

GROUP STAGE

GROUP A:

Sex; Disclaimers; Introductions; Breakfast

1.

WAS IT 1998 OR 2002? I CANNOT EVEN REMEMBER. But it was one of those surveys dreamt up by a hopeful survey company executive; hopeful the end result would be staggering enough to propel it around the world. Then he or she would achieve lifetime notoriety. Every pub introduction would incorporate: *"Sam's the person who masterminded that survey before the 1998 World Cup."* Or was it the 2002 World Cup? Regardless of which cup it was, Sam would be in demand as a keynote speaker at global survey conferences for decades to come.

Personally, I rarely trust surveys. Not since Sir Humphrey Appleby tutored Bernard that achieving a desired outcome is merely a case of persuasively framing the question. Shrewd old Sir Humphrey was nearly always right, but what would he have thought of a survey asking British males whether they would prefer making love to their partner or watching World Cup football?

Like me, he would probably consider it futile.

Think about it. Sex is one of just two reasons why men were originally put on earth. Since the need for the other, providing for a family, has all but disappeared under an

avalanche of female self-sufficiency and modernised welfare policy, sex assumes even greater importance nowadays.

You can choose to believe all those other equally dodgy surveys about modern lifestyles, tight underpants or overuse of cell phones reducing the sex drive of your average male, but nearly every bloke I know still thinks about, dreams about, or talks about sex in an alarmingly persistent fashion. Some are even fortunate enough to engage in it. Communication between men is already appalling enough. Remove sex as a topic of conversation and you risk reducing it to a sequence of grunted greetings.

But the males amongst us need not feel ashamed. After all, this is the way we were built.

God is a master of torque, and this was most evident in the way he dealt with sex. Ensuring the continuance of mankind was a complex assignment that required a combination of factors to successfully work in unison.

First, male testosterone levels needed pitching at the correct level. Too far one way and nothing constructive would ever get done. Too far the other way and the human race would have expired due to boredom, the last batch of disinterested teenagers concluding matters by spending too many Friday nights filling out survey forms. Realising this, He purposely over-compensated the male testosterone component a touch, before then balancing the equation perfectly with a combination of the female psyche and a handbook preaching restraint. In stark contrast to men, most women actually reflect about sex and whom they engage in it with. But this alone was not sufficient. Men were physically built to be the provider and this enabled some, through the use of force, to simply ignore headaches or the desire to be loved.

Thus the Bible, a compendium of moral guidance.

It is debatable as to whether the Bible has proved as successful as God originally intended. Mankind's 2,000-year track record of rape, torture, murder, war and even the odd crucifixion would suggest not. Not being one myself, I can only surmise how a Christian would judge its success. Most

appear to be supremely optimistic people (especially when predicting the ultimate fate of non-believers) and I would therefore guess adoption of the half-full glass approach: just imagine how much more dire history would have been without it. But, successful or not, the Bible was the spiritual precursor to what channels us today: the law.

And today the law instructs that we may not engage in sexual activity without the consent of the other person (or persons). Fair enough too. But this has not prevented men from building massive global enterprises geared solely towards loosening inhibitions and increasing prospects. Beer, Nightclubs, Curry Houses. Usually in that order. And God, foreseeing this evolutionary process, even chipped in with alcohol-reactive female hormones.

The spare time created by modern labour-saving devices has also helped revolutionise sex. So, rather than an essential activity to procreate life, squeezed in amongst the endlessly tiring struggle to survive, sex is now a recreational hunt; and one where possibility can assume more importance than outcome.

Sex today therefore assumes greater importance to men than ever.

Its original role, to continue the human race, remains. But the majority of our spare time is now expended on either plotting or partaking in leisurely and wasteful copulation, be it with a regular partner or someone else. It is little wonder that more and more women seem to be turning to other women to satisfy their sexual needs.

Let us summarise then. God created man in His own image. God therefore had a one-track mind and used His penis to compensate for this shortcoming.

No, that cannot be right. Let us start again.

God implemented a clever, interactive mixture of differing dynamics in men and women to ensure that the necessary amount of sex took place to ensure continuation of the human race. Included in this mixture were morals, which mankind then adapted to include both believers and non-believers. As a result of progress, the human race

now has far too much spare time. Men largely employ this downtime to try to legally lure women into bed or onto the bonnet of a sports car. Women, being the far more intelligent and perceptive sex, are gradually tiring of this incessant puerility.

But one undeniable truth reigns supreme throughout the history of mankind and today remains as prevalent as ever: Sex is King! (Or Queen, depending on preferences.) It is what created each and every person ever born – apart from one well-documented Nazareth-based exception. By my rough estimate, this would be about eight billion.

Whew. And that is just successful sex, meaning it is probably fortunate that most men tire of it after a few minutes. But regardless, sex is what continues to make the male world turn around, whilst also remaining responsible for both the creation and the continuity of life.

How, then, could that survey possibly have arrived at any other conclusion? It was a complete and total mismatch. And the men of Britain are not stupid either. Was it Cecil Rhodes who once said that nine out of every 10 men born wished they had been born English? And those fortunate to be born British delivered the correct survey result after typically subjective thoughtfulness.

The World Cup routed Sex.

95% to 5%.

Sex may be responsible for both the creation and continuity of life, but the football World Cup is...well, considered by the vast majority as being preferable to sex.

2.

Disclaimer.

Preface

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE DICTATES THAT MOST OF YOU WOULD HAVE PICKED UP THIS BOOK IN A BOOKSHOP SOMEWHERE and will now be skimming the first few pages in a hurried attempt to establish whether or not it is worth continuing. Please bear with me a little longer as this disclaimer has been designed to help expedite your decision.

Just ignore for a few more moments that salesperson currently glaring in your direction.

Part One: The Requirement for Culling of Readership

- i) *There is a certain risk in commencing a book with a disclaimer such as this. Any book serious about readership should try to avoid beginning with wearisome and quasi-legal detail.*
- ii) *However, it is an accepted misconception to judge any book by its disclaimer.*
- iii) *If, for example, FIFA had to rely on the opening match of its World Cup tournament as a means of enticing interest or selling the overall concept, then this book – if indeed written – would be somewhere over there in the History section.*
- iv) *That stated, this book did feature an opening chapter containing intentional references of a sexual nature: a deliberate attempt to bring as many potential readers as possible to this point.*

- v) *However, the remainder of this book will not prove suitable for everybody. Nor will certain readers be suitable for this book.*
- vi) *Culling, therefore, needs to now take place.*

Part Two: The Act of Culling Readership

Firstly, those persons motivated solely by sex should now carefully place this book back on the shelf and move discreetly away from the Sports section. There is no more sex. There is plenty of pseudo-eroticism. But no sex.

Secondly, those persons seeking logical explanations as to why seemingly rational people can allow their lives to be overtaken by the conceptuality of a football tournament need not bother reading any further.

Thirdly, to those unsettlingly lucid but emotionally deficient bores who consider people infatuated by football to be 'sad', you have inadvertently strayed into the wrong section of the bookshop. Human emotion is a persistent theme of this book and it will therefore be of little interest to you. Gardening should be either to your left or right.

Fourthly, to those irritating people who take themselves too seriously, I have gone to the trouble of preparing your own special personal message. Others of you may now proceed directly to the next chapter or to the checkout counter.

Part Three: Author's Message to those Irritating People who take themselves far too seriously

Aside from football, my other great intrigue in life is cricket. But wholly different reasons are responsible for attracting me to the English Game as opposed to those that first attracted me to the English Game that became the World Game. Cricket is a sport demanding enormous psychological stamina. To remain at the

crease for hours as somebody tries to maim you with a small, hard projectile hurled towards you at 100mph is not for the mentally delicate. The slightest error of judgement or sliver of self-doubt can result in a nasty demise. Yet, curiously, this game has traditionally and enthusiastically cocooned itself in a blanket of absurdity. The result is that it attracts – like moths to a brightly lit lamp – every conceivable oddball in the Commonwealth. Adjusting the box; fielding at silly mid-off; incessantly rubbing a ball in the region of the crotch; gardening with a bat; staring blankly at the pitch; appealing in a theatrical manner. In other words, the licence to behave in the strangest possible manner without fear of public humiliation or even arrest. But as much as I both appreciate and adore the wonderfully entertaining people who willingly embrace cricket's ridiculous ritual, I actually derive even more enjoyment from watching or playing alongside those people who ordinarily take themselves so seriously. You do not even realise you are doing it. Do you? For what it is worth, you may as well have your backside festooned and Morris dance nude across the village green in broad daylight. But whilst I find you humorous in certain situations, unfortunately, seldom is my enthusiasm reciprocated. So, naff off.

3.

I LOATHE CONFERENCES AND COURSES. I simply cannot tolerate being cooped up in a stuffy room with a load of boring people sporting nametags with Jim scrawled in barely legible felt pen.

And, worst of all, most seem to commence with that hideous ritual where everybody is required to individually introduce themselves to the rest of the group.

It is always something like: *“Hi there everybody, I’m Jim and I’m married with two young boys. I’m a chemical plant*

inspector and in my spare time I like to peruse books about nuclear physics and potter about in my specially designed insect-repellent glasshouse."

Yawn. It is difficult enough remaining awake after a couple of hours of these already tedious conferences without having your eyelids weighed upon so soon by such dreary detail.

Just for once I yearn to hear: *"Hi there everybody, I'm Marco and I'd love to dismember that cheating bastard of a Bolivian referee who sent Totti off for diving. Vaffanculo!"* At least I would finally have somebody worth sidling up to during the first break.

Somehow, though, I cannot see it happening. So I stay away from conferences and courses.

But introductions, painful as they often are, are necessary.

So here goes.

I have no football lineage whatsoever.

An English friend once told me that his life-long dedication to Nottingham Forest Football Club was inherited from his father at birth. A kind of genetic imperfection, like a flat nose or knock-knees. I was not quite so lucky: I got the knock-knees but no football club.

I was not born into the great football dynasties of Europe or South America. Nor am I a disciple of the movements now frenetically engulfing Asia and Africa. Or even a new-age American just discovering the peculiar addiction of football. An Inuit Eskimo or Tibetan Monk with a satellite dish? I would be so fortunate.

What, therefore, are my credentials for writing a book about the consuming effect of the World Cup football tournament on an individual?

What, in fact, are my credentials for writing any book?

I have written only one other book. I sent this book to an author-publisher. He rejected it. But he also gave me some valuable and much appreciated advice.

Writing a book is not easy, particularly when you have

little concept of what you are doing. Any advice, therefore, especially that of a previously published author, is like gold dust to a novice such as me. I will not share the majority of this advice with you, because I consider it part of a publisher-budding writer compact that should remain between the master and his apprentice.

And because I have chosen to disregard most of it.

Moving on.

Do not expect Hemingway or Mailer. They never wrote any books about the World Cup. Do, however, expect a person who frightens you.

You will either be frightened by how much you resemble me or, more likely, how an ordinarily rational person can allow his life to be so easily hijacked by a football tournament. It is not that I merely enthuse over a month of world-class football every four years. According to FIFA there are already well over a billion of these; a good number of whom could write, do write, far better than I could ever hope to.

What I can offer, however, is a perspective from what most would regard as the upper reaches of World Cup fandom.

Not quite in amongst that manic faction at the very top that you read, with a muddled sense of remorseful triumph, has killed himself or herself out of either abject dejection or sheer ecstasy. Nor am I even sufficiently qualified to place myself into the fountain-diving or drive-around-the-streets-tooting-madly-until-dawn categories. A combination of a lifetime restrained by Anglo-Saxon lineage and a local police force suspicious of overt emotional behaviour has ensured this.

I certainly revere the infrequent opportunities to observe such outrageous enjoyment of life, especially when driven by football. And once in Rome, on a steamy evening after Italy had triumphed, I inadvertently became buried amongst such rampant madness and did find myself hesitantly drawn towards an inviting and semi-occupied fountain. My one chance in life to plunge in without restraint or consequence

was eventually thwarted by a sense of guilt and a deficiency of lager. I was neither Italian nor drunk.

My nationality precludes me from such indulgence. The World Cup is not the opportunity to parade my colours in the streets or fountains of the world. Nor is it the chance to hurl chairs through the plate glass windows of foreign bars. Football is the game of our planet, but where I come from, it must first search and seek you out. Then, battling against secluded opportunity and simmering public ridicule, you must cling defiantly to the faith. The bibles need to be stored beneath the floorboards in readiness for the knock at the door in the middle of the night. Well, that is possibly exaggerating a tad, but the concept that football is more important than life and death has never frequented rugby union-obsessed New Zealand. Both the cemeteries and the cities here are full of people bypassed totally by the extraordinary thrill of synchronised bobbing.

Football is, after all – as my fellow New Zealanders often dutifully remind me – *only* a game.

This perception that football is ‘only a game’ is an important one that is often subject to debate in the context of the football World Cup. I therefore feel it warrants careful examination early in our journey.

It’s a load of bollocks.

Football is only a game to New Zealanders because they know only games. Yet I sometimes yearn for the balance of such typically earthy perception. Then one gaze at the World Cup trophy and I think: “*To hell with them.*”

We all need something to worship, something to enthuse over, something to assist us through the largely monotonous drudgery of life. We also require something to intermittently remind us of just how stunning, emotionally opulent, violently fickle and downright crazy our world can be. One inevitable attraction of every World Cup finals tournament is that it will deliver all of this, and even some football.

So, I do not frequent the echelons of the lunatic, the patriot or even the emotionally capricious. I was not born

in a shack in Rio with a picture of Pele on the wall, in a dank back street in Naples or somewhere on a council estate in East London. I simply discovered by chance the intoxicating magic of the World Cup whilst growing up in one of football's final, lingering outposts. And my willingness to doggedly persist with what soon became an obsession in the face of heretical public suspicion simply reinforces the profundity of this...well, obsession.

It does offer me, though, the ideal opportunity to stand back from the subjective, the biased and the emotion, and to observe this modern juggernaut through balanced, unsullied eyes.

If you believe that last sentence then take my advice: buy your local World Cup guide instead. Because the apparent purity of my neutrality actually counts for nothing. Whilst balance may be a requisite for competing in a World Cup, it is seldom evident in the people who follow it. And I promise to prove no exception. This is, after all, one reason that helps make it so exceptional.

4.

THIS NEXT PIECE HAS BEEN INSERTED INTO THE MIDST OF THE INTRODUCTION PROCESS AS A MEANS OF REVEALING MORE ABOUT MYSELF but, at the same time, probing *your* endurance threshold and capacity for punishment. Consider it a kind of SAS induction test. Or that moment near the beginning of a conference where the 'facilitator' asks: "*If there should be anybody present here today who does not wish to be here, please leave now.*"

You know those competitions where you can win a breakfast with a famous person you really admire?