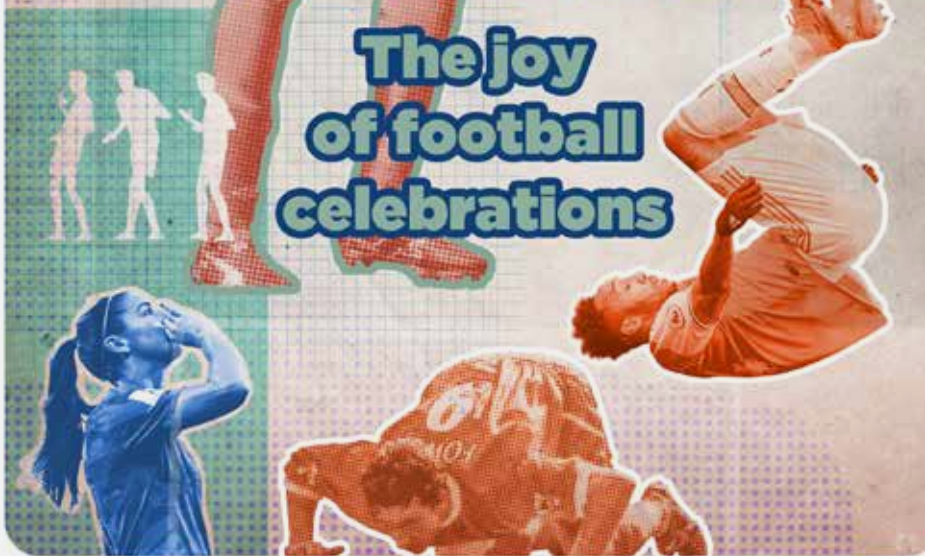


TONY RICKSON



GO GOAL!

**The joy
of football
celebrations**



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GOOAAAL!

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1

Great goal, great celebration

HERE WE are at the world's most iconic football stadium, and it's a beautiful sunny summer Saturday afternoon. No, not that one, though we'll come to it in a minute.

This was Thirty Years of Hurt later – 15 June 1996. The occasion was the European Championships and England were playing at Wembley against their oldest footballing rivals, Scotland. The build-up to the goal was exquisite, the execution was jaw-droppingly stunning, and the celebration was ... well, the best there's ever been. Before, obviously, but since too, although a lot more effort and work has gone into the apparently simple goal celebration ever since.

The lead was a narrow 1-0 to England with 11 minutes to go when goalkeeper David Seaman launched a long ball forward, route-one style. A couple of quick passes on, and Paul Gascoigne cut in from

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what we used to call the inside-left position. With his left foot he lifted the ball cleverly over Scotland defender Colin Hendry and as it fell he volleyed it with his right to send it sizzling inside the near post past his Glasgow Rangers team-mate, keeper Andy Goram. What a manoeuvre. What a strike. What a match-clinching goal.

Gascoigne had his wits about him when he created and scored that perfect goal, and he had his wits about him to remember how he'd planned to celebrate if such a glorious moment arose. He raced beyond the far post to lie on his back with his arms outstretched. Team-mates in on the joke ran to squeeze handily-placed water bottles into Gazza's wide open mouth. A few seconds, no more, and the cameo was over and the England players were returning triumphantly to their own half.

The inspiration for the celebration was an incident a couple of weeks previously on a pre-tournament trip to Hong Kong. The players had let their hair down on a night out and Gascoigne, to no one's surprise, was in the thick of it. He found a dentist's chair in a nightclub – as you do – and laid back in it while drinks were poured into his mouth. Footballers everywhere have been known to let their hair down on the odd occasion – the problem here was the image was captured on camera and the next anyone knew it was on the front page of a national newspaper. How embarrassing. Newspaper columnists have never had a drink on a night off,

of course, but were quickly into print to condemn England's thirsty footballers.

Did it spoil their performance in the upcoming Euros? Well hardly, England unluckily went out in the semi-finals in what equalled their most successful tournament since 1966. And that Gascoigne celebration was a suitably stinging but tongue-in-cheek response to the criticism.

His Wembley celebration told a story and was smart, quick and funny. And it wasn't the first time a passionate Gascoigne had moved a multi-million TV audience. He'd done it in 1990, too, when he wept after getting booked in the World Cup semi-final against West Germany, meaning he would have missed the final if England had qualified. (They didn't!)

Gazza's emotional and unforgettable moments were of extra significance as football in England had endured a miserable previous decade. Hundreds of innocent lives had been lost at Hillsborough, Heysel and Bradford. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher hated the game, and football, beset by hooliganism, was at its lowest ebb. It needed to rediscover what we'd always loved about it – the passion, the excitement, the fun, the emotion.

Several things combined to create the renaissance. There was the heart-warming Italia 90 World Cup, with Gazza's tears touching us all. There was the re-admittance of English clubs into European competitions, the start of the Premier League, and

the publication of seminal football book *Fever Pitch*. (Who could forget the young lad reluctantly dragged along to his first match at Arsenal, and as he goes into the stadium becoming so overwhelmed by the noise, the anticipation, the smell, the excitement, the green grass, that he asks his dad: 'Who are we playing next week?')

Celebrations helped as well. After Arsenal had stunningly beaten Liverpool 2-0 at Anfield to clinch the 1989 Division One championship on goals scored, home fans stayed behind to acknowledge their achievement and applaud them as they celebrated. Where so recently there had been hooliganism and bitter confrontation, suddenly it was being replaced by respect and sportsmanship.

So the drama and the passion were gradually returning to the beautiful game. Once upon a time, a polite handshake was the absolute furthest a teammate would go in the form of congratulations after a goal had been scored. The scorer himself would march back to the halfway line, pleased with himself inwardly, but programmed not to show pleasure on the outside. Cool, calm, don't show your emotions; stiff upper lip and all that.

So often since those far-off days, it's the celebrations we remember more than the goal itself. Gascoigne's wasn't the first, but suddenly every time someone scored we began to look for what they were going to do. Thought was going into it and there were dozens of ways to enhance the moment. The

knee-slide. The aeroplane. The bundle. Rocking a baby. Or sucking a thumb. Pointing – at the club badge, at a team-mate, at their own name on the back of their shirt, at a partner in the stand, or to the sky to remember a departed loved one. Kissing a camera. Some form of acrobatics. Forming a love-heart with the hands. Dancing around a corner flag. An annoying shushing gesture. An equally annoying cocky look. Shirt over the face. Or shirt off altogether.

One thing we'd never thought of, though, was revealed by Arsenal and England defender Martin Keown, in his post-retirement work in the media. He reported in the *Daily Mail* that Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger had questioned why he was only covering 10 kilometres in a match. Keown wrote: 'So I started celebrating the goals. I'd sprint to the other end of the pitch to be with my team-mates and suddenly I was hitting 11km, 11.5km. Job done.'

Take a look, yet another look, at the goals when England won the 1966 World Cup at Wembley on that previous summery sunny Saturday afternoon. The scorer would manage an involuntary little leap, and raise one, or both, arms. Those nearest would offer congratulations but defenders back in the day hardly ever ventured over the halfway line for any reason, and certainly not to acknowledge a goal. Now one's hardly ever scored without the whole team bundling into a celebration, the scorer often buried deep at the bottom of the heap. Rarely the goalkeeper, though; it usually looks naff if they break ranks to

race up and join in. However, this book has uncovered the occasional exception to that rule. And what do kids kicking about in the park and the junior leagues do? They copy everything and do it with feeling. A game doesn't go by without a knee slide. Or that cupping-ears gesture. Professionals as role models? They surely are.

What our youngsters must be discouraged from doing are the celebrations that are horribly wrong. The odd Nazi salute has crept in over the years, as has the *quenelle*, a nasty anti-Semitic gesture. As well as players forming their hands to depict handcuffs in solidarity with, perhaps, a friend who had been sent to prison. Referees are instructed to issue bookings for shirt removal, going into the crowd, revealing a t-shirt with a political or unsuitable message and taunting opposition fans in an unacceptable way.

There was no way Marco Tardelli was going to produce an inappropriate goal celebration when he scored for Italy against West Germany on their way to victory in the 1982 World Cup Final. Caught up in the moment, he just raced away, fists clenched, tear-stained face taut with a manic expression, probably becoming the first man in history to heartlessly brush aside excited team-mates as if they'd had nothing to do with it. Many reckoned it was the most goosebump-worthy goal celebration ever. His was a great example of the involuntary celebration. Tardelli never planned it that way, the moment just overwhelmed him.

GREAT GOAL, GREAT CELEBRATION

Goalscorers began to run faster and faster in jubilation, but the arrival of the 1990s saw a change, with the addition of the pre-planned celebration. As well as Gascoigne, there was Jurgen Klinsmann's self-mocking dive after scoring on his Spurs debut, Roger Milla doing sexy dancing round the corner flag, and Brazil's Bebeto introducing that oh-so-sweet but still slightly nauseating baby-rocking routine in 1994. The new baby in question, by the way, is now ... guess what: a professional footballer.

By coincidence, it was Brazil who featured in what became one of the most famous non-celebrations in another World Cup, in 2014. Germany gave them a 7-1 semi-final thrashing and decided to stop celebrating their goals out of respect for what Brazil had achieved in football. Players, of course, have been known to refrain from celebrating if they've put one over their former club – Frank Lampard against Chelsea while enjoying a short period at Manchester City in 2014/15 is one of hundreds of examples. So there was only one way for Lampard to turn after scoring. On his heels and back to the halfway line.

Which doesn't solve the problem all players face about which way to, well, face, once they've scored. Should they run towards their colleagues, who clearly must have played some part in creating the goal? Or should they go to the fans, who have paid a lot of money to be there to enjoy such a moment? Didier Drogba, for instance, would always head towards the supporters to salute them, and didn't Chelsea fans

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love him all the more for that? On the other hand, Thierry Henry usually turned inwards to point at the team-mate who had set him up. Steven Gerrard, meanwhile, had a knack of knowing where the nearest camera was to slide towards and smother with a passionate little kiss.

Celebrations? We love them. Wolves manager Nuno Espirito Santo, talking about delays caused by VAR decision-making which marred the 2019/20 Premier League season (before coronavirus ruined it some more!) called them the most important moments in football. This book is packed with hundreds of them: some you'll remember vividly, others will ring a bell in the back of the mind. If it was good, it'll be here somewhere. To the players, keep them coming and keep them innovative. Who knows if in the next game we watch, someone will come up with something we've simply never seen before ...