

THE HACKER

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They think it's all over....

The clock has moved on another four years and once again it is time for the quadrennial dreams of the English football fan with the start of the FIFA World Cup. Surely this time there is hope that we can now end Baddiel & Skinner's now lengthened 44 years of hurt and win footballs ultimate prize. For many fans the images of Moore being held aloft, the ricochet off the underside of the crossbar and Nobby Stiles manic dancing aren't just distant memories, they are history that took place before they were even born. For them our solitary victory isn't real, in the same way that the horrors of a World War cannot be grasped unless you were alive at the time.

Instead, for any football fan born after the summer of '66, the World Cup is synonymous with pain, agony & despair. In fact, if you add in the Euro Championships as well then world football for the under 44's can be neatly wrapped up in a phrase to send shivers down their spines: penalty shoot-out.

Surely there is a better way to end a sporting contest than the lottery of a twelve yard game of Russian Roulette?

Try this solution.... Imagine England once again get through to the final and find themselves facing their old nemesis, Germany. The game is tight but just before the break Rooney uses all his strength to shrug off the might of the German defence to take England in to half time one up. The second half is a tight affair. Alas, like in 1966 England cannot hold out and succumb to a last minute equaliser. So under current rules we head for extra time and with no more goals find ourselves at penalties once again. Perhaps here is when we turn to our favourite pastime of golf and see if it can produce a more satisfying end than penalties. Well, let me tell you right now that the answer is no, it can't. In fact the examination actually highlights one of the most amazingly bad ways to decide a tournament that has ever been created in sport: Count-back.

Under a count-back system the scores achieved by both teams in the World Cup Final would be calculated across both halves. The first half would be discarded, why I have no idea. Instead the result would hinge on who performed the best in the second half. In this instance Germany would win as they 'won' the second half one-nil. Before you could utter Kenneth Wolstenholme's immortal line the German skipper would be holding aloft Gazzaniga's 5kg solid gold statue and once again we would be crying in our beer and smashing up town centres across the country.

Clearly this is a totally unacceptable way to decide the winner. What possible reason does the second half have for being more important than the first? And yet we golfers let this happen week in week out to decide not just the outcome of a few quid in a midweek swindle but also the destination of silverware. Frankly it is ridiculous, a silly system that in my mind is no better than tossing a coin.

But what would we use instead?

Let me start by having a quick look at the wonderful handicap system. In what other sphere of life can multiple players play for a single prize regardless of their level of ability. However when you step back a few paces and look at it from afar, cracks start to appear. Imagine if you will a 400 metres race operated under a handicap system whereby runners are allowed extra seconds depending on their ability as is the case in golf with shots. The pistol fires and the two runners involved set off. One is 17 years old and the other is 90. The younger runner hurtles round like a hare and posts a time of 46 seconds and runs off scratch. The older runner takes an extra minute and by the time he shuffles over the line the younger runner is already changed and ready to go home. The 90 year old runs off a handicap of 61 seconds

and thus wins the gold medal by a second. Hmm. When viewed like this the whole handicap system is exposed as a bit silly. But on this occasion I'm going to let that go, maybe that's the subject for another rainy day. Instead I'm looking for a better way to decide a tie than the arbitrary use of count-back. Now assuming that the whole of the golfing world accepts that the 90 year old runner is the worthy winner due to handicapping, what would happen if they had actually tied? Do we really check to see who ran quicker, after handicap, over the last 200m?

The aim of the game is to run around the track in the quickest time possible. So whilst the handicap has allowed them to compete, common sense dictates that in the event of a tie the fastest must prevail.

So in golf, whenever there is a tie, the player who shot the best gross score should win, or in the event of a stableford the player with the lower handicap to achieve their points total. Of course many will think this gives advantage to the lower handicap players. It doesn't, it just makes sense - always remember the 90 year old runner.

Which is why I actually think a penalty shot-out is a good and fair way to end a football match. At least it is decided by the skill of kicking a football rather than some formula of fortune like golf's countback.

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