

From The Stand – Scots Fans Back on the Rollercoaster



The Edinburgh Reporter's Mike Smith contemplates another World Cup qualifying campaign for Scotland.

The queue for the rollercoaster ride that is Scotland and the World Cup is already forming. The first ride is in Malta on Sunday – nicknamed 'the banana skin', the start to another World Cup qualifying campaign is fraught with danger for the Scots.

Yet, it says a lot for how low our national game has plummeted that there is nervousness ahead of the tie against a country ranked 176th in the world. Surely we'll be able to defeat Malta? Well, we need only to think back a few weeks to when Hearts came up against Maltese opposition in the Europa League to answer that one...

It is almost 40 years since Scotland last had a team many of us thought were one of the best in the world. The much-maligned Ally MacLeod was the national team manager who took Scotland to the World Cup Finals in Argentina in 1978 and the bold Ally was telling anyone who would listen that the Scots 'would return home with a medal'. Defeat from Peru, a humiliating draw with Iran and the sending home of winger Willie Johnston for taking a banned stimulant – Willie took hay fever medication called Reactive which contained traces of the stimulant – meant the Scots were sent home with their tails between their collective legs. Not even a thrilling victory over the Netherlands – who would go on to reach the final itself – in the final group game could save face. Since 1978, Scotland's football team has been in steady decline.

There has been the odd occasion or two when it seemed Scottish football was about to make its presence felt again. We came close to qualifying for Euro 2008 with the Scots famously defeating France home and away. Only a narrow defeat by Italy in the final qualification game prevented Scotland from gracing the European Championship finals. In 2003 Scotland defeated the Netherlands in a play-off for a place at the Euro 2004 finals. The trouble was it was only a 1-0 win in the first leg – and Scotland crumbled 6-0 in the return in Amsterdam...

More recently, Scotland came close to reaching the finals of Euro 2016 in France – only to capitulate on a painful night in Georgia. We couldn't even make it to the play-offs by being the best third-placed country, thanks to the Republic of Ireland having the belief they could defeat world champions Germany. Belief is, sadly, in short supply in Scotland.

1998 was the last time Scotland played in the World Cup Finals. A brave showing by Craig Brown's men in the opening game against holders Brazil still resulted in defeat. This was followed by a draw against Norway, defeat from Morocco and the return tickets back home...

What I find particularly sad is that decades of, for the most part, abject failure has taken its toll. Apathy now seems to reign over the national side. This attitude isn't helped by the new dates and kick-off times arranged by Fifa in order to please the seemingly countless television companies who pour their money into the Fifa coffers and expect the national sides to dance to their tune. Scotland's kick-off time in Malta is that less than traditional time – 7.45 on a Sunday evening. And for those of us not of a mind to travel to the Mediterranean the night before the beginning of a working week, watching the game on television is only an option a) if you subscribe to Rupert Murdoch's empire or b) if you go to the pub to watch the game on a big screen which, being the night before the woes of Monday kick in, is not ideal.

Then there is the financial aspect of football in 2016. The transfer window shuts on the last day of August and already over £1b has been spent on transfer fees – in England alone. That truly is a staggering figure. The vast sums of money Murdoch's Sky TV has ploughed into the English game to secure rights to cover games – and also BT Sport who have performed a similar act – has made the English FA Premiership 'the richest league in the world'. But at what cost?

Foreign players arrive in England for astronomical transfer fees, often at the expense of home-grown talent. And while the television money given to Scottish football is only a fraction of what is given south of the border, there are several players who have recently plied their trade in Scotland and have begged the question from long-suffering supporters – why?

We have long since been used to the likes of Celtic and Rangers importing players of dubious quality. The rest of Scottish football, it seems, has followed suit. Now I'm not saying all foreign imports to these shores are lacking in quality. But I do wonder about some of the players on display. Is the dearth of home-grown talent in Scotland now so severe that clubs are signing players from abroad on the premise that 'they're foreign, they must be good'?

The Hearts team which romped to the Ladbrokes Championship title less than 18 months ago contained a fair amount of good, young Scots players. However, as Head Coach Robbie Neilson has had to adjust his team for the more arduous challenges in the Ladbrokes Premiership, he has shipped many of these lads out. The likes of Dale Carrick, Kevin McHattie, Gary Oliver and Scott Robinson appeared to have promising futures but now have not only left Tynecastle but most have faded from the sight of the top flight of Scottish football. Even the likes of Billy King and Jordan McGhee – both likely to feature for Scotland's Under 21 team against Macedonia at Tynecastle on Friday evening – have been sent out on loan to Inverness Caledonian Thistle and Middlesbrough respectively. With King unable to

play against Hearts the other week, the Caley Thistle side was dominated by English players. When you consider that, nearly 50 years ago, Celtic won the European Cup with a side containing not only all Scots but players born within a 30-mile radius of Celtic Park then it's easy to reflect on how times have changed.

Of all which makes Scotland Head Coach Gordon Strachan's task all the more difficult.

Unlike some so-called experts – step forward Pat Nevin – I don't have the answer to Scotland's troubles. I am simply saddened that our country's football team is as poor as it is. I hanker after the days when Scotland reached six World Cup Finals out of seven. Particularly the Willie Ormond era when Scotland were the only unbeaten country at the 1974 World Cup Finals and were within a Billy Bremner hairs breadth of beating Brazil. Even the Ally MacLeod era, pre Argentina debacle, when Scotland brushed aside European Champions Czechoslovakia and defeated England at Wembley with a style and swagger that shouted 'Wha's like us?'

Jock Stein took over from Ally MacLeod and while he steadied the ship and guided Scotland to the World Cup Finals in Spain in 1982 and for much of the successful qualifying campaign for Mexico 1986 – tragically, the big man died during Scotland's draw in Wales which secured a play-off place – there still seemed to be something missing from the Scotland sides of that era.

Sadly, Scotland no longer produces players such as Jimmy Johnstone, Willie Johnston, Jim Baxter, Denis Law and Kenny Dalglish. The focus now seems to be about trying not to lose rather than displaying flamboyance and skill by putting opponents to the sword. I'm tired of hearing the same old script trotted out – 'we're only a small country, we shouldn't expect to produce hugely talented players blah, blah, blah...'

I know we live in a different era now and society has changed so much in the last five decades but when I see some of the players who play for Scotland now and compare them to the greats of yesteryear it makes me mourn for our national side. Scotland has failed to adapt to the changing world. I take the point that when we qualified for the 1978 World Cup Finals we did so from a qualifying group of just three countries – Scotland, Czechoslovakia and Wales. However, now it seems we just don't have the players to cope with a two-year qualifying campaign and our international ranking may well be sinking to the levels of the Faroe Islands, Malta and Cyprus before long. In fact, we may have already reached that level.

The fervour and hype that precipitated the 1978 World Cup Finals will never be repeated. Indeed, the SFA would never wish it repeated given the embarrassment that enveloped the national team at that time. There seems to me to have been a deliberate attempt to play down Scotland's prospects ever since for fear we are exposed to the same humiliation again.

Sadly, as the likes of Serbia, Macedonia and Wales pass us by, it seems we no longer need to play down our prospects – our national team's lack of ability has resulted in a downward spiral we may never escape from.

Here's hoping the World Cup rollercoaster at least takes Scotland towards the ascendency when it begins on Sunday evening. With Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania and England to come it would be nice to experience some kind of high...