
1996–97 SEASON

*The power of Sky and
some suggested changes*

ENGLAND'S VICTORY OVER GEORGIA WAS A TRIUMPH FOR CABLE TELEVISION AND INNER STRENGTH

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I WAS ALL AGAINST SKY TV WHEN IT CAME ALONG, gobbling up our game, corrupting clubs with its millions, imposing stupid changes, creating new conditions just to suit the TV schedules. Such as matches starting at dopey times in the middle of the week, not at three on Saturday afternoon as nature intended. I didn't approve. Didn't get a dish. No one in our street got a dish, certainly not. What kind of street do you think this is?

Then these jokers started digging up the pavements, digging around in my prejudices, and cable arrived, corrupting me with its special offers, and the result was, well, I got it, didn't I? I keep it in the corner of the room I call my office, but haven't told anyone in the street. I find that if you watch with the curtains closed, nobody can possibly know.

Last Saturday she went off for her West End fix, taking in Blake and Rubens at the National Portrait Gallery, and a matinée at the

National Theatre. I said don't worry about me, pet, I'll be busy in my room. You've got culture. I've got logistics, psychology, geography, economics, oh, all sorts.

The dressing rooms in the Premier League are absolutely chocker these days. All those interpreters for a start, who have to be ever on hand to translate really hard words such as parrot, moon and gutted for our foreign players. Then there's a whole host of counsellors waiting to hold trembling hands, should any of our home-grown players recovering from alcohol, drugs, gambling, wife-beating and missing penalties need to share. Flying tea cups at half-time, which I have personally witnessed in one of our top football club's dressing rooms, just doesn't happen any more. There isn't the space. So, that was a logistical problem to ponder.

Psychologically, how would Gazza cope? Hard one that. Not to mention Adams and Southgate, after what they've been through. As for the geographical problem, where exactly is Georgia and if it's 12 o'clock here, what time is it there?

Then economics. How come Kinkladze can buy his old football club when he's only playing for Man City? And if the average Georgian wage is £150 a year, which someone on Sky TV said, or £40 a week, according to the *Independent*, how can they get people to pay £6 for a ticket?

At 11 o'clock, I settled down to wonder and to work, oh yes. I had the TV on, but vee vee low. I am now converted to Sky and am pleased that its millions have had one good effect, namely bringing all those foreign players to raise the standard of our native game, and I think Andy Gray is first class — love his graphics and board games — but I still get caught, and pissed off, because it will start coverage of live matches an hour before kick-off.

So I got some work done, while watching out of the corner of my eye. I groaned when I spotted that Ray “very much so” Wilkins was out there, about to bore for England with his square comments. But I managed a loyal glow each time I spotted a draped Unionjack,

showing that supporters from some of our famous clubs, such as Yeovil Town and Thetford, had trailed all the way to Georgia. You what? How did they manage, on £150 a week?

I caught some inane racist observations in the studio, left over from the dark ages, alleging that being Latins, the Georgians would bottle it if they got behind. Yes, there are still so-called football experts who believe Britain is alone in having a never-say-die spirit. You'd have thought being regularly stuffed by Germany, not to mention Brazil, Norway and the US, would have shown this theory to be utter bollocks.

At 12 o'clock prompt the doorbell rang. Oh no. Has she come back for something? Could it be Jehovah's Witnesses? Neither. It was Derek, my neighbour who is an architect. I know your secret, he said. I've spotted the cable on the wall. Unless you let me in to watch with you I'm telling everyone.

The lads done well, thanks to two bits of luck — ie, the two goals. At half-time we opened some Beaujolais. That's one advantage of a lunchtime game. A bit gross to drink at four on a Sunday afternoon, Sky's usual time. At the end we agreed Batty was man of the match and opened another bottle.

I decided Hoddle likes Hinchcliffe in the team because they look alike. They've got the same jaw line. He likes Southgate because he's clearly intelligent, like Hoddle, but that's more worrying. Intelligence can be a troubling quality in football. Think of Steve Coppel, the economics-graduate manager. Worried himself into resigning.

Gazza has GBH rather than IQ worries. He was not himself. But was he ever? It's been said his peak was at Spurs, but I didn't notice. He used to make me scream, not salivate, throwing himself around like a mad cow, frothing and shaking, unbalancing the team, brow-beating others into passing to him when he was in a rotten position. He at least kept his head. Ditto Ince, ditto Batty. Our Glenn is having a calming effect all round.

It was all so calm and sensible that there was nobody or nothing to stir the blood and I was longing for McManaman to come on. Instead we got Ian Wright. I like watching Wright at Arsenal. He plays better for Arsenal than Sheringham does for Spurs, yet the opposite happens when they play for England. Explain that one, Glenn. Le Tissier suffers in the same way. So did Glenn himself, come to think of it.

We forget it now, but Hoddle never reached a peak with England, always being less than the sum of his many parts. We also forget what a girl's blouse he could appear as a player: too nice, too soft, never dominating. I was sure he would never make it as a manager. In my mind he was another Martin Peters, someone with a brilliant football brain, but not tough enough. I was wrong. Just shows you. Never categorise from exteriors. Quiet inner strength is what matters, not outward physical aggression. Is it Jesus that's brought it out, giving him a solid centre in his life? I don't think so. Just self-confidence, allied to strong views, good sense, decent values.

How did the game go, she said when she came home, culture-crammed. Any goals? Just two, I said, but it was really all about moral philosophy. French moral philosophy, she said, judging by the Georges Duboeuf wine bottles.