

WHY



WON'T WIN THE WORLD CUP

I hate to say this, writes **Stuart Corbridge**, but England won't win the 2010 Football World Cup. Trust me, I'm a social scientist. And an Aston Villa fan. Which makes me perfectly placed to look at the evidence in a rational, unbiased way.

Reason number one. They're not at home.

Sometimes the best team wins the world cup – as Brazil did in 1958 and 1970, and Argentina in 1986. Almost everyone watching those tournaments agreed that the winners had reached a higher level, mixing efficiency and magic in their game to outclass the other teams. And if there is no outstanding side, it is generally one of the best four that wins the World Cup – for example England in 1966, West Germany in 1974, Argentina in 1978 and France in 1998. The football fans among you will have noticed the common factor in this list – they all won it on home turf. Being at home helps because the players are comfortable in familiar surroundings, have loud support, and fight a little harder on their own soil.

But it is also true (as football fans have long suspected) that referees favour the home team. My LSE colleague Luis Garicano was co-author of a study on 'Favoritism under social pressure' (2005) which examined more than 750 football matches from the Spanish League to show this. The study found that referees tended to add time at the end of close games where the home side was losing and less time when they were winning, all in response to the pressure from the home crowd.

The home team this year, South Africa, isn't good enough to win the World Cup (even with help from referees). But it is no coincidence that England's only triumph came in England.

Reason number two. They don't pick the right mix of players.

The England team of late has not been an all-England team. It is a little known fact that all of the outfield players who represented England in their first and last games in the 2006 World Cup were born or brought up in Greater London, Greater Manchester or Merseyside/Wirral (GLGMM) – as shown in my paper 'Why is the England football team doing so poorly?' (2008). That's right. Three large metropolitan areas that together comprise less than 25 per cent of the population of England provided ten out of ten starting outfielders. No one born or bred in the West Midlands, West Yorkshire or South

Yorkshire. No one from Tyne and Wear, a traditional breeding ground for England footballers (think of the Charlton brothers, Gascoigne and Shearer).

When England played in the World Cups of the 1950s and 1960s they generally fielded only three or four players from GLGMM. World Cup winners including Alan Ball and Ray Wilson got their starts with Blackpool and Huddersfield Town. To get in the England team in 2006 a footballer generally had to play for one of the platinum four: Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester United. Some English players do join these clubs on transfer – but it is reasonable to wonder who has not been getting on the football ladder because they grew up in the wrong place. It is hard to compete with one leg tied behind your back.

Reason number three. They need more two-footed players.

Most of us instinctively kick a ball with either the right or left foot and avoid using the weaker one whenever possible. Even international footballers are rarely born with equal skill in their left and right feet. But those who can pass, shoot and cross with either foot have a huge advantage in the range of options open to them when they have the ball.

The value of these players is simply demonstrated in a paper from LSE's Centre for Economic Performance, 'The returns to scarce talent: footedness and player remuneration in European soccer' (2009), which showed that two-footed players in Europe's top leagues are paid a premium of around 15 per cent compared to players who are right-footed.

In some countries (Brazil, Holland and many African nations) coaches work hard to help players improve their weaker foot, but in England there has tended to be an assumption that one-footedness is a given which cannot be changed by coaching. This attitude is slowly changing, and some of England's best players – Wayne Rooney, Steven Gerrard and Joe Cole – are comfortable with the ball on either foot. But watch out for some of the others occasionally tying themselves in knots as they try to switch it to their good foot.

Reason number four. They're rubbish at penalties.

In three of the last four World Cups they played in, England were knocked out on penalties. This might just be bad luck, but in looking for a more logical explanation it is worth turning to game theory, which uses mathematical models to suggest what strategies to use against a competitor. Indeed Professor Bernhard Von Stengel, head of LSE's Department of Mathematics, uses the example of penalty kicks to teach game theory.

He explains: 'The striker decides whether to shoot left, right or down the middle. The goalkeeper has to decide whether to wait or jump immediately. So you can use game theory to compare the probabilities of doing one thing against an opponent doing another and maximise your probability of hitting the goal.'

'One of the main things game theory demonstrates is that you shouldn't behave predictably; sometimes being unpredictable can be better. For instance, in the 1974 World Cup final Holland's Johan Neeskens scored a penalty by going right down the middle. It was quite audacious but in a sense it was an excellent strategy – in game theory sometimes you bluff in order to win with a weak hand.' [Germany, however, went on to win the game.]

So perhaps England just need to be a little less predictable from the penalty spot?

Even then – says the social scientist in me – they won't win it. (Just as Aston Villa didn't quite win the big prizes this past season.)

England for the cup! (next time) ■



Stuart Corbridge
is professor of development studies at LSE.