

Let's dive straight into the meat of it this month. I'm not going to write about the US Open – beyond congratulating 19-year-old Coco Gauff for her first Grand Slam, and Novak Djokovic for his record-breaking 24th. Nor will I talk about the Rugby World Cup – any musings I have will be outdated by the time you pick this up. Although I have to say I was impressed at how we rallied to a comfortable win over Argentina after an early red card; heroic performances across the board, but special shoutouts to Courtney Lawes, Maro Itoje and George Ford's right boot. No, instead I will stick to the football this month, because I want to vent.

At the time of writing, club football fans the world over have heroically struggled through another international break. Sure, in some places watching your national team might not resemble pulling teeth, but this is England. Two games in every international break equals two opportunities for disappointment. A stuttering draw against Ukraine typified it; even if for once we actually played well in the second match, against the auld enemy Scotland. International football shouldn't draw such apathy from us though, because looking ahead to next summer's Euros, England once again have a great shot at winning the whole thing. We have a frighteningly good squad compared to most other nations, with 20-year-old Real Madrid sensation Jude Bellingham leading the charge. He's started the season on fire at the Spanish giants and is thriving in an attacking midfield role, scoring goal after goal after goal. And the win over Scotland showed his importance to the Three Lions. It's a simple strategy for Southgate to follow: play Bellingham in that position, and put Phil Foden nearby. Watching all of the young forwards linking with talismanic Harry Kane, Declan Rice solid as ever at the base of midfield – and a real leader too - we've got some

of the world's best. So why is supporting England still so frustrating?

Look, there's a few players who've received the brunt of the tirade from England fans – and unfortunately this spills over into pure online vitriol against them, which clearly I'm not condoning. But Southgate continues to make some questionable selection decisions. I'll let Calvin Phillips off the hook a tad as he was really good against Scotland and is clearly just struggling to break into a world class Manchester City team – a tough ask when your positional rival is Rodri, one of the world's best players right now. So let's focus on the other two getting the heat online after regular game time under Southgate: Harry Maguire and Jordan Henderson.

Let's start with Henderson – he shouldn't be in the team, plain and simple. Sure, a top-quality midfielder a few years ago when he was captaining Liverpool to all manner of trophies. And for the England fans with short memories, Henderson came into the side at the Qatar World Cup in December to provide real steel in central midfield. But compared to other players in this position, his defensive abilities are slowly dwindling and he leaves a lot to be desired going forward. Plus, if Southgate drops him, it keeps him out of the limelight – Henderson's decision to leave the Premier League and take a massive paycheck in Saudi Arabia hasn't done his public image any favours, most notably after his outspoken support for the LGBT+ community in recent years. Just look at the way Henderson's new club Al-Ettifaq doctored pictures of him wearing a rainbow armband – regardless of where you, or anyone, stands on a Saudi Arabian club not supporting LGBT+ causes, Henderson choosing to move there is just signposting himself as a massive hypocrite.

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Then there's Harry Maguire, a slightly more contentious debate. We've seen it time and time again – Maguire plays much better for England than he does for Manchester United. I feel for him in many ways – signed for an eye-watering £80m when he clearly wasn't worth that much, he's lived with a target on his back ever since walking into Old Trafford – and has crumbled under the pressure. But under Southgate he's been a rock at the back, a pillar of our moderate successes at the World Cups and the run to the Euro 2020 final. I think it's because he suits the way England plays – this defensive brand of football that Southgate preaches, safety first, loads of passing options at the back, low block in defence.

But therein lies the issue. Why play defensive football when you have such attacking riches? Southgate, I fear, is a limited manager: sure, we're very hard to beat, with this drilled defensive system. But we need to take the shackles off, let our aforementioned talent showcase their swagger and verve. So many drab performances stick in the memory: the dire 0-0 against Scotland at Wembley in the last Euros, the turgid 0-0 against the USA in Qatar last November, or even the 1-1 against Ukraine most recently.

It's important to stress this point: I'm not saying Southgate should be sacked, even if many think he should. Gareth merits his place in the top job, not least for how he's transformed the narrative surrounding our national team – it's easy to forget how bad the days of Steve McClaren, Fabio Capello and Roy Hodgson truly were. All I want for him is to be less risk-averse, and to try out new tactics – particularly in friendlies, and even now in qualifiers given that qualification for the Euros is all but assured. His reasoning for selecting Maguire against Ukraine wound me up; to paraphrase, 'We need central defenders

who have experience playing for England, so we picked Harry'.

Hang on a second, there's a fallacy in that argument. If you don't give the other players a chance to play, they'll never get that experience that you're after.

Just in the centre-back positions, there's Fikayo Tomori who starts for European heavyweights AC Milan, Levi Colwill who's only 20 and coming off the back of a stellar season with Brighton, and even Lewis Dunk who's still at Brighton and consistently playing well, week in week out. Maguire's not match-fit; by picking him, not only are you shooting yourself in the foot tactically, but you're denying a pathway to deserving players who'll now be sat there thinking 'what do I need to do to play?' Give Maguire a chance to avoid the criticism that he received after floundering and scoring an own goal against Scotland - and Gareth, give yourself a break from part-timers like me having to write stuff like this.

I think Southgate knows Euro 2024 will be his last in charge, and he'll likely step down at its conclusion rather than being asked to leave. He's (rightfully) desperate to win the tournament at all costs – so don't be surprised if he selects another uninspiring but steady squad who are experienced playing in his comfortable but uninspiring system. We'll be super hard to beat, as per usual, and will score some goals thanks to our world class stars up front. Whether that means we finally win a trophy, well I don't know. I'm not sure I trust us in the big moments against the best of the best – just look at that 2-1 loss to France in the World Cup.

The Euro 2020 final, on home soil against an Italy team who ended up failing to even qualify for the two World Cups either side of that tournament, was our best chance.

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Forget us losing the penalty shoot-out, we had the beating of them in normal time - but the completely risk-averse approach we took after going 1-0 up appeared to suck the life out of the team.

When England do move on from Southgate, I think we should be looking at someone like Graham Potter – someone who has worked his way to the top of management with innovative coaching techniques, rather than simply being in charge of England's youth teams. In just six years, Potter took minnows Ostersunds from Sweden's fourth division to playing in Europe and beating Arsenal 2-1 at the Emirates Stadium. He then reversed the slide at Swansea City in just one season, was the catalyst for making Brighton the top four challengers we know them as today, and ended up in the Chelsea job. Ok, his time at Chelsea didn't end so well,

sacked after less than a season in charge. But that's a bigger issue entirely – new owner Todd Boehly is still learning how to run a football club, spending £1bn in a year without having any sense of transfer strategy. It's early days for new Chelsea boss Mauricio Pochettino, but he honestly isn't doing much better than Potter – and Poch is widely lauded as one of the best in the business.

Potter remains out of work at the time of writing – it's probably only a matter of time before a Premier League club sacks their manager and he gets drafted in. But if he's still available next summer, I think England would be foolish not to sign him up.

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