

# When Football Did Not Come Home

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Global Research, July 15, 2021

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*They were in with a shot. The English team, deliriously floating on chants of [Football's Coming Home](#), had made it to their first major tournament final since 1966. The UEFA European Football Championship would be decided at Wembley against an Italian side unblemished by defeat since September 2018. But the English, coached by the much admired Gareth Southgate, succumbed in that most cruel of deciders: the penalty shootout.*

In English footballing history, the penalty shootout has been responsible for a string of famous defeats. In 1990, the national side lost to the West German juggernaut in the semi-final of the World Cup. In the European Championship in 1996, the result was repeated, with the Germans again winning. Southgate will have particularly vivid memories of that: he was one of the players [who missed](#). The shelf of defeat was beginning to sag.

Then came the European Championships of 2020, delayed by the global pandemic. England were fortunate in their draw and, unlike many of their opponents, played most of their matches on home soil. But their record proved impressive, with Southgate's side keeping a clean sheet till the semi-final against Denmark. It became clear that Southgate had created a team unit as opposed to a team of stars bristling with contesting egos. Previous [footballing practices](#) extolled celebrity within the team, with predictable consequences. “Beckhamisation”, named after the recognisable former England captain and Manchester United player David Beckham, did much to create estrangement within the ranks between the celebrities and the foot soldiers.

The success of Southgate's team also did much to tease out discussions about English identity and a supposedly new form of progressive Englishness. “In England we have spent a bit of time being a bit lost as to what our modern identity is,” [observed](#) Southgate prior to the 2018 World Cup. “I think as a team we represent that modern identity and hopefully people can connect with us.” The UK Migration Museum [even declared](#) that, “Without players with at least one parent or grandparent born overseas, England would be down to just 3 players.”

The draining final played on July 11 finished with each side having scored a goal. In the penalty shootout, the steely discipline of the Italians resolved the match in their favour. Pundits spent hours [debating](#) England's tactics against the Italian goalkeeper, as if it mattered. Should the tender-aged Bukayo Saka have taken the fifth penalty kick as

opposed to a more seasoned player? Was Southgate being too bookish in sticking to the original line up of players?

But the defeat did more than produce the usual rivers of commentary on tactical slips and fortuitous blunders. Darker demons were released from the froth of despair. Vengefully, they focused on matters of race, scalding and unsparing about those who had failed to score. A torrent of abuse was released upon Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Saka, a vicious, smouldering kind that has come to typify social media commentary. Natalie Elphicke, Conservative MP for Dover and Deal, [heaped scorn](#) on Rashford in a private WhatsApp group. “They lost – would it be ungenerous to suggest that Rashford should have spent more time perfecting his game and less time playing politics?”

A mural of Rashford in Withington, Manchester, was defaced with obscenities. In [appealing](#) for information on the incident, Chief Superintendent Paul Savill warned that hate crime would not be tolerated and was “not welcome in this city.” Notes of support were placed across the mural like plastering bands of reassurance across cuts and bruises.

Team captain Harry Kane took to Twitter to [praise](#) the three players who had the courage to take the penalty and should be celebrated for that fact. “They deserve support & backing not the vile racist abuse they’ve had since last night. If you abuse anyone on social media you’re not an @England fan and we don’t want you.”

Three lads who were brilliant all summer had the courage to step up & take a pen when the stakes were high. They deserve support & backing not the vile racist abuse they’ve had since last night. If you abuse anyone on social media you’re not an [@England](#) fan and we don’t want you.  
[pic.twitter.com/PgskPAXgxV](https://pic.twitter.com/PgskPAXgxV)

— Harry Kane (@HKane) [July 12, 2021](#)

On the issue of condemning racial abuse, certain players found the messages from the Johnson government jarringly insincere. The pot of identity was again being stirred and the result was increasingly ugly. Home secretary Priti Patel received a sharp barb from English footballer Tyrone Mings for having previously refused to condemn fans who had booed the England team in taking the knee in protesting against racism. In his [opinion](#), Patel had undercut her own case. “You don’t get to stoke the fire at the beginning of the tournament by labelling our anti-racism message as ‘Gesture Politics’ and then pretend to be disgusted when the very thing we’re campaigning against, happens.”

It was not just that the home secretary had voiced her view against such displays of “gesture politics”. She also saw little problem in the conduct of the fans: “That’s the choice for them, quite frankly.” The hordes were duly summoned.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has also been known to dabble with the race card, penning pieces of some notoriety and doing his bit of stoking from time to time. London radio presenter James O’Brien [noted](#) one article in particular mocking Islamic dress. “In the three weeks after the ‘letterboxes’ article was published in August 2018, 42 per cent of offline Islamophobic incidents reports ‘directly referenced Boris Johnson and/or the language used in his column.’”

Labour's opposition leader Keir Starmer was even more explicit in Parliament, [accusing](#) Johnson of giving racism "the green light" and engaging in his own culture war. "And I'll tell you the worst kind of gesture politics, putting an England shirt on over a shirt and tie whilst not condemning those booing".

Johnson [has promised](#) to take "practical steps to ensure that the Football Banning order regime is changed so that if you were guilty ... of racist abuse online of footballers then you will not be going to the match, no ifs, no buts, no exemptions and no excuses."

The government was also seeking other handy alibis. As usual, social media platforms were walked into those roles to provide ammunition. Johnson claimed to have had a firm word with representatives from social media at his Downing Street residence on July 13, [warning](#) that he would "legislate to address this problem in the Online Harms Bill, and unless they get hate and racism off their platforms, they will face fines amounting to 10% of their global revenues." The more astute comment in this move [was made](#) by former Premier League player Anton Ferdinand: sort out your own house first. And that house is in severe need of tidying.

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