

## FIFA World Cup 1950 England v USA



By the time the 1950s rolled around, the world had already stopped destroying itself. England had re-joined F.I.F.A. along with all the other home associations, so the Home International Championship took on a more significant meaning: it became a qualifying group for the final stages of the 1950 World Cup in Brazil. But Scotland let it be known from the start that they would go to Brazil only as British champions. That did not happen, so they stayed at home. England went alone. There were those who thought 1950 was a little too early to start the competition again. Certain nations had not recovered from the devastations of war. And others were re-covering but slowly (if at all) from the political consequences of the years 1939-45. Russia didn't enter. We had seen one glimpse of Russian soccer in that interesting tour of Moscow Dynamo in 1945. But then the Russians disappeared. The Hungarians too withdrew. No doubt to build the wonder team which was soon to shock Europe. Czechoslovakia was in turmoil. Austria did not think her team good enough and Argentina had been rowing with Brazil for so long that nobody really expected them to support a world competition in that country.

The England team that travelled to Brazil under Walter Winterbottom's direction had some intriguing players. A full-back named Alf Ramsey was present. Billy Wright was there. So was Tom Finney. Stan Mortensen, Wilf Mannion, and Jimmy Mullen. And a wingman named Stanley Matthews. English hopes were high. After all, football was a British game. The football played abroad was hardly more than a pleasure. They had several players who could play around a bit. However, no one was able to shoot or head the ball. England's inclusion in a group alongside Chile, Spain, and the United States of America resulted in satisfied smiles among officials and fans. They were about to be eliminated. England's first game provided little insight into what was to come. The match occurred against Chile at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium.

A massive 200,000-capacity stadium had been built specifically for the competition. It was never truly completed before the final day. It also went into decay for quite some time. England easily defeated Chile with a score of 2-0 because to favourable weather conditions. England were on their way to confirming what England had always believed: that England was the sole football country in the world.

The following step was a satire match versus the United States of America in Belo Horizonte, a mining town. It now has a stunning and expansive stadium. However, back then, there was only a small, constricted field. The American side was a mixed bag. Eddie McIlvenny, a Scot, had previously played for Wrexham in the Football League. However, he failed and emigrated after being offered a free move. There were other immigrants from Belgium, Haiti, Spain and all points north, south, east and west. Not even the Americans expected anything but a heavy thrashing to go with the 3-1 defeat they had suffered at the hands of Spain earlier in the competition.

The 1950 World Cup marked the end of England's interest. There was one more match against Spain, and England made five changes, including the addition of Stanley Matthews to the line-up. However, it proved to be ineffective. Spain triumphed 1-0, and England were eliminated. Furthermore, everyone, including players, officials, and journalists, returned home. A contest lacking England held no further appeal. We didn't prioritise education at that time.

The Three Lions' first World Cup was much anticipated, albeit by the rest of the world rather than the English themselves. The Brazilian press hailed them as the 'Kings of Football' upon their arrival, and England would be the centre of attention in South America. Anything less than a title would be considered failure in an England group brimming with talent, probably the best the country had ever assembled, so here we had England's first Golden Generation, a star-studded line-up. At the age of 35, Stanley Matthews was still possibly the best player. Stan Mortensen, his Blackpool colleague, was 29 years old and one of England's most productive attackers at the time. Other forwards featured two of the North East's best players, Jackie Milburn and Wilf Mannion, as well as Tom Finney, who, like Mortensen, was arguably at the pinnacle of his career when the tournament came around. Midfielders included Portsmouth veteran Jimmy Dickinson, while the defence would be led by Billy Wright and Alf Ramsey.



The 1950 England FIFA World Cup team that faced the USA on June 29, 1950 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.  
Back Row: Alf Ramsey, John Aston, Roy Bentley, Laurie Hughes, Billy Wright, Bert Williams  
Front Row: Jimmy Mullen, Tom Finney, Stan Mortensen, Wilf Mannion, Jimmy Dickinson

How is it possible that such a skilled bunch of players, many of whom are regarded as among the game's all-time greats, could fail so dramatically and humiliatingly, losing to rank amateurs? Is this another example of the English overestimating their own skill pool? Were we simply overconfident, or was something else at play? The England squad encountered a multitude of issues subsequent to the touchdown in Rio; nevertheless, the indications started to emerge weeks prior to that. Neil Franklin, one of the most distinguished players in the country and England's finest defender during the late 1940s, would have been among the first names on the team sheet in Brazil. Franklin, who was subsequently eliminated from contention by the FA after declining a spot at the World Cup with his wife who was due to give birth that summer, relocated to Colombia and joined Independiente Santa Fe in order to circumvent the FA-imposed domestic wage limit. Franklin, the first authentic ball-playing defender, was indispensable to that England squad. "Within weeks of the World Cup, we had lost our linchpin," Billy Wright said of his absence.

As important a player as Franklin was, and he certainly was just that, his absence alone cannot be used to justify England's complete collapse. The England team had not been fully prepared for life in Brazil, and were not helped by those who organised the trip. The journey to Rio was a gruelling 31-hour trip including stops at Paris, Lisbon, Dakar and Recife. When the team finally reached touchdown in the then-Brazilian capital, men with gas masks boarded the plane and sprayed all the passengers down with pesticides, reportedly leaving them coughing and spluttering. Hardly the warmest of welcomes. Whilst the England team hotel, 'The Luxor', still sits proudly on Copacabana beach, the area was a little less luxurious when Walter Winterbottom's men checked in over half a century ago. Brazil was a major culture shock for the entire England team, most of whom had never ventured outside of Europe. The food provided at the hotel was not suitable for elite sportsmen during a World Cup. Wolves shot stopper and England goalkeeper Bert Williams described one of the meals as "a bowl of olive oil with a piece of bacon floating around in it." This lack of decent nutrition in conditions no England player would have any familiarity with playing in could certainly be considered a major factor.

The food wasn't the only thing that shocked the England team. Their first game was hosted at Brazil's Maracana, one of the world's great football arenas. However, not from where the England players were sitting. The stadium was dilapidated and in need of immediate repair work. The building was still ongoing at the Maracana, leaving it mostly empty with an attendance of only 29,703 for England's game against Chile, compared to the official 173,830 (widely believed to be more than 200,000) that crammed into the venue for the World Cup final less than a month later. Rats infested the cold, damp and dirty changing rooms. But England were resolute, if not spectacular, and rose to see off Chile in a 2-0 win with goals from Mortensen and Mannion in either half.

4 days later, took place over 250 miles away in Belo Horizonte, and probably still goes down as the most humiliating and shocking defeat in the country's history. The story goes that a bunch of ragtag, part-time, amateur players were hastily assembled for the World Cup and shocked the world by beating the founders and supposed "King's" of the game in England. Unlike most fairytale stories of this ilk, the story is incredibly close to the truth. The US team was really made up of rank amateurs. Their goalkeeper was a baseball player turned 'soccer' player who never kicked the ball, with the US defenders having to take his goal kicks. The US goal scorer, Joe Gaetjens, was a Haitian-born forward who worked as a dishwasher in a New York restaurant.



The captains of England and USA, Billy Wright and Ed McIlvenny, exchange souvenirs at the start of their match on June 29, 1950 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

The outcome was very accidental. Despite his incapacity to kick a ball, American custodian Frank Borghi played an absolute blinder in goal as the England team primarily pounded the US goal. Gaetjens' header gave the United States the lead in what was essentially their lone attack of the contest. Stanley Matthews had to take a 28-hour flight to join the England team for the US game after missing the first match against Chile due to the FA sending him on a goodwill mission to Canada as an ambassador. However, upon arriving, he discovered he was not included in the team. The only England selector for the competition, Arthur Drewry, had a rule against altering a winning squad. Matthews was therefore out. "Come the final whistle; I thanked my lucky stars; I hadn't been a part of it," he remarked after watching from the stands.

A few days later, England took on Spain once more at the Maracana. England would have to win by a two-goal margin in order to advance, as Spain had won both of their matches against the US and Chile. They didn't. They actually lost once more. Telmo Zarra's goal early in the second half secured Spain's spot in the next round, leaving England level with Chile and the US after one victory and two losses. The disgrace was barely acknowledged at the time. The shocking outcome from the US received extensive coverage, with the exception of England, where the West Indies 'historic victory at Lords dominated the backpages.

It would take England sixteen years to make apologies, until 1966, when Alf Ramsey a participant in the dismal England tournament in Brazil—led his team to victory on home soil. In fact, England's team was the best at the 1950 World Cup. The squad was incredibly talented and had only lost one official international match against non-British opponents in the previous eleven years. During that time, they had defeated Portugal 10-0, Italy 4-0, and the Netherlands 8-2. What should be regarded as the greatest failure and missed opportunity by an English "Golden Generation" in history was caused by the absence of Franklin (and to some extent Matthews), culture shock, inadequate nutrition, and having a single team selector with no prior experience managing a football team.

## 1950 FIFA World Cup from an American perspective

Some of the biggest stars in international football filled half of the pitch. A postman, a dishwasher, and a gravedigger were on the other side. The outcome appeared formal. However, one of the biggest upsets in football history occurred in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in front of about 10,000 people and one daring US writer. Author Geoffrey Douglas called the US a "real bunch of ragamuffins" after they defeated a talented England team 1-0 in the 1950 World Cup.



The US team that defeated England at the 1950 World Cup.

(back row) manager Chubby Lyons, Joe Maca, Charlie Colombo, Frank Borghi, Harry Keough, Walt Bahr, coach Bill Jeffrey  
(front row) Frank Wallace, Ed McIlvenny, Gino Pariani, Joe Gaetjens, John Souza, Ed Souza

A fleeting header by Joe Gaetjens at the close of the first half proved to be enough to give the semi-professional US squad the historic victory. However, it hardly registered on people's radars at the time due to the nation's lack of interest in the sport. Few US media outlets covered the match; only one reporter, Dent McSkimmings, travelled to Brazil on his own initiative. According to US football historian Steve Holroyd, the outcome was comparable to the 1980 Winter Olympics' "Miracle on Ice," in which the US team defeated the powerful Soviet Union in Lake Placid. Apart from the political aspect, that was it. A courageous group of underdogs recently defeated what was widely acknowledged to be the greatest team in the world, Holroyd told CNN Sport. FIFA World Cup 1950 from an American angle.

Though it is not as popular as other sports in the US, football has a long history dating back to the 1920s. Around the time that other major US leagues were going professional, football attempted to establish a professional football league. Holroyd claims that the American Soccer League was "wiped out" by the national economic depression of the 1920s, which made it the first soccer league to rely on corporate support.



Joe Gaetjens diverts the ball past Bert Williams to give USA their shock victory over England

According to Holroyd, the sport "largely retreated into the ethnic enclaves" following the demise of the American Soccer League. "Played exclusively by immigrants, it is very much seen as a sport for immigrants," he stated. "Kearny Scots, Kearny Irish, and Philadelphia Germans were the teams that emerged when the second American Soccer League was founded in 1933; they no longer bore the more neutral names you would expect to find on these shores, like Pawtucket Rangers or Newark Skeeters." The sport did see a brief comeback during and after World War II, but it was limited to certain areas of the nation, such as St. Louis, Missouri.

As a result, there was minimal public interest in any coverage of the US's participation in the 1950 World Cup. It fell to the United States Soccer Football Association—which, as Holroyd notes, probably only employed one permanent staff member to assemble a squad to take on the footballing heavyweights of South America and Europe. According to Douglas, the team that was chosen was a "hodgepodge," drawn from players from all over the US. With the exception of four who performed in St. Louis, the majority had never even met, let alone collaborated. The US, Mexico, and Cuba had to advance through a three-team qualification group in order to play in the 1950 World Cup finals. Mexico, a nation with a long history of football, went undefeated with four victories out of four, and the US just made it through with a 5-2 victory over Cuba. Hopes were low even then. They primarily went down there for a giggle. They simply assumed they would be able to take a break from their jobs. Really, they had no idea what the World Cup was," Douglas remarked. Hopes were quite high for an England team filled with stars on the other side of the pond. The squad had opted not to participate in the previous three World Cups, so this was its first time participating. "Because they believed they were already champions and could handle this, England decided not to compete in the first three World Cups. This was going to be their coronation—they had finally agreed to take part," Holroyd remarked. The England team was expected to perform well because it included players like Stan Mortensen, Tom Finney, and Stanley Matthews who would go on to be considered greats. They were going to have an enormous shock.

Some of the US team members who Douglas interviewed for his book on the match mentioned that they felt their English counterparts were overconfident. When the teams had faced off earlier in the year, the Americans had been soundly defeated by an England reserve squad. However, the match held at Belo Horizonte's Estádio Independência was not the same. Their star player, Stanley Matthews, wasn't participating since they were resting him for the next match. However, they didn't even field their best players since they believed that playing America would be quite simple, according to Douglas. "Therefore, the English were incredibly carefree and full of jokes when they took the pitch, especially in the first half.

As expected, the English squad dominated from the start of the match. The undertaker-turned-US goalkeeper Frank Borghi was said to be having the game of his life on that particular day. The game completely changed course in the 37th minute. The cross from Walter Bahr zipped past the dejected Bert Williams in goal and off the side of New York dishwasher Gaetjens. And suddenly England were under immense pressure. When Gaetjens scored at the end of the first half, everyone started to panic, according to Douglas. And then the people on the US team said that England had pressed a bit too aggressively. England became somewhat disorganised in the second half as a result of their inability to comprehend what was happening. With a combination of incredible defending, some erroneous finishing from England, and endless saves from Borghi, the US managed to hold onto their advantage and record a legendary triumph that will live on in football history. But the outcome is one that has been mostly lost to the passage of time for the American players on that day, the American people back home, and future generations.

The American players were not immediately struck by the enormity of what they had accomplished, even in the immediate aftermath of the victory. "Oh, that's pretty cool," they thought after defeating England. That is really fantastic. "Let's move on to the highly significant games against Ford Motors back in St. Louis," Douglas remarked. Furthermore, there wasn't much worldwide attention, even in light of how big the outcome was. Several media outlets decided not to cover the incident since McSkimmings was the only reporter there at the game and his article was published in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. According to Holroyd, "the 1950 World Cup was not a blip on the American sports radar." "The immigrant populations were the ones who showed any interest at all in learning how the homeland was faring. Nobody was supporting the US team. The players who had won were so uninterested that only their families met them when they got back home. There would be a ticker tape parade today. It'd be enormous," Douglas remarked. This may have been a turning point for American sports, but because of the lack of coverage, it passed into history without much fanfare until almost 30 years later, when players started getting calls from reporters every four years, in advance of World Cups, asking them to share their stories.

The English felt a great deal of embarrassment at being defeated by the young American squad. Douglas detailed a newspaper, emphasising the shame by drawing black borders around it. According to Douglas, "they were embarrassed that this team of nobodies from a country that didn't register on the football scale" defeated them. Since then, the winning squad's "Cinderella" victory has been celebrated, with every member of the US team being inducted into the United States Soccer Hall of Fame in 1976. According to Holroyd, this upset is the biggest upset in history on the biggest international stages of football, even with the wealth of surprises and underdog tales in the sport.

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