

WATCHING A WORLD CUP TOURNAMENT

Three essential ingredients are required to watch a World Cup tournament in its entirety: a roof, a television and a month. Occasionally you will require willpower, perhaps even a divorce. Food and sleep are obviously helpful too.

A Chinese man died four days into World Cup 2006 after becoming 'so excited he forgot to go to bed'. Three gentlemen in Thailand also failed to last the distance, due to various reasons stretching from 'heart failure' and 'fatigue' to 'strong emotions' and 'excessive drinking'.

Heart failure or strong emotions, understandable. But fatigue or forgetting to sleep?

You must look after yourself during a World Cup tournament. Like any lifestyle choice, it is only sensible to strike the right balance. I know from my experience in Italy just how intoxicating and dangerous it can be when falling victim to incessant coverage but, for goodness sake, what is the point of dying four days into the tournament? Was the glutinous thrill of those four days really worth forfeiting the remaining 27?

What nobody can afford, however, are distractions.

These must be eliminated at all costs. Work, relationships, whatever. Satisfactory arrangements must be made to enable the suspension of what constitutes your life during the three years and 11 months in every four-year World Cup cycle when the finals tournament is being anticipated as opposed to experienced.

Some of you may be chuckling to yourself about now, in the same way I see people reacting to those silly 'What to do' lists that always appear on the Internet in the weeks preceding any World Cup tournament. You know the ones - 1. Never let the wife near the TV set etc...etc.

I have never intentionally searched out such lists, but carrying the reputation as someone with an 'interest' in the World Cup seems to prompt various people to come running up to me, flapping these lists in my face and exclaiming: "You'll love this!"

Well, to anybody who has done this to me in the past, and to those who may be contemplating it in the future, I have one message: I do not love them.

Never have. And never will. In fact, I despise and detest them.

Because these lists are invariably the predictable dribble of frauds. Such tripe would never be assembled by any true World Cup addict. Watching an entire tournament is a serious undertaking that requires enormous personal sacrifice, dedication and commitment. It can even be - as the examples from a few paragraphs back demonstrate - life threatening. It is not something to be trivialised or mocked by fakes who, when the crunch comes and merely to keep the peace at home, will almost certainly be the very ones found heading off to tea at the in-laws in preference to watching South Korea v. Togo. (Incidentally, you missed an excellent game.)

This is not a crime - not everybody has the necessary qualities or desire to absorb every match, nor should they be required to, but just do not patronise those who do with your lightweight nonsense.

Others of you are probably thinking to yourself, "Well, given what I have read so far in this book, what credentials has this guy got to be claiming the moral high-ground on this issue?"

And you would be right.

Look at my tardy record to date:

1966 - Missed the tournament.

1970 - Unchanged.

1974 - Read about an incident that occurred after the final match.

1978 - Watched a handful of games live.

1982 - Increased my number of live games, moderately.

1986 - Euan showed a marked improvement this time round. But could still do better if not so easily distracted by things such as work.

1990 - Went to the tournament. But transit resulted in too many missed games.

USA 1994 constituted my eighth World Cup. But I was yet to watch one. It was time to correct the imbalance.

And corrected it would be: 52 matches played, 52 matches watched.

It was a close run thing, however. That old mistress resurfaced. Seduced by the temptation of a 'World Cup never to be forgotten' I still have the pamphlets sent away for in early 1994. Odd really, because I have never forgotten any of the World Cups I have experienced, whether present or not. But it made sense some time later, when reading how the Canadian-based company that made this promise collapsed and kept everybody's deposits. That was one World Cup experience you would certainly not forget.

In the end I opted instead for a brand new 29-inch television set, which a Canadian company could not remove from me. A combination of factors, tussled over for months, finally resulted in this decision.

Convenient late morning kick-offs; the arrival of pay television in New Zealand and a promise of full uninterrupted coverage; the horrible thought of a kind of hybrid Enrique-Greyhound experience; and the persistent hankering to just sit down, relax and watch an entire tournament from start to finish.

And of course, it would be a lot cheaper. Especially if having to pay a second deposit.

I think it was more about the challenge of seeing if I could achieve it.

To actually endure game after game after game, no matter how dreary or challenging some would inevitably be. What it achieved, however, was to kick start an obsession that continues to plague and bully me today. An over-correction rather than correction has taken place, resulting in the emergence of a wholly different imbalance.

And, perversely, one that threatens to end my prospects of attending a World Cup tournament again.

My last World Cup Finals match not seen in full was the 1990 Florence quarter-final between Yugoslavia and Argentina; so long ago that one of these two nations has since endured a lengthy and horrible civil war before bitterly exploding into several separate states and ceasing to exist.

I watched the start of this match in my Rome hotel room, hurriedly left to catch Enrique's bus departing for the Italy v. Republic of Ireland match, and arrived at the Olympic Stadium just in time to witness - up on the big screen - Diego Maradona limply scuff his shoot-out penalty to tremendous acclaim around me. Argentina would eventually persevere; but this is what happens when attending World Cup tournaments - you miss parts of games, sometimes whole games.

I did, however, get to see all seven remaining games at Italia 1990. And then all 52 at USA 1994. And all 64 at France 1998, South Korea and Japan 2002 and Germany 2006. Which means, with the sort of dogged persistence that only Geoffrey Boycott could enthuse over, I have ground out over the course of 16 years a total that currently stands at 251. Not out.

My first century was raised in Paris, when South Korea and Belgium fought out a 1-1 draw in a Group E contest at France 1998. I then had to wait a further eight years before finally raising my double hundred - in Stuttgart, when France and Switzerland failed to produce a goal in their Group G match. I even managed a little wave of an imaginary cricket bat when the German and Portuguese players appeared for the 2006 third place match: my 250 successfully reached.

See what I mean about obsession. I am now terrified to miss a game.

Because then I would have to start all over again. And besides, the first match of the knockout phase at South Africa 2010 will be my 300th consecutive game. What a moment that promises to be.

Provided, of course, I am still alive.