

Prologue

18 December 2022

Someone, somewhere, is kicking a football, possibly to take a penalty. It's a moment of truth that can sometimes take your breath away, and the climax to a story about a young goalkeeper from Northern Ireland that's become one of the game's fairytales.

Ah, football!

Willie McCrum was an inheritor of means who believed in fair play but ruined his family and died a pauper. 'This man,' Gary Lineker once said, in ironic homage, 'has a lot to answer for.' Among the sepia shadows of the past, there's also a god-fearing McCrum, with an Old Testament beard, who shares my name, a resilient optimist who believed in doing the best he could with what he had, a progressive innovator and church-going workaholic who – never mind football – was too busy for recreation. This personal history holds a mirror up to more than a hundred years of the game, but also harbours a father-son relationship that could have been torn from the pages of a late-Victorian novel, a scenario, provoked by the collision of family with football, which also happens to be true.

On TV, the penalty kick looks like someone belting a ball at a nearly open goal in the merciless humiliation of a doomed defender. Actually, the odds

are not quite as bad as they seem. Global statistics suggest that approximately one third of such shots will fail. And that's the hook. For the spectators, it's an enthralling agony which will propel us to the brink of some excruciating sensations: joy, dread, hope, dismay, rage, and exhilaration, as if Time itself stood still.

Every second of the penalty kick is a drama as suspenseful as a five-foot putt at the eighteenth hole, or a Wimbledon matchpoint. People have gone into a similar kind of rhapsody about cover drives in cricket, but that's light verse compared to this spectacle. No other sporting moment distils such a fear factor, in which the penalty box becomes, according to one writer, a 'chamber of truth'. When the whistle blows for that spot kick, the fate of the earth seems to hang in the balance during a fleeting passage of single combat whose outcome might bless or curse either protagonist.

It's 18 December 2022. Psychological moments in sport rarely come much bigger or better than this, the climax of the World Cup Final, France vs. Argentina, in Qatar. After extra time, with both sides punch-drunk, the score is tied, 3–3. Inside the stadium, a sea of blue-and-white, flecked with tricolores, there's uproar; the suspense is unbearable. Once the inevitable shootout begins, it's over to the gladiators: competing kicks from each team.

First up, the superstar French striker, twenty-three-year-old Kylian Mbappé. Television captures him steadying himself, after a very deep breath, cheeks

puffed in nervous exhalation, a sportsman masking the moment with an edgy half-smile. Then, in a thrilling gesture of self-confidence, with the ball at his finger-ends, just before he steps forward to take the penalty, as if in the sunrise of eternity, this great player kisses the ball like a plaything, *en passant*.

In the past, footballs were weapons more than toys. As one sportswriter has put it, ‘The old leather ball, classically struck by an instep encased in the old leather boot, generated a noise that only the Royal Artillery could have replicated.’ Mbappé’s ball is no bruiser, but a distant relative, many times removed, of the great leather beasts of yore. As airy as thought, this Derbystar Deliciae Platearum is a miracle of aerodynamic ingenuity, tailor-made for the mind-games of the penalty kick. On the toe of a great striker – spinning, drifting, dipping, or looping – such a multi-coloured sphere becomes a thing of magic, a trick to tease and tantalise.

Tonight, Mbappé has already scored a hat-trick. He’s the first player, since England’s Geoff Hurst in 1966, to achieve this feat in a World Cup final. He will shortly score again, but to no avail. France are about to join the catalogue of title holders who lose. Mbappé’s ruthless efficiency is followed by Lionel Messi’s audacious shot. He just rolls the ball beneath the goalkeeper’s nose, in a teasing display of *sang-froid*. There are international sports analysts with careers devoted to the psychology of the penalty kick. Now

the shootout becomes a masterclass in what English players call ‘shit-housery’.

Next, no. 20, Kingsley Coman, for France, gets bamboozled by some outrageous gamesmanship from the goalkeeper Emiliano Martínez, who defies the odds to make a brilliant save. (‘The box is mine’, he boasts afterwards.) With team confidence surging, the Argentine striker Dybala, no. 21, slots it home down the middle, as cool as you like. Then no. 8, Tchouaméni becomes visibly rattled by Martínez’ antics with the ball, and hits the post. France are 2 down, and there’s no way back. Once Paredes (no. 5) has smashed the ball past Hugo Lloris, Kolo Muani, no. 12, for France, holds steady to score. Now, as Gonzalo Montiel makes that long, lonely walk down mid-field, the pressure is intolerable. But he calmly sends Lloris diving . . . the wrong way.

Game over: Argentina 4, France 2. In Qatar, bedlam. In Buenos Aires, a crazed fan gallops bareback on a white horse down the crowded Avenida 9 de Julio. On national radio, a veteran broadcaster is celebrating his newest nervous breakdown like a banshee: *Arg-Arg-Arg-Arg-en- teeeeee-aaaaaaa!*

The British pundits are gasping. Pixie-eyed Gary Lineker, a former England striker, commentating for the BBC, has been known to joke that football is a simple game: ‘Twenty-two men chase a ball for ninety minutes and, at the end, the Germans win.’ Not tonight. Having declared that he’s ‘never seen anything like it’, he hails a Final for the ages. Alan Shearer,

another renowned ex-striker, chimes in: ‘We’re breathless.’ He also judges it ‘an unbelievable Final . . . I don’t think I’ll ever see anything like it again.’ After this, Rio Ferdinand, his colleague in the commentary box, announces that he feels ‘blessed’, adding that he will ‘tell my grandkids I was here’. Off-camera, the aftermath of a great match has become a wall of noise.

Among rival French and Argentine supporters, massed in the Lusail stadium, a secular cathedral of sport, tears of desolation or joy streak the painted faces of the faithful. Lineker is still summarising. ‘Somewhere in this script, someone made it into a drama,’ he says. Lineker once took TV cameras to venerate the grave of the half-forgotten amateur who first conjured this duelling moment; he knows his football history. These kicks, super-charged with such positive and negative electricity, combine box-office with football mythology.

Amid so much ecstatic storytelling, Mbappé’s stolen kiss gets lost. But I can’t help thinking that Willie McCrum from Co. Armagh might have recognised the French player’s tender act of superstition. My neglected ancestor devoted some of his best years to improving the game of football in the 1890s. The penalty kick was his brainchild, a peculiar contribution to the conduct of the game. Every nuance of this World Cup shootout – a great conflict reduced to a visceral moment of catharsis – would have made perfect sense to my great-grandfather. He might have been astonished to witness this extraordinary climax televised in

such a stadium, but the fundamental things apply. A kick is just a kick.

‘You could not make it up,’ says Lineker, almost lost for words in Qatar. For many like him, this is the real thing: a game that tells us who we are, and what we feel, in a casual but gripping commentary on the story of our lives.

Perhaps he’s remembering his own magic boot. (Lineker holds the England record for goals in World Cup Finals.) Actually, ‘making it up’ might not be the worst strategy. If this game is partly a metaphor, there’s plenty of room for creative digression and competing narrative strategies. Even as a matter of life-and-death, the power of a global sport to promote seductive versions of luck, risk and redemption is more than metaphorical, however. There’s history here: *The Penalty Kick* is a football story about Ireland, game theory and a fervent young keeper.

Penalties come in different guises. From 1891 to 2022, you can find many other kinds of penalty-kick drama in the mirror of history. Sepp Herberger, Germany’s national coach during the 1930s and 40s, had it best. A pragmatist, obsessed by his team’s performance, and not much else, who somehow survived the rise and fall of the Third Reich, Herberger once said of football: ‘The ball is round. The game lasts ninety minutes. This much is fact. Everything else is theory.’

Mbappé’s kiss tells another story.