in the days before and after the World Cup qualifier with the Netherlands.

Bigger than both the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh in 1986 and the Rugby Union World Cup staged mostly in Britain in 1991, the 1996 European Championship (or Euro 96, as it would become known in shorthand) would be the highest-profile sporting event to be contested in Britain for 30 years. Everyone

would be watching, in Europe and beyond. The thought that it could be marred by hooliganism disturbed the sleep of the organisers. After Bologna there was another problem; England now needed a manager to prepare a team for the tournament. Six days after the San Marino game a beleaguered Taylor resigned. In a childish yet on balance deserved two fingers to his tormenters in the press, he leaked the story via his father to the *Evening Telegraph* newspapers in Grimsby and Scunthorpe. It was more a confirmation of the inevitable than the scoop of the year. Taylor could at least try and get some sleep now. The fate of the national side could be someone else’s responsibility.

The BBC highlights package of the final night of European qualifying went on air shortly after England’s misery in Bologna had concluded. Des Lynam introduced John Toshack, Jimmy Hill and Terry Venables as the pundits. Wales, having come the closest of all the British nations to qualifying, topped the running order. After Toshack had taken the lead in dissecting the harrowing defeat to Romania, the highlights of Gualtieri’s goal and England’s doomed response followed.

‘The manager is only going to be as good as the number of quality players that our league produces,’ said Hill, citing the sparse number of England’s players in Italy’s Serie A as an example. Venables wouldn’t have it, insisting in return that the players were there and hinting heavily that they hadn’t or weren’t being picked. The debate went back and forth – style, coaching, tactics, the influence of clubs on the national team.

Lynam then interjected with a question for Venables. ‘The papers tell me that no one wants the England manager’s job...do you go along with that? Or do you think that people out there in your profession or perhaps your ex-profession – for the moment – would take the job and would want the job and be reasonably good at the job? Bearing in mind perhaps the limitations of the players and perhaps the immense pressure from the press?’

Venables had chuckled when Lynam said ‘ex-profession’. ‘I think it’s changed a lot,’ he said. ‘I think there was a time not too long ago where if this job came up everyone would be grasping at it.’ Lynam shot back, ‘Including you, probably.’ The exchange was now heading down an obvious path, with Venables trying



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to keep his responses vague but acknowledging that it wouldn't interest most managers.

'You were always tipped but you haven't been tipped lately,' said Lynam. The reason why was left unsaid. Venables had been sacked six months earlier by Tottenham and had spent the intervening time attracting legal firestorms like honey beckons in bees. 'I'm resting,' countered Venables, his famous grin spread across his face. 'I'm enjoying myself.' Lynam got straight to the point. 'Would you take it, would it be a job that would interest you, supposing all things being equal?'

All of a sudden Venables adopted the shyness of a nervous teenager on a first date. 'I'll tell you what I'm gonna do,' he said to Lynam, 'I'm gonna sit on the fence.' More chuckles followed, but the message was clear. That'll be a yes then. It was something from the night at least; a candidate to start clearing up the mess, however unlikely. Venables had been known to covet the job for years, but the obvious window to appoint him had been when Bobby Robson quit in 1990. With everything hanging over him it looked unlikely now, even more so when the sub-committee empowered to find the right man was announced.