

It's good to be back, isn't it? The summer break is nice and all, but when the football returns I'm just giddy. As I write I've just returned from the terraces of the Gtech Community Stadium in west London, having watched Brentford battle to an opening weekend 2-2 draw with Tottenham. A decent result, and an indication in my eyes that the two clubs could be near each other in the table come May 2024.

This was a Tottenham without Harry Kane – their talismanic striker and captain, perhaps the club's best ever player – who finally put an end to the perennial rumblings about his future in north London and, with just one year left on his contract, was sold for £100million. He's travelled overseas, to German juggernauts Bayern Munich – the one club in the world where he's almost guaranteed to finally win a major trophy, given that Bayern have won the last 11 German league titles. Lots of pundits found it difficult to understand the move abroad. After all, Kane at just 30 years old is only 47 goals shy of Alan Shearer's all-time Premier League goalscoring record. Kane scored a whopping 30 league goals last season, so staying in the league for even just two more years would've likely seen him break the old record, and set a new almost unattainable one. But realistically, Tottenham would never have sold him to a Premier League rival, and Kane simply had to leave a Tottenham team who didn't qualify for any level of European football this year. Bayern now have a really good chance at going toe-to-toe with Manchester City for the Champions League.

I'm not going to linger too long on the Women's World Cup as it'll be over by the time you pick this up – but I've really enjoyed it thus far. Watching the evolution of this England team has been fun; at the time of writing, we've made it to the semi-finals for the second World Cup in a row. It hasn't been particularly pretty, but it's been effective. Lauren James, the 21 year old Chelsea forward (whose brother is Chelsea

and England right-back Reece James) had had a breakout tournament and seemed to be confirming her place at the top of the world order – but in remarkably similar fashion to Wayne Rooney at the 2006 World Cup, she was sent off late in a knockout round game for stamping on an opponent. Having said that, her contributions in the group stages were the difference that saw the Lionesses battle on. Nigeria gave us a scare in the last 16, one in which we managed to shed the national identity by winning a penalty shootout. A comeback win against Colombia in the quarters showcased the fighting spirit running through the squad. At the time of writing, we're being listed as the favourites to win the World Cup and bring football home – but I think it's far too close to call. A semi-final against hosts Australia for me to look forward to, and then the final against Spain or Sweden if we get there. I'm actually backing Sweden to lift the trophy; you'll once again be able to relish in the shortcomings of my prediction.

The tournament has also pleasantly surprised me in terms of quality. Now before you come calling for my head – I'm not being sexist with that insinuation. The women's game, as we all know, is comparatively poorly funded and forever facing an uphill battle compared to the men's game. Yet with the fanfare around both, there's a tendency for us to fall into the trap of watching both tournaments as if the physical difference between the two is to be the only difference. Then we observe the obvious technical gap and some people, surprised at that, turn into an attack on the quality of the women's game. Women's football needs time, it needs a steady increase in funding, and it needs tournaments like this to continue to raise its profile. Increasing the number of teams at this World Cup from 24 to 32 – matching the men's – was a sign that the game has grown in the last four years, but that came with a risk that there would be a huge gulf

continued on p57

in quality between the best and the others. Yet that's not really transpired – hell, even Germany, ranked 2nd in the world, were dumped out of the tournament at the group stages by Morocco ... ranked 72nd.

Whether England go on to lift the trophy or not, the Lionesses have done us as a country proud, and continue to lead the charge in lifting women's football to where it belongs on the world stage.

We've got another international tournament on the horizon this coming month. I hasten to say "look forward to", because it's the Rugby World Cup, and we're English. Normally a match made in heaven – but this year, something that seems destined to disappoint. Before the Six Nations, I said to give Steve Borthwick time. I think he still needs patience from us – hear me out.

After another fairly flat Six Nations - stumbling into 4th above Italy and the worst Wales side I've ever known, whilst suffering a Twickenham humiliation by French hands-confidence hasn't been high. Unfortunately there's something systemically wrong in English rugby – which is why I'm hesitant to call for Borthwick's resignation, as I genuinely can't see what more he can do. The talent pipelines established between club and country in both France and Ireland simply do not exist here, whilst our top league is in financial ruin. Three Premiership clubs have gone bankrupt in the past year (namely London Irish, Wasps and Worcester) because, at a very basic level, the money that the sport generates is vastly outstripped by the current costs that professional clubs face. The RFU has failed to show the leadership required to set up a structure that redistributes funds to keep these clubs afloat. Surely if France can run a successful league, then England can figure it out. It being a solution, or at least an improvement, to a club-country relationship that would keep clubs in the black financially, thus allowing the Premiership to thrive, enabling players

to kick on in their development to become world class Test rugby superstars.

England are suffering from a relative lack of quality these days. Yes, we have some exceptional players who move heaven and earth for the jersey. But we're not producing forwards (particularly in the tight five positions) who are of the same Test-level quality as other nations. And whilst we've got an abundance of outside backs and loose forwards right now, the key half back positions are perhaps the most problematic.

At scrum half, Danny Care is, in my opinion, the standout at club level, but his recent recall to the national setup has come a bit too late. Jack van Poortvliet has been the regular starter, steady and secure in his play, and with time on his side - but he's just picked up a nasty injury. And then there's Ben Youngs – the man with the most England caps ever – but that should tell you that he's not the man to build around.

At fly half – our captain Owen Farrell, one of the leading lights of the last decade for England. But his track record for dodgy high tackles looks to have caught up with him; a recent red card against Wales means he's likely to be banned for a couple of the World Cup pool matches. Then there's the prodigious Marcus Smith – a player so talented that I sometimes wish he was French or Australian, where they'd get the best out of him. It feels like he's on a different wavelength to our current crop – and for some reason England aren't willing to experiment by building the team around him. George Ford I like, and he might well step back into that starting jersey – but he's had his critics in the past.

There is a silver lining in all of this. The baffling decision to make the draw in 2020 has been kind to us English. Back then, we were ranked 3rd in the world, and thus are one of the top four seeds. And the quirkiness of the draw has blessed us – only one of the current best five teams

continued on p58

in the world (Ireland, New Zealand, hosts France, South Africa, or Scotland) can reach the final. Meanwhile, our half of the draw is much kinder. In fact, going off of current world rankings, we are expected to reach the final – read that again.

I should be jumping for joy about that. But all it's doing is papering over cracks. When England reached the final four years ago, it was purely on merit. The semi-final win over New Zealand might be the best England performance I've ever watched. This year, reaching the final would simply be a case of England beating teams who are somehow worse than us at this point in time. Getting out of the pool would be a fairly good achievement – Argentina and Japan won't be easy opponents there.

If England do get through the pool, the quarter-final will likely be against Wales – a close call based on the recent Tests. Then a

semi-final against the Aussies – yes, currently a bit off the pace of their fellow Southern Hemisphere giants, having finished dead last in The Rugby Championship (think the Six Nations, but instead it's got four teams and is played below the equator). But their head coach? The one and only Eddie Jones; so anything's possible there.

Making the final on October 28th at Paris' Stade de France is a distinct possibility – but that's where the fun stops. England would finally be facing one of the big boys. In a one-off match, perhaps we could pull off one of the most unlikely World Cup triumphs. And, of course, I'll be backing them all the way - even if I expect a drubbing.

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