

What we need is a Muslim Rooney

Sunday, 09 July 2006

By Oona King, published in the Telegraph

'I'm so happy for you,' I tell my Italian husband when Italy get through to the World Cup final. On reflection I realise this is a lie. I am insanely jealous. Why can't it be England? And why does football mean so much to so many? During the England match, head in my hands and hardly able to breathe, I was chided by my two-year old niece: "Don't get upset, it's only a game." Such wisdom and ignorance from one so young… When England exited the 2002 World Cup she didn't exist, yet she's already grasped the futility of being an England fan. But what she hasn't grasped is the significance of the beautiful game. She's not alone.

There's a fifth column in this country. Not those who whooped with joy when England fans had the smiles blasted off our faces by the Portuguese penalties and Wayne's infantile hooliganism. No, not them - at least they appreciated the cliff-hanging drama consuming millions, unparalleled in any cultural form from cinema to ballet, opera to carnival.

No, I'm talking about the people who disdain football without realising it is our greatest invention. Football at its best is unequalled - not just as a sporting occasion revealing genius and beauty, but as a social phenomenon generating goodwill and understanding (granted, I don't mean football's fringe element of psychotic testosterone-drenched hooligans who, in other eras, would be beating each other's brains out in a cave).

In techie language, football generates quantum levels of social cohesion. Never mind all the money the Government spends trying to improve relations between the Muslim community and the rest. Give us a Muslim Wayne Rooney, and the Commission for Racial Equality could pack up shop and transfer its staff to Sport England.

Football is the universal language uniting street children in Soweto with stockbrokers in Surrey. Following the Oldham riots, where Asians and whites fought running battles, the council chose football as the one thing bridging the two communities. The French 1998 World Cup victory, led by Zinedine Zidane, momentarily sank the far Right. Suddenly no one wanted to hound illegal immigrants because they were united in ecstasy at winning the World Cup. Without those immigrants they wouldn't have a team, never mind a trophy. And look at the impact here when boxing wonderkid Amir Khan was draped in the Union Jack.

As today's final unfolds, let's pick ourselves up and look towards the 2010 World Cup. In case our team doesn't win (shock horror), let's aspire to an even greater victory in the battle for hearts and minds. I'm supporting our Institute for Community Cohesion. They want to twin every British school with one in the developing world in the prelude to the World Cup and Olympics - because nothing unites like sport.

And as for white liberals and ethnic minorities who wring their hands about England swamped beneath St George crosses, well listen up. I spent my childhood terrified of meeting anyone with a St George's flag. Those people would often tell me to "f*** off back to my own country", and even kick me on my way. Those people still exist. But the British and English flags are no longer theirs.

Although I'm still not entirely happy for my Italian husband, I'm happy for the world that England invented football. But just once in my lifetime, please can we bring it home?