

The new year is upon us, but unfortunately for you I'm going over old ground in this column. Us England fans might want to leave this winter's anguish firmly in the past; for me writing this the pain is a little fresher – just a day old. Yet even after bowing out at the quarter-final stage in Qatar, there's plenty to be positive about. Whilst I don't disagree with the editor's comment of 'we were robbed', I'm going to hopefully offer a much more rounded take. But all that's to come. Let's start with everything else that happened in this World Cup before England lost to France.

I distinctly remember when I first started watching football – the 2006 World Cup in Germany, when I was just seven years old – and how it hooked me in. I'm not the biggest fan of international football generally, and like many of us prefer forming a close attachment with a club that I can follow week in week out, but tournaments are a different prospect altogether. The whole fanfare, the month of huge football games multiple times a day, different cultures and players from across the globe coming together for one event, a nation uniting behind a team like nothing else ... it captured my imagination. That 2006 tournament was memorable for me in many ways – I learnt the players by spending my pocket money on the iconic Panini sticker album, re-enacted the goals in the garden and experienced my first taste of English disappointment as we whimpered out on penalties against Portugal. The 2010 World Cup in South Africa lives long in the memory too – the absorbing new taste of fan culture that focused on colourful clothes and vuvuzelas, the iconic swerving Jabulani football that delighted attackers and terrorised goalkeepers, and of course another English humbling, this time at the hands of Germany. 2014 is arguably my favourite out of the five I've watched: I loved the Brazilian party atmosphere that they brought as host nation, whilst there were some upsets and shocks too – like Costa Rica reaching the quarter-finals and Germany demolishing Brazil 7-1 in the semi-finals. 2018 in Russia delivered for us English fans as we reached the semi-finals in Gareth Southgate's first major tournament at the helm, so there's fond memories from that

one too.

This year's edition was always going to be a bit different though. The sheer fact that Qatar were to host the tournament, let alone during the winter months, was outrageous. From corruption allegations that became facts, to investigations into the inhumane treatment of a migrant workforce assembled to plop eight brand new stadiums in a small soccer-starved desert country... I'm all for opening the world up to sporting opportunities, but there were clearly more logical alternatives to them hosting the tournament.

However, putting all of that aside considering it's now happened, we wipe the slate clean and assess the tournament for its core purpose – the festival of football that ensued. One word that sticks out about this tournament more than any of the other four World Cups I've watched is: unpredictable. The sheer frequency of surprise results consistently caught me off guard. It might point towards a narrowing of the gap between the truly elite international teams and the others that usually make up the numbers at such tournaments. There's an argument too that the location of the tournament, the weather conditions and where it's fallen in a nation's domestic football season are all contributing to this discord between expectation and reality for many of the teams. Either way, it's added so much to the drama.

The group stages were bubbling over with upsets, at times more than one a day – look no further than Saudi Arabia's 2-1 win over Argentina coming hours before 'dark horses' Denmark were held to a 0-0 draw by unfancied Tunisia. Some of the favourites fell early – Germany failed to make it past the group stage in back-to-back World Cups having lost to Japan, Belgium mustered just a single goal across three matches, and perennial knockout threat Uruguay also fell short. Australia were largely written off before the competition but made the knockouts after beating both Denmark and Tunisia; the Socceroo's run coming to an end in the round of 16 at the hands of a Lionel Messi inspired Argentina. Talking of Messi, in my mind he's

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cemented himself ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo as the best player I've ever seen play football – whilst Ronaldo has thrown his toys out of the pram at Manchester United, souring his reputation before leaving the club where he was idolised, Messi has continued to stand out at PSG alongside the next generation's hottest prospect Kylian Mbappe. And in Qatar, Portuguese manager Fernando Santos benched Ronaldo and saw his team decimate Switzerland 6-1 in the round of 16 – Messi meanwhile has dragged Argentina to crucial victories over Mexico, Australia and the Netherlands thanks to moments of mind-blowing magic on the pitch. He doesn't even need to have lifted the trophy to secure his place at the top in my eyes.

The quarter-finals saw a couple more big surprises. Croatia fought until the death to take tournament favourites Brazil to penalties before holding their nerve to win a second successive penalty shootout. But the pluckiest underdog story has to go to Morocco, who became the first African nation to ever reach the semi-finals, and they did it in some style. They first topped a group containing Croatia, Belgium and Canada, winning two and drawing one whilst conceding just the one goal. Then they took a star-studded Spanish side to penalties, where a shootout saving masterclass from their goalkeeper Yassine 'Bono' Bounou secured a spot in the last eight. Facing an injury crisis and coming up against a Portuguese side fresh off the back of that 6-1 win, many wrote the North Africans off once again – and once again, they proved us wrong, deservedly winning 1-0 after another lionhearted defensive performance. Hard work, grit, energy, teamwork, a never-say-die attitude, putting their bodies on the line – these are all cliché, but all phrases that describe everything Morocco embody on the pitch. In an era where the armchair fan is closer to the talent scout than ever before, Morocco are arguably the only country at the tournament to have provided unearthed gems of players – from industrious midfielders Sofyan Amrabat and Azzedine Ounahi to a slew of injury replacements in their backline, it's the squad of true underdogs.

The quarter-finals of course also saw England's

tournament come to a close, as we lost 2-1 to France. The media storm was brewing for days before, and we always knew the bubble would burst if we lost. A common theme points at the teams Southgate's England have beaten in major tournaments, with arguably only Germany in Euro 2020 being a big team of note (and look at how they're doing in World Cups). I certainly have in the past been an advocate for bidding farewell to Gareth – he's done remarkable things to breed a positive atmosphere and mentality in the squad, and we've consistently lived up to or exceeded expectations in tournaments, but I always felt that England were dreadful to watch and that the truly elite nations would counter our predictability. But in Qatar I have to say I'd been pleasantly surprised (bar the dour 0-0 draw with USA, let's forget about that one). 19-year-old Jude Bellingham starring in a box-to-box midfield role, Bukayo Saka turning opposing full-backs inside out, Harry Kane contributing to the team with his work-rate and playmaking abilities, Harry Maguire shrugging off his doubters with confident displays at centre-back ... it's hard to think of one player who didn't have a good tournament. We played on the front foot, at times to scintillating effect – scoring 12 goals across our three wins. You can't complain with that. Against France, I do feel that we were verging on dominant and certainly had the better opportunities. It's typical of English fans to be moaning about a referee who awarded us two penalties in the same game but taking off my biased hat I think our gripes were certainly merited. It's also typical of England to be crippled by the penalty curse once again, with the ever-reliable Harry Kane blazing his second spot kick over the bar. It was a valiant effort, but in the end we were undone by two moments of quality from the French that ultimately put a mirror to our side and showed us what we lack – an ability to win the big games through moments of individual brilliance. England have become a fantastic team under Southgate, but are we on the right path to harness the superstar qualities that we need to get over the line?

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