

### **In pursuit of Henry Delaunay**

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The European Championships are the games of the modern day European coliseums, where every four years the paying public are entertained by the greatest performing artists from the continent.

Typically, and some would say obviously, this spectacular and much heralded carnival is Gallic in orientation. It is an altogether inspired event, a showcase spectacle oozing in flair and finesse.

Since Henry Delaunay originally mooted the idea for a showcase Euro tournament in 1927, we have been treated to countless memorable and infamous moments of memories and magic.

We have the inaugural USSR win in 1960, Greece's withdrawal in 1964 because of their war hostilities with Albania, and the Italian semi final coin toss win against the USSR in 1968.

The 1972 tournament offered a glimpse of the West German world cup win to come two years later. Panenka's 1976 winning chip is constantly replayed on ESPN and Youtube. The West Germans won again in 1980, whilst Platini's nine strikes led the majestic French team of Bats, Battiston, Tigana, Giresse, and Fernandez to a historic first win in 1984.

The first tournament I watched in full was Euro 88, the cleanest of the tournaments in terms of fair play. One of my early emotions was disbelief as the Glaswegian Irishman and Liverpool midfield maestro Ray Houghton blew the wind out of England in Stuttgart's Neckarstadion. Houghton proved to be the dreaded kiss of death, with England subsequently being thrashed by the Oranje and Red Army. The Dutch trio of Gullit,

Rijkaard and Van Basten rightly took the lion's share of plaudits. But as a 12 year old this was the tournament where I was introduced to Lothar Mathaus, the soon to be best midfielder on the planet. Also making his debut was the elegant Italian legend Roberto Mancini, who until the opening game had suffered a barren spell which had put his selection into question.

Euro 92 was brilliant, simply for the fact that with Yugoslavia's removal, the great Danes with Schmeichel, the (in) famous Jensen and the brothers Laudrup came off their sunbeds to beat the new Germany in the final. It was also the win that earned Torben Piechnik a dream move to Anfield.

The punters were served up a feast in 1996 and with the help of Skinner and Baddiel, football did come home. The home team were in their element and Gazza was mesmeric. The Dutch had been re taught the rules of Total Football and with Pearce banishing the ghost of 90, England it seemed were unstoppable. The home nation was so convinced it would be a home victory that the semi final loss to the Germans left the nation in a period of mourning.

The Netherlands joint bid and hosting with Belgium was a historic milestone in Euro 2000. The tournament cemented France's domination of world football, though the colourful Portuguese were personally my team of the tournament. The Geração Dourada, widely known as the "Golden Generation" had promised great things for years. At long last a spectacular team with the flair of Rui Costa, Figo, Baia and the colourful Abel Xavier had arrived, leaving Europe drooling in their wake. For me it was therefore a crime that they met Les Bleus in the semis.

In 2004 there were shocks galore as the Italians, Spanish and Germans were sent home by the time the group stages had ended. The biggest shock was left till last as the Greek Olympians led by wily fox Rehhagel defeated France, the Czechs and the hosts to lift the Delaunay trophy. Theo

Zagorakis proved what the Premiership, Martin O' Neill and Leicester fans had known for years – that he was the number one holding midfielder and man marker in Europe.

England's absence in 2008 allowed me to savour the finer aspects of the tournament without getting too worked up.

This is a collection of poems and haikus from the 2008 championships. I had bravely decided to commit to a diary of the tournament and commenced penning verses before, during and after each game. The collection is primarily a fan's perspective and I am hoping that it will provide light and pleasant enjoyment for the reader.

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