

The analytics of football's possible return home

Blog post by Managing Director Benjamin Wegg-Prosser, 9 July 2018

The twenty-three men of the England World Cup squad in Russia have done more to restore respect for Britain abroad than any number of ministerial visits, soft power exchanges and cultural tours. The irony of this turnaround taking place in Russia, at a low-point in Anglo-Russia relations, something which the death of a British citizen yesterday linked to the nerve agent attack in Salisbury is only likely to exacerbate, has not been lost on anyone in Moscow, Samara or Kaliningrad (I write having watched England's last three matches in these cities.)

The contrast between the measured approach which England's manager Gareth Southgate has taken when preparing his team is in stark contrast to the chaotic approach that British government has handled the Brexit negotiations. Where Southgate has downplayed expectations, explaining one cannot hope too much from a young and inexperienced squad, Theresa May has asserted that Brexit means Brexit with a series of revised plans that (to misquote a football adage) "have looked good on paper but poor on grass." It should be noted that English football's most recent low-point, its defeat at the hands of Iceland in the 2016 European Championships, came four days after the result of the Brexit referendum. So, how has this England football team been able to turn around such a challenging brief, compared to the short-comings of its political leadership? I will leave further Brexit analysis to other able colleagues.

Let me explain Southgate's approach. The starting point in fact pre-dates his time as manager. England managed to exit the 2014 World Cup within five days of its first game after defeats to Italy and Uruguay. At that point the two competing centres of power in English football: the Football Association (who oversee the English national team) and the Premier League (who run the English domestic league) came together to undertake a research project to assess the scale of the problem.

Their starting point was to understand whether they actually had a problem. Analysis was commissioned to gauge whether England really did fail to meet the expectations placed in them in the run-up to tournaments. The answer was an overwhelming yes: reviewing results of all the major teams in the run-up to international tournaments compared with how they performed at the championships showed that England consistently came in below par, countries like Italy and France came in on par and the Germans always performed over par.

With this data in mind, the research team then sought to understand the reasons behind this. They settled on two core issues. The first was physiological: during the formative years of a footballer between the age of 18 and 21 the English players, compared to their European peers, failed to sustain similar levels of technical progress. It was assumed that this was principally down to the restricted opportunities that many young English players have in their domestic league thanks to the strength of the Premier League and the high number of non-English players. The second was psychological: English players really did not like playing for England, some indeed hated it. Why? The interviews with players revealed that the cliques linked to clubs, wealth, geography and yes, even race undermined the team spirit. Moreover, the weight of expectations from the media, and the dramatic swings from heroes to zeros on the back of one result became too much for some of these young men to bear.

From the perspective of England's current success in Russia it is possible to see how this research project has sown such fruitful seeds. England now has a much more active youth programme, with teams winning junior versions of the World Cup in recent years and Premier League clubs being more conscious of their obligations to support young English talent. While Southgate's more open and collegiate approach has made his squad more united and happy in themselves. In turn, they have become more accessible and engaged with fans and media alike, which has had a profound impact on the atmosphere in Russia.

Whatever happens in England's semi-final against Croatia, the appliance of thoughtful research and analysis will leave a lasting impact on English football. Whether its political masters in Whitehall running the Brexit process have time to learn from this experience is another matter.