

Hysterical, deluded and thoroughly English

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England has exited the football World Cup and once again failed to live up to expectations. But why do the English fool themselves, again and again, into believing they can win, and might they actually enjoy it?

According to Wikipedia, hysteria is "a state of mind of unmanageable fear or emotional excesses. The fear is often caused by multiple events in one's past that involved some sort of severe conflict." Sound familiar?



After a humiliating 4-1 defeat to Germany, England has once again entered an unofficial period of national mourning. It's something the country goes through after every World Cup or European Championship exit - from **euphoric** anticipation to shock and despair in the space of 90 minutes.

So have the English become hysterical in their dealings with the national side?

Harry Eyres, writer of the Financial Times's Slow Lane column, believes the passion has taken on a desperate, obsessive quality: "Too much seems to **hang** on it. We appear needy as a nation. There's an extraordinarily neurotic fear and excessive expectation about watching England. I don't think we're in touch with reality."

The world is **entranced** by the beautiful game every four years. But not everyone seems to invest as much importance in their national side.

On holiday in Spain during the 2002 World Cup, Eyres remembers pulling into a bar in Andalucia to catch the end of the Spanish team's quarter final with South Korea. The talented Spanish side went on to lose but there was no **vitriol**, Eyres recalls: "It was amazing how lightly they took it. This was a working class, blue collar bar. Can you imagine a pub full of builders in England when the team get knocked out - it would be a tragedy. My impression is that in Spain it just doesn't matter so much."

Writer Simon Kuper sees a similar imbalance of expectation when England is compared with France, where he lives. If the English did badly in this competition, the French - finalists in the last World Cup - did even worse, getting knocked out in the first round. But in France, says Kuper, author of *Why England Lose*, no-one thought the home side would actually win. What **enraged** the French public was not poor displays on the pitch but the mutinous behaviour of the team's arrogant stars.

"Unlike the English the French are able to switch off the team when they're angry with it. People are disgusted. But they don't go into the **anguish** of looking at the country as a whole. They just say the team are horrible people."

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Not only do the English never learn. They appear to thrive on the masochism of **outlandish** hope followed by tragic defeat, he argues. "I think people enjoy the ritual. Every four years it happens and takes you back to previous tournaments. It's a communal moment, people sharing the pain with each other at the bus stop. It's that thing about big World Cup games that end in tragedy - usually on penalties, ideally to Germany." But that ritual comes at a price, says Kuper, who sees a **crucial** difference between the attitude of the English side and that of his native Holland.

Anger-land

"When a Dutch player scores he's happy but when an England player does it's all clenched jaw, relief and anger. It's very stressful for the England players. It's like with children at school, when they know the expectations are too high and they can't meet them."

But if England is deceiving itself about its ability, who or what is guilty of **inflating** expectations unrealistically high? Britain's tabloid press frequently seem to overplay the side's ability. But that's no surprise, says Roy Greenslade, a professor of journalism and a former editor of the Daily Mirror. Playing on the hopes of fans, and reinforcing their disappointment, is all part of the never ending circulation battle.

"The biggest football fans are tabloid readers. And the popular papers both respond to and ramp up the public mood. And it is our national sport. You don't get this level of interest for cricket."

But there is something **unique** about Britain's newspaper industry, he says: "We are different in having a competitive national press. So the papers can **galvanise** a population across the whole country. They can't do that in France or Germany where much of the press is regional." Back in 1966 when England won the World Cup and Greenslade was a young reporter for the now **defunct** Barking Advertiser there were only two national tabloids. Today the newspaper scene is almost unrecognisable by comparison.

Diagnosing defeat

"Make no mistake the papers set the agenda. And today we have feeding frenzies. **Savage** as it sounds the Madeleine McCann story sold papers and previously there was Princess Diana. The World Cup is another first class example of a feeding frenzy that electrifies the newspapers."

What this frenzy is really about is fear of national decline, says the writer and broadcaster Toby Young: "In a sense it's people's anxiety about Britain's **waning** influence on the international stage. It expresses itself in their anxiety about how England will fare in the World Cup. And that's why beating Germany has become so important."

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"The chant 'two world wars and one world cup!' rings increasingly hollow each time we're beaten by a German team. It's the ability of the German team to punch above its weight in football terms. And that seems to us to **reflect** their ability to punch above their weight economically."

There is a political angle to all this with theorists on opposite sides of the ideological debate diagnosing defeat in different ways. "If you're on the left it's the players who are overpaid and selfish exhibiting the spirit of materialism introduced by Thatcher," he says. "If you're on the right it's because of a lack of confidence and self belief."

The loss to Germany has prompted much soul searching. So would the English be better off hiding their flags next time around? Young thinks not - believing that win or (mostly likely) lose, it's all for the good. "In this age, here's something that for once genuinely brings us together as a country. And the anxiety about national decline would be there whether it's expressed in this way or not. You can describe it as hysterical if you like but I'd say it's cathartic."

The healthy side

Psychologist Dr Sandy Wolfson agrees. She has studied the behaviour and emotional lives of football fans and argues the World Cup is good for the mind. "The vast majority of fans get many psychological benefits. There's always going to be moments of depression and despondency when you lose. The key thing is its ability to get social interaction between people from all walks of life. You'll get a highly paid lawyer in the pub talking to a street cleaner. And football's a good way of getting people to think intellectually. You can also scream and shout in a socially acceptable way."

But aren't we all living in denial? "The optimism is healthy. And it's cyclical, you get the renewal of hope after defeat. I'm not denying your team lets you down and you're going to have a hard time. There will be a lot of people angry, upset and negative. But research shows that within a week you're thinking about the next event."

Surely there is one simple lesson we can learn from this predictable debacle. Whoever gets the poisoned chalice of being England manager in four years' time, could for once learn to manage expectations. When the inevitable question from the press pack arrives - "So can we win the World Cup this time?" the coach would reply: "Probably not. Let's see if we can get to the second round first shall we?"

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A. Look at the words in the text that are in bold. They are listed on the left below. Now match them with a word on the right that can replace them in the text.

For example **euphoric** can be replaced by

euphoric	→	ecstatic
hang		inimitable
entranced		exaggerating
vitriol		stimulate
enraged		mirror
anguish		incensed
outlandish		depend
crucial		wrath
inflating		absorbed
unique		brutal
defunct		diminishing
galvanise		bizarre
savage		torment
waning		vital
reflect		obsolete

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B. There are ten spelling mistakes on page 3. List the correct spellings below.

C. Now answer the following multiple choice questions.

1. Who played Italy in the final in 2006?

- a. France
- b. Spain
- c. Germany
- d. South Korea

2. What reason does Roy Greenslade give for the fact that the French and German press do not stir up such feelings as the English press?

- a. They have fewer newspapers
- b. The public are not interested in football
- c. The press is more regional
- d. Their press is less competitive

3. What do you understand by the phrase "The Germans punch above their weight"?

- a. The Germans played well
- b. The Germans played badly
- c. The Germans played better than expected
- d. The German team members were heavy

4. Why does Toby Young believe that beating the Germans has become so important?

- a. Because we always lose to them in important competitions
- b. Because we are the better team
- c. Because people believe Britain is losing its influence on the world stage
- d. To stop the press hounding the team if they lose.

5. Which of the following reasons does Dr Wolfson not give to support her belief that the World Cup is good for the mind?

- a. People from different backgrounds will socialise
- b. It enables people to think intellectually
- c. The team will not let you down.
- d. You can let off steam in an acceptable manner.

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D. What are your views?

Does football matter? Does the World Cup unite people and nations?

Is it all a waste of time and money?

Write several paragraphs giving details of your views.

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ANSWERS

A

euphoric	ecstatic
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anguish	torment
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crucial	vital
inflating	exaggerating
unique	inimitable
defunct	obsolete
galvanise	stimulate
savage	brutal
waning	diminishing
reflect	mirror

- B** angel should be angle
opposite should be opposite
geniunely should be genuinely
behaviour should be behaviour
magority should be majority
benefitts should be benefits
dennying should be denying
predictible should be predictable
poisonned should be poisoned
probebly should be probably

- C**
- 1 a
 - 2 c
 - 3 c
 - 4 c
 - 5 c