



**FANTASY
FOOTBALL**
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Aha! Here is my review of the European Championship.

A little delayed perhaps, appearing a little later than every other pundits' reflections on the tournament; I feel like the short, fat man who holds on to his hat, as he jogs, wheezing, trying to catch up.

Firstly, did I get to the final?

Yes. It's a crazy story. A few Greeks and I knocked together some equine carpentry, which we then pushed up to the stadium and climbed inside. Well, the stewards, thinking it was some sort of gift, brought it in and once inside we all jumped out and... and okay, that's a fib; there was no second Troy (sorry about that one, but bad Ancient Greek puns are my Achilles Heel. But these are the brackets so I can write what I want.)

No, I caught my flight home and ensured I'd have to write this final piece in the past tense. That last morning, I did set myself little tests, like 'if the bus to the airport doesn't come in two minutes, I'm staying'. And straight away the bus would trundle around the corner.

So I got back and ended up watching the final — not through a dense fog of smoke or anything mind you — in Paddy the Farmer's pub.

Now it's time to hand out a few gongs to the good and great of the tournament. While lots of journalists foolishly rushed into this task one week ago, I've taken time to sit back in my rocking chair, swirl my brandy, and put some thought into it.

What you must remember, is that when you've been at almost a third of the matches at a tournament, it is often difficult to remember precisely what happened. Football fatigue can even affect you at games and you may have to turn to the people next to you and ask: "Who got the goal there? Who crossed the ball in? Who's playing?"

And all the matches I saw on TV were broadcast in Portuguese, so I missed the insightful thoughts of commentators. In Portugal, they don't have pundits at half-time either; their excellent cameramen just pick out pretty girls in the crowd and concentrate their lens on them during the interval.

Best Team: I'm not going to pick a group of misfits from various teams and wedge them into one unwieldy unit. Instead, I'm opting for one country. While it should be Greece, because they were the eventual winners, I couldn't pick that untalented, shirt-pulling bunch, a team so negative, they must have delighted tournament sponsors Canon (I'm not bitter about losing money on Portugal winning the thing or anything.) So I'm opting for Russia, the only team that managed to beat the untalented, negative shirt-pullers.

Best Player: This was supposed to be the tournament of the midfielder, where Zizou would confirm that comparisons with Maradona were not exaggerated. Instead, he got sick before taking a penalty against England.

While Nedved, at times, and Rosicky were wonderful, for the most part the likes of Zidane, Gerrard and Ballack had less an influence on the tournament than a past-his-best Davids, Gravesen, and Zagorakis. How sad is that. At least we can take the easy way out down here in Cork and crown the most influential player as Alexander Mostovoi. Weight of the nation on his shoulders, he got sent home after speaking out against his coach. Top man.

Worst Player: I know he didn't play any game, and that he didn't even travel as a member of the England squad, but the award

Football's



GOOOOAL: A Barcelona fan who was told that the best place to start a protest was on the net.

goes to Danny Mills, just out of fondness for how bad he would have been if included by Eriksson. Okay, a tie between Danny and Ian Harte.

Best goal: Not a goal per se, but the Barca fan's face hitting the back of the net in the final was sublime.

Best Performance: Not many players grabbed a game by the scruff of the neck and pulled their team over the line, so I'm opting for Big Phil's tactical astuteness throughout the tournament. Surely there is a some position in the UN for the big man.

Best Fans: The Dutch. Best dressed, best band, best fun. Dutch people have the added advantage of looking weird as well.

I should give it to the English because they were so well-behaved. But that's relative to how they have behaved before and to give it to them for that reason would be, in their own language, "pants".

I suppose the rest of us fans should be grateful because the common language we all communicate in is usually English. But some-

times when you meet up with someone who cannot speak English, you just end up slapping them on the back and shouting out the name of their best player. "John Dahl Tomasson," you congratulate them, and then they slap you on the back and shout, "Robbie Keane." In many ways, this can be more rewarding than talking to English fans.

"My granny's from Ireland. Where are you from: Norf or Sourf?" I always try to confuse them by saying the middle. They turn the name of their own country into three syllables when they chant. And the clincher, that gives the English, again, the award for being the worst fans at the tournament, is, that the majority of them, even at a neutral game, won't stand up for other countries' anthems.

Some day, even though I'll probably get seven shades of s**t kicked out of me, I want to go up to fattest, most tattooed group of 'Sven's Army' and shake a ruler underneath their double chins. Then I will tell them: "You may have ruled the waves, but it is I who waves the rule." I'll deserve the beating too.

Best Venue: Braga. The stadium that is built into the mountainside is supposed to resemble an Inca suspension bridge from Peru. The design is wonderful. Plus 'braga' in Spanish means knickers, which I find funny.

Best Headlines: From the Mirror: 'Acropolis Wow' and 'Grecian 2004'.

Best Quote: "In the second half I watched our bench and saw some players showing me two fingers." Dutch goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar.

The Carol Coleman Award for the most probing interview of the tournament: "What was it like playing against 12 men?"

Incisive as ever, Garth Crooks backs the England manager into a corner after the Portugal game.

Most Appropriate Song: Nelly Futardo's Forca Portugal was just another silly ditty to tack on to a major tournament. Surely the opening track on her new album, One-Trick Pony, is dedicated to a certain Manchester United winger though.

Most curious thing about trip: Free