

June 22, 1986 - Mexico City THE HAND OF GOD MATCH

This is the day of all days because this is the game of all games. Even the average soccer fan requires no reminding this game is one of the most memorable World Cup matches ever. As previously mentioned, the war for the Falkland Islands between England and Argentina is a fresh and vivid memory. It was fought and concluded four years earlier and a major influence in the composition of the current government in both countries. In England, Margaret Thatcher's re election is due to the English victory according to many sources. While in Argentina, Leopoldo Galtieri, involved in the violent coup to seize power from Isabel Peron in the mid 70's, is forced to resign and imprisoned.

The English fans aren't going to let the Argentines forget recent history. Before the game, the scenes outside the stadium are incendiary, but security is massive. Mexican soldiers and policia are conspicuous. The Argentines are viewing this match as the first real opportunity to inflict revenge and the English are simply rubbing Argentine noses in the previous defeat. It's a damn good thing each country speaks a different language. Effective communication on this day could have led to a riot. Some of the chants by the English are deplorable:

*The next time you want our islands just ask
cuz then we can say no instead of killing your soldiers
and kicking your Argie ass.....*

Many share the viewpoint that football is a surrogate for war and I'll talk more about this later. I'm certain today's game actually means more. More people cared about the result of this match than who won the Falkland War. Those generations born after this match know much more about the game than the war.

The Falkland clash is definitely the freshest and most influential point of contention between the two prior to this game, but the reason for the war and animosity goes way back. The history of Argentina and England is very intertwined. It rivals a big brother, little brother relationship that went awry. Big brother England, as they were doing all over in the 19th century, had deeply infiltrated settlers into the fledgling Republic of Argentina and quickly seized control of the economy. Exploiting the lack of industry in its little brother, the English set up companies that controlled the flow of Argentine resources, mostly beef and grain, and in return, offered English products, mostly on the cheap side, that the natives could not produce. So controlling the production and shipping industries, exploitation was unavoidable. The locals who knew better were not sufficient to challenge the status quo but that was to change with future generations growing in numbers.

The most appreciated import of the English was football. As football will do, its appeal spread quickly and by the time of World War I, the natives were starting to have their own teams completely devoid of English ex pats. With the arrival of peace after the Great War, English clubs began to undertake the arduous trans Atlantic voyage and play exhibitions with the upstart Argentinian squads. To the hosts, these were always so much more important than the visits of any other nationality and with the intense scrutiny given to these matches, they took on a whole new importance. This was a way without war for little

brother to show big brother, or vice versa, they had been surpassed. Argentina had been under the metaphorical English heel for so long, what better way was there to make the statement that things had changed? So with the stage set as it was, the games could only be a source of tension. To make matters even more flammable, the standard of refereeing was not the same amongst nations then, even the balls were different in size and composition. The English game was much more physical with more contact than the hosts were used to and so it was inevitable that the English sides were deemed “bullies” with their style of play although it was normal and accepted from their perspective. To retaliate, the local sides would uncharacteristically play rough and lose the plot of the game. The games were to evoke all forms of condemnation in the newspapers on both sides of the vast Atlantic. The natural progression of reaction of the reading public was distaste for the other. The seeds were planted long ago and now the soil was made fertile for the animosity to escalate. Remarkably the English tours were to continue sporadically up until the 1930’s when the world economy descended into a state of rot.

With the Second World War and the suspected harboring of Nazi war criminals by Argentine’s nationalist leader, Juan Peron, relations descended even further. Despite this each had a need for the other, Argentina’s raw materials (beef) and English production, so they continued to trade until England was able to find other providers in the early 1950’s. With the cessation of all trade, dialog amongst the two nations ceased. Peron, inclined to isolationism in general, was also dictating the itineraries of the Argentine football team and avoiding England was a priority. They were really not seen much until the 1954 World Cup in Brazil. Amazingly, the founders of the game, England, appeared for the first time in 1950. The two nations were to actually play their first international in Wembley Stadium in 1951. The first meaningful match was in Chile in 1962 and England convincingly won 3-1. Even with the victory the English press didn’t highlight the victory, but the cynicism of the Argentine side and their violent and persistent fouling. Neutrals weren’t nearly as condemning and felt the game was played in a good spirit. It was clear to the world there was already a mutual dislike, bordering on irrational, between these two nations, on the pitch and off.

Then came the 1966 World Cup hosted by England. Many think the 1986 match the climatic moment but, as convincingly argued by author David Downing, “The 1966 quarter final became the defining moment in the two country’s footballing relationship, the summation of all that had come before, the reference point for all that followed.” English predisposition of “Latin temperament” was a condescending perspective shared by many Brits, but more damaging was the press’s representation of it. Argentina’s inferiority complex is already spelled out. So when these two took the field, expectations were already tense and while the game had its episodes, two polarizing moments were to steal the spotlight. The referee’s first half dismissal of Argentine captain Antonio Rattin was met with the captain refusing to leave. His expulsion was never really understood and the German Official, Rudolf Kreitlein, was to cite constant badgering by the Argentine captain every time he made a call. Rattin’s refusal presented the English press with their pantomime villain and they exploited him masterfully. The other culprit was victorious England manager Alf Ramsey (England won 1-0). After the match he would not allow his players to exchange jerseys with the South Americans, even ripping one out of an

Argentinian's hands and returning it to his player, the photo was posted in many newspapers. In the post match press conference he would call the Argentines "animals" even though the spirit of the game was generally appropriate to most neutrals. The Argentinian press had a legitimate villain, and his discretions required little effort to capitalize upon.

Red and Yellow cards are actually used in the 1970 World Cup in Mexico for the first time because of this game. English referee Ken Aston is given credit for their introduction. It is later revealed Kreitlein had verbally cautioned two English players before even ejecting Rattin, but there was no way anyone could know the disposition of each player's status other than to literally ask the referee. Had this been disclosed in some manner, some of the controversy and Rattin's reaction, ejection even, may have been avoided. Clarification was needed and Aston approached FIFA with the yellow and red card idea. He used these colors because of the universality of their use on traffic lights. Ironically this is the same Ken Aston who was the center official for what is probably the most violent game in World Cup history, the Battle of Santiago. It was the final group game between the 1962 hosts, Chile, and Italy. There were already undertones of dislike between the nations due to Italian journalists publicly condemning the host nation's infrastructure and general condition. In 1960 Chile was rocked by the strongest tremor ever recorded, the Valdivia Earthquake. Recovery efforts were not to the Italian's liking and they publicly ridiculed the Chileans. The game itself only saw two ejections (both to Italy) but the players' actions were such that before the game was televised in England, the BBC opened with the following disclaimer, "You are about to witness the most stupid, appalling, disgusting and disgraceful exhibition of football, possibly in the history of the game."

There were to be other episodes between England and Argentina to widen the gulf prior to 1986. The treatment of the British sides Glasgow Celtic and Manchester United in the late 60's while in Argentina for the South American leg of the Intercontinental Cup was damaging. Hostile crowds were expected, but sub standard accommodations along with draconian security inhibiting the players' freedom while savagely beating any who would come near the British were enough to leave very unfavorable impressions. Internationally there were to be three friendly matches that were anything but, two had ended in draws and the most recent in 1980, had resulted in a 3-1 English victory at Wembley.

But today is for keeps and the match is anything but "stupid, appalling, disgusting and disgraceful". I offer to bring Marta but she declines. So I'm to experience a role reversal, I'm to be the seller and not the buyer, a good day to do so because it's a seller's market. Having no idea where my seat is, but assuming with the Argentines, the buyer should be neutral or supporting the albicelestes. There are some English supporters deemed worthy in appearance looking for tickets, but I avoid them. After some walking I find an older man in French blue definitely looking for a ticket.

Asking him in English, "Sir, I have a category B seat that I need to sell, what are you willing to pay?" I show the man the extra ticket.

The Frenchman doesn't answer right away, he looks me over intensely and finally says with

a thick accent, "Are you English?"

"No, I'm American."

"Sacre bleu! I wonder your accent. American? D'évangile?" Getting past his amazement of my nationality, he makes it clear he has no desire to sit anywhere near English supporters. In an effort to save time I explain to the Frenchman the ticket is his for the Mexican Peso equivalent of \$50.

The Frenchman agrees, "Oui, Oui," and we make the exchange. Ironically after selling the ticket I never see the Frenchman again; his seat is occupied by a Mexican. Apparently they had traded tickets because the Frenchman wasn't willing to risk sitting with either set of supporters. The Mexican had a nose bleed Category C that the Frenchman willingly traded for.

The Azteca is full. My seat is in a neutral section and facilitates a great view of the events to follow. The Frenchman has made a big mistake. The first half is carried by the spectators; both teams are a bit tentative and overly concerned with leaving themselves exposed to the counterattack. There are opportunities but the teams go into the locker rooms scoreless.

History is made in the second half. In the 51st minute, Maradona scores what is to become known as the goal scored by the "Hand of God". In 1986, the goalkeeper is still able to pick up any ball played into his box regardless of who played it, the opponent or his own teammate. Maradona will drive at the English backline blowing past two defenders, teammate Jorge Valdano will mishandle his pass and English back Steve Hodge, at the top of the box, loops the ball back in an arc to be collected easily by the English goalkeeper, Peter Shilton. Maradona anticipates the back pass and darts into the area and reaches the ball just before Shilton, eight yards out from goal. But the ball is too high for the diminutive Maradona's head, Shilton's hands rise to collect the ball, and Maradona extends his hand over his head and palms it past an unsuspecting Shilton into the English net. Maradona celebrates as if all is right while the entire English back four and Shilton are appealing for a call of hand ball to the out of his league Tunisian referee.

I'm waiting for the call, supporting the English or not, my sympathies lie with a fellow member of the goalkeeper union, none should ever suffer this injustice. I'm seated directly behind the goal defended by the English in the center deck. I realize immediately Maradona has used his hand. Why neither the ref nor the linesman sees it is a mystery. I'm in a state of disbelief when the English kick off to make the goal official. The Tunisian, Ali Bannaceur later blamed his error on a hemorrhoid medication that affected his sight! This brings new meaning to the statement, "He pulled that one out of his ass."

The injustice of it ignored, there is no doubt this has a direct influence on the next goal Maradona is to score three minutes later to put Argentina up 2-0. In what many consider the greatest goal ever scored in the World Cup and also recognized by FIFA as the greatest goal of the 20th century, Maradona collects the ball ten yards inside his own half and dribbles thru the English left side like a snow skier smoothly navigating a slalom course.

His initial pirouette ten yards inside his own half leaves two defenders mesmerized and he streaks straight through and by the English defense. With only the approaching Shilton to beat, Maradona deftly touches the ball outside and around the now rendered immobile English keeper leaving him on his ass. The best player of his generation hammers the ball into the unprotected net. The Azteca explodes. I'm convinced the English are still dwelling on the injustice of a few minutes before when Maradona lowers the boom with his second. The lack of any player actually tackling Maradona illustrates English focus is gone at the time. Hats off to Maradona, in five minutes he experiences his true moment of destiny. He has scored two of the most memorable goals in the history of the game and cements himself in the 'Legend' category. Years later, levity is offered by Jorge Burruchaga, "Well after that pass, he could hardly miss, could he?" I doubt a 1-2 punch like that will ever be seen again.

The majority considers the English finished, but as their Warlord Winston Churchill 46 years earlier in the Battle of Britain, they refuse to capitulate even when all appears lost. In the 74th minute English manager Bobby Robson introduces John Barnes into the game. Barnes decimates the Argentine flanks and one of his crosses is rewarded by a Lineker finish in the 80th minute. The English keep coming but Argentina maintains their slim one goal lead and the final whistle blows with the English hammering away for the equalizer that is never to come.

I won't leave until an hour after the final whistle. This is the last World Cup game seen live on the pilgrimage. The Azteca empties and I remain, processing what has just been witnessed. I also consider the sixteen days before; what a wonderful time it has been. Besides reflection another more practical reason motivates me to wait- avoidance of any English or Argentine fans looking for trouble.

It's time to go home but the conclusion is obvious, I need to do this again! A negative by product of this euphoria is my future viewing of all the iconic American events that ignite the passion in us: The Super Bowl, March Madness, World Series, etc. seem to be anti climactic when compared to today.

After the world and its camera crews leave Mexico, the country will experience a damaging recession and suffer from double-digit inflation. FIFA has fattened its bottom line and is already looking to 1990 Italy.

Futwan Kerbol is hooked. He was most inquisitive about the "non ordinary" reality of Neza and the Hand of God.

FRANCE 1998- DUNGA LEAVES ME A TICKET- HE IS THE BRAZILIAN CAPTAIN IN 1998

June 16, 1998 - Nantes

Today's plan is not yet determined. Not reconciling the hotel menu prices with my budget, I venture out and discover a pastry shop that suits my appetite and resources. Returning to HQ (The Ambassador), I seek out Benefactor. He's conversing with some gentlemen viewing the

TV. They are watching highlights from the previous day's matches.

Benefactor introduces his companions who are employed by Reebok and guests of the hotel. One of them is Craig Johnston (nice name). Craig is of Australian descent and played for the great Liverpool teams of the 80's. He was present at the disaster in Heysel and is also part of the Liverpool squad in the FA Cup semi final in Sheffield against Nottingham Forest in 1989.

This match is significant because it was cancelled six minutes after kick off. An overcrowding problem in the Liverpool end resulted in the deaths of 96 people. The causes of fatality were listed as asphyxiation, or in most cases, they were literally trampled to death. It's known as the Hillsborough Disaster and is instrumental in the removal of any terraces (standing room only) in English football grounds. The Hillsborough Stadium was utilized as the neutral site for the match and for reasons still unexplained, the Liverpool end was understaffed by police and stadium officials. There was a massive congestion of supporters, many without tickets, and they forced their way into the ground and the terraces. With numbers far exceeding the terrace capacity, the people in front were pinched tightly into the restraining fence between the stands and the field and eventually they were pushed to the point of being crushed. Some very fortunate fans escaped by climbing the fence and jumping onto the field. Within a minute of the pitch invasion, necessitated for survival, the pressure brought on by the expanding crowd resulted in the fence collapsing and a human wave pouring onto the field with those in front bearing the full brunt of the release. The resulting disaster left 94 people dead and two were to die later as a result of their injuries. Hearing Craig speak of the day is a sobering experience. Inquests are still ongoing concerning the culpability of certain individuals serving in official capacities at the time. Initially blamed on hooliganism, it was later learned it was due to the negligence of the people responsible for security, police and government, and there was a cover up protecting the police officers in question. Ironically, hooligans weren't the cause but this tragedy was the final straw and the catalyst for Britain's organized war on hooliganism.

Finishing my conversation with Johnston, I have a decision to make. Not knowing where to go today and the failure of acquiring a ticket fresh, I'm unsettled. The two games on today's docket are Scotland v Norway in Bordeaux and Brazil v Morocco in Nantes. Both are less than three hours by TGV and the first match kicks off at 5:30, there's time to consider the options. Memories of the Tartan Army are compelling me towards Bordeaux but then I overhear a conversation between Benefactor and the Reebok reps.

Looking at me Benefactor says, "Did he tell you what he did last night?"

"No, is he worth hearing," asks Craig?

"I wouldn't bring it up if it wasn't."

I explain my escapades from the night before yet again and the Aussie is amused. I finish by saying, "But I sure as hell can't go sneaking into every game, that's not a good policy to fall back on."

Then the other Reebok rep utters magic words, "I might be able to hook you up with a ticket

to the Brazil match tonight”. Other Reebok Guy’s (ORG) offer is something along these lines: “Dunga is a client of mine and left a ticket for a sports shop owner from Portugal by the name of Jose Rose Bedaya (JRB). I haven’t heard from Jose and I don’t think he’ll be showing up. He was supposed to claim it last night but never did. Go to the team hotel in Nantes and if the ticket’s there, it’s yours.”

Dunga at this time is the captain of Brazil. The Brazilians are the defending champions, having won in the US. But there was criticism of that Brazilian team due to their tactics not being the open and adventurous play of earlier generations. Dunga was to send a message to them as he hoisted the Cup in Los Angeles, “Take a picture of this you shits!”

ORG names the hotel holding Dunga’s ticket and I’m on the TGV to Nantes. ORG has indicated I should delay pick up until about an hour before kick off. “When the team is there, the security is impassable. An hour before, they should already be at the stadium so getting to the desk will be easier. Besides JRB may still come and I want to give him every chance to get his ticket.” I’m not good about honoring the ‘hour before’ request.

Arriving a few hours before kickoff, I venture to the hotel and am greeted by a mob scene. The hotel is cordoned off from massive crowds surrounding the establishment to view, and be acknowledged by, the Selecao. They’re waiting for the Brazilians to load the bus to leave for the stadium. I wish Carlos Alberto was with me. The living legend could part this crowd as Moses did the Red Sea.

Acquiring access into the hotel looks an impossible task. I realize even if I reach the front desk, how can I prove I’m JRB? ORG had not mentioned the need and this isn’t the best moment to experience this enlightenment. Ultimately, the fact I’m here is sufficient to convince me to see it through. The first task is to get into the hotel. A simple plan forms, impose my way through the mob and inform security I’m there to get a ticket. Squeezing as politely and as forceful as possible, like a Mexican entering a crowded bus, I make it.

The second task is to get the ticket. Entering the hotel, the Brazilian Team is exiting and the crowd outside comes to life. Ronaldo, Rivaldo, and company file past. Samba music and shrills of exuberance cascade around as the Selecao board the bus. Still watching as they load, the moment the bus closes its door, it speeds off to the match. Approaching the front desk I put my Spanish to work, “*Perdon, su habla espanol?*” Pardon, Do you speak Spanish?

“*Si, por su puesto. Se usted ayudo?*” Yes, of course, may I help you?

“*Gracias, estoy aqui conseguir un billette. Me llamo Jose Rose Bedaya. Senor Dunga ha indicado a yo que hay una billette para mi.*” Thank you, I am here to get a ticket. Mr. Dunga had indicated there is a ticket here for me.

“*Estas un amigo de Senor Dunga?*” You are a friend of Dunga?

“*Mas o menos, hacemos mucho trabajar.*” More or less, we do a lot of work together.

As we speak, the receptionist searches for the ticket, he files thru some envelopes and finds one matching my assumed name “*Ah, lo encuentro.*” I found it. The moment of truth has

arrived and just like that, he hands me the envelope and says, "*Espero que usted disfrute el juego.*" I hope you enjoy the game.

"*Gracias.*" No translation needed! And with that I leave for the match hoping Jose Rose Bedaya doesn't come looking. After the previous day's hardships in seat acquisition, I'm delighted to have a category one ticket. I then consider what a shame JRB didn't think of bringing his wife or some friends.

Stade de la Beaujoire

As last night, the ticket market isn't for the faint of heart. Deciding to mill about outside the stadium to see what's happening in the "black market", prices anywhere from \$800 to \$1000 per ticket are flying around. I actually consider selling my ticket for a brief instant, but sense and reason win out in the end. Putting it all in perspective, considering the events of the night before and what I risked to get into the Parc of Princes, it's vital to see a match first hand. Eight hundred bucks would be beneficial, but then I'd never be able to say I was at the match. Call it rationalization, but if I had the mentality of selling the ticket I would not have the attitude to enjoy these adventures. My mindset is a bit insane and it's that insanity that makes it work. Also, the deities would produce a backlash; selling that ticket will trigger a series of events changing the outcome of several adventures that lie ahead and those are priceless. Pragmatically, eight hundred dollars comes and goes (Rome anyone?), but Brazilian World Cup matches only happen once every four years. And just for the record, my seat is fantastic! Dead on at midfield and 15 rows up, I'm on cloud nine.

Brazil wins the match 3-0 and it could have been worse. A ninth minute goal by World Cup legend Ronaldo, is followed by a Rivaldo strike at the stroke of halftime and Bebeto puts it to rest five minutes into the second half. The most memorable performance is actually a Moroccan player by the name of Hadji. He gives the Brazilians fits every time he touches the ball. So much so that the international press is calling him the 'Brazilian of Morocco.' He single handedly electrifies the match. He's to get a contract and play in the Premiership for Coventry City and Aston Villa. This match is Hadji's 'moment of destiny.' He becomes an instant legend in his native Morocco.

I'm tired, and of course, there's no reservation in Nantes for the evening. I've already decided the next day's destination is Italy v Cameroon in the sleepy Mediterranean town of Montpellier.

I consider myself fortunate to find a sleeper train with Montpellier as a stop the next morning. Paying for the upgrade, I board and discover my bunk is meant for a person no more than 5' tall and some stinky, snoring bunkmates besides! So bad is the accommodation within a few hours I actually vacate the bunk and sit in the regular coach, remaining there until Montpellier. The train meanders along revealing the beauty of the south coast of France, especially in the hours framing sunrise. In no particular hurry, the rhythmic massage of the tracks is comforting while the journey casually slices through the fog forming on the beaches. Every so often the fog opens for an incredible view of the shores and infinite horizon of the Mediterranean.

JAPAN 2002- MAKING ORDER IN THE CHAOS

June 22, 2002 - Busan, Korea to Osaka, Japan

An 8 AM wake up is followed by powdered donuts and a horrible cup of coffee and I'm on a hydrofoil gliding to Japan. Again the Strait is scenic but this time it rains the whole way across. Three hours later, arrival in Japan and it's the bus to the train. No way of making it to Tokyo on time for any of the flights, I have to settle for another night in Japan and decide to effectively use it by seeing another match. So Osaka is the destination.

This is my description of Japan from a train window- city of departure then through numerous tunnels bore right through the many mountains, then abruptly out of darkness and inundated with natural light, a glimpse of a valley strewn with crop lines and back into the darkness of a tunnel. Sudden glaring light, then a large city and back into the tunnel and so on. I arrive in Osaka at 3 PM. Japanese cities are so much more presentable than their Korean counterparts.

Osaka is chosen because tonight the surprise Senegalese are playing a very opportunistic Turkish side. The other match I've left behind in Korea features hosts South Korea taking on a Spanish side unwittingly poised to become the next victim of poor officiating in the South Korean ride to the semis. The Korean population has fanatically supported their side and manager Guus Hiddink has prepared them well. Deservedly they advance out of the group stages, winning the group that features the US. But in the round of 16, South Korea sends Italy home and Italian manager Giovanni Trapattoni sincerely declares a conspiracy. The referee, Byron Moreno of Ecuador, is either intimidated or personally benefitting from Korean advancement. He disallows a legitimate Italian goal and controversially ejects Italian superstar Francesco Totti for diving. Moreno is to be banned from officiating within a year for accepting bribes for domestic league action.

Today is Spain's turn. The Spanish newspapers had ridiculed the Italian claims, but when Spain loses to Korea, the Spanish newspapers join the Italian bandwagon and Trapattoni goes from crybaby to revolutionary. Marca, the giant of Spanish newspapers, leads with the headline, "Italy Was Right!" Two Spanish goals are wrongly denied and the linesmen, repeatedly and often incorrectly declare the Spanish offsides. Hiddink is to leave this tournament and be known around the world forever after as "Lucky Guus." Some even dare to say, "Guus knew who to give his golden eggs too."

This tournament also would be known as the "no instant replay" event because of the poor officiating in the early matches being exposed by the big screens in the stadiums. Every close call was instantly being replayed and beamed across the world, and because of the jumbotron screens in the new stadiums the fans and coaches saw them instantly in slow motion. So in the more urgent 'here and now' environment of the matches, poor calls were instantly exposed while the officials were still officiating. They were literally able to see a replay of their blunders during stoppages. The fans were given fodder to hurl upon the guardians of the game and these were the ingredients for an exploding powder keg if continued. FIFA made the proper decision and turned the screens in the stadiums off.

In fairness, officiating a World Cup match with the passions of each side in the forefront is nearly impossible. The speed of play, and now with players intent on getting calls even if they are feigned has made it that much harder. While there are several references to the mistakes of the referees through the years in my odyssey, let this statement serve as a commendation to all the times nothing is ever said; because those are the times they got it right. And while the cacophony of criticism is loud, the silence is deafening.

Tonight is a Saturday night in Osaka and for the first time ever a scalper tries to play this angle. Trying my luck with the scalper first I ask the universal, "How much for a Category A?"

As with most scalpers, he's English, so that makes him a tout actually, "Paying in dollars I assume, so eight hundred."

"What? There are other tickets."

"Listen mate, it's Saturday night here and all these Japs are out and have plenty of money. Just like us they want to have a good time tonight."

"I want have a good time every night, I never knew that a sense of urgency was associated with Saturdays. How long you been here?" Despite my abrasiveness the Brit is not put off, probably happy to speak the same language with somebody.

"In Osaka or Japan?"

I answer, "Japan."

"Since the start."

"How has the market been overall, really?"

"Not so good mate. Thank God for yesterday, we were able to get our heads above water with that one."

I feel bad for Naïve Brazilian and tell the tote about seeing empty seats in both countries on TV over the tournament, "Korea looks like a disaster for you guys."

"It is, we have a decent amount of tickets for the semi and Korea's in it so we might just get back something there."

Deciding to move on I ask, "Listen friend, I'm going to see what's out there, any idea where you'll be when kick off is close?"

"I'll be outside this gate (he shows me the symbol, Japanese lettering). For your sake I hope you don't have to find me, I'm good at what I do."

“I agree on both counts, and good luck.” And with that I venture into the masses of Japanese out on a Saturday night looking for a good time.

A lot of Japanese have adapted my most effective technique for ticket acquisition, a simple sign. But they are inexperienced, seeking the group of tickets together. I'm 16 years ahead of them. Another change from 1986 I noticed in France is touts carrying a sign looking for a ticket, but actually selling them. In truth, they are in the market to buy, but only to resell, and not be the end user. This has made ticket acquisition tougher. Because of an incorrect predisposition, some people will avoid me because of the sign. Others will approach looking for tickets assuming I'm a scalper. Tonight the signs are prevalent and anxiety is the result. I'm to experience success in an unanticipated fashion. There's a large, blond haired man with a fistful of tickets and he's starting to generate a crowd. Several people circulate around him as wolves circle their prey. From a safe distance the swirling natives are trying to speak to him but the man is unable to understand them. What needs to be communicated does not require speaking, packs of wolves never talk to their quarry after all. The churning predators are quickly tightening the noose and multiplying. Slicing through the swirl and upstaging the unintelligible Japanese I ask, “Do you speak English?”

The man turns his blue eyes to me and I sense a feeling of relief in his look. “I do,” and he's about to say something else but is besieged upon by the Alpha male. A Japanese man is rattling a verbal barrage waving some yen, insisting on tickets. Others smell blood and are bearing down on this ticket source.

Without ceremony, I take control and step between the assailing purchaser and his intended target. “All right, that's enough! One line right here, now! Let's go!” I emphatically indicate a certain spot and point for people to start falling into formation with a confidence that comes from being in a place where knowing nobody allows me a certain brashness. The wolves are now trained dogs and stunned to silence, I have control. To amuse myself and assert dominance, I say loudly, “I'm not fucking around people! Let's go one line right here!” Arm extended, I move it up and down on the same vertical plane giving the universal hand signal to “Get your ass in line.” The Saturday night crowd complies and the ticket holder laughs uproariously. I turn and say, “OK man, I'm gonna bring 'em to you one at a time to do your thing.”

While being offered thanks I point to the man who had initially interrupted and is first in line, “All right you, let's go, you're up!” And he approaches. While the two negotiate I get acquainted with the man between bargaining exchanges. He's a Swede and has the tickets because Senegal had knocked them out the round before. He was with a large group and most of them went home leaving him with the tickets. Someone tries to circumvent the newly established order and I react, “Hey buddy, can't you see there's a line, don't bother him,” and I point to the line. If the intruder has no idea what I'm saying, he gets to hear it from his fellow countrymen who are in line. The intruder is not happy with the social order but knows he's outnumbered and takes his spot in the queue. I turn to the Swede and get to the point, “Do you think you could save one of those for me at a reasonable cost.”

“I will save the best two for you and I my friend, don’t you worry. I am Mats and you are...?”

I answer and realize there’s a problem with the current order, there will still be a line when the tickets run out and some folks are going to be unhappy. Mats has 11 still to sell and I ask, “What are you selling them for Mats? There are more people here than tickets and maybe you could start to cull this herd by giving the price so those unwilling can move on. It’s going to get unmanageable here soon.”

“I’m getting 40,000 a ticket, that is the price.” That’s around \$330.

“OK, I’ll try to communicate this to them.” I approach the line asking, “Does anybody speak English?” As expected, there are no takers. I then “borrow” the cardboard sign of the second person in line and make the universal sign language requesting a pen. I write ‘40,000’ on the cardboard and hold it up with one hand while the other hand has one finger up. “40,000 a ticket, that’s the price, 40,000 for one.” Several people fall out. Soon the inventory runs out leaving only two people in line who aren’t happy but quickly move on.

There’s still a half hour to kick off and it’s a good thing because there are several checkpoints we must go through and it takes time. Twice I’m patted down on my way in, Mats only once. During these inquisitions we get better acquainted. Mats says, “I like the way you took charge back there, I didn’t realize what I was in for.”

“My friend, pulling out tickets like that is not advisable and you see why. So why 40,000? You could of got more I’m sure.”

“Everybody just wanted their money’s worth when they gave them to me and that was taken care of after the first five sales so the rest was, how do you say, gravy? So I was happy with the rest of it. My trip is paid for because I stay for a few more days. I am happy.”

“That’s awesome and gravy is right, thanks for the ticket!”

We sit together in the match and while the city is nicer than last night, the stadium is not. The dreaded track is there and annoys me. Not behind the goal where the track would be an overt hindrance, it still takes away from the spectacle. The game isn’t necessarily good either. An extra time goal by the Turks will be the difference.

I won’t stay until the end. I’m not feeling well and soon after the Turks score I wish Mats well and head out, I need a bed. Another early wake up is required to get to Narita, Tokyo’s Airport.

ENGLAND 2009- VENTURING INTO DANGEROUS TERRITORY

January 25, 2009 - Liverpool

The match at Anfield is to feature one of the most recognized and longest running derbies in club soccer. Everton FC is to cross Stanley Park and challenge the host Reds for a spot in the FA Cup round of 16. Liverpool's Lime Street station is under an hour by train from Manchester's Picadilly station and I take the ride in the mid morning. Arriving in the city made famous by the Beatles, I'm greeted by skies of perfect blue and pleasant temps that would motivate any to abandon the confines of a closed structure to appreciate a near perfect day.

Despite the surroundings, I'm apprehensive. I'm in search of a ticket, attending a match such as this without one is an audacious assault on unlikely odds for success. Working in the station is a waste of time since there are very few coming into Merseyside for the match, all the supporters are already here. My only other attempt at entry into a sold out English ground without a ticket was just over three years ago at Stamford Bridge with my son; but that was a standard fixture, today is the hottest ticket in Liverpool and always will be unless there was ever to be a reunion tour of the spirits of Lennon and Harrison and the living Ringo and Paul.

The Merseyside Derby is prominent in club football because of the successes of both sides and its longevity. Prior to the emergence of Manchester United in the newly established Premier League of the 1990's, Everton and Liverpool were two of the most dominant sides of English Football through the 70's and 80's: Liverpool being more productive and garnering more trophies. But the simple fact that Anfield and Goodison can be seen from the other contributes to the intensity of the rivalry. The original rift was the result of politics in the late 19th century and infighting amongst the board. The original Everton actually played in Anfield but the majority of the board took the club across Stanley Park and set up Goodison Park as their home ground in 1892. The remaining board members immediately filled the void and set up Liverpool FC with their home as the vacant Anfield Road.

Catching a bus to Anfield, I end up in a conversation with a Liverpool supporter. His name is Liam and the Scouser is intrigued an American is here for the match. Of course it doesn't take long to inquire about a spare ticket.

Liam is compelled to ask me, "Did you have any idea what you were getting yourself into today?"

Falling into the "ignorance is bliss" mode, I feign, "What do you mean?"

"This match was sold out within 24 hours of its announcement mate. Anfield is always sold out before the fixtures are even announced for league play."

Not to be deterred I tell him, "Well I'm still going to look, there's always the chance of a spare in someone's pocket."

Liam takes the initiative, "Come with me to the pub. We can inquire about a spare while tipping a pint." Exiting the bus I follow my new friend. We're actually walking away from Anfield, now in view. Liam points and says, "That's the Kop you see."

The spirit of the junkie surges as I look at a place long revered by many and known to the world. There are many kop's but the Liverpool Kop is the only known by those three simple letters. The Kop came into existence in 1905 and was named the Spion Kop by Ernest Jones, the famed British psychoanalyst, in memory of the many Scousers who died in battle over a hill in South Africa by the same name during the Boer War. The anecdotes are many regarding the most famous stand at Anfield. It's said the fervor of the home supporters can magically will the ball into the opposition's goal when Liverpool attacks that end. The phrase "sucked in by the Kop" has been used more than once.

Today my end game is to see the Kop from the inside and I follow Liam. Soon we enter a yard and parking lot surrounding by a very solid and menacing fence. Tight spindles are spiked and made of steel. There is disrepair in the metal with rust evident. Inside the fence is a pub named The Derry Club. It's a modest façade. Brown bricked and very square in shape, this isn't a place known for its flash, but more for its substance. Liam encounters several warm welcomes and the red of Liverpool is the prominent color being worn.

I didn't wear red today; a neutral black was selected. I had no idea where my ticket might come from, so blue and red weren't considered. But the thought of having that red shirt on at this moment did cross my mind.

Inside, we're escorted to a table in a room off the main hall and bars. It's less crowded and conversation comes more easily, no need to scream over the din of a crowded bar playing loud music. I'm in the Derry Club's VIP section.

I take a chair and Liam introduces me to three others seated at the table. It's a father and his two sons. The father is around my age and the two boys appear to be in their late teens, early twenties. They're clad conspicuously in red. Looking around the room, there are posters and portraits dotting the walls and most are of some historical context. One particular poster catches my attention, it shows a soft flow of waves a few inches over its center and above the water there's a pair of hands and above that it says, "Hands Across the Water", all of this constitutes the lower two thirds of the poster. The top third is a blue sky dotted with clouds and floating there is a symbol I don't recognize. Immediately the Paul McCartney song *Uncle Albert* is playing in my head. I ask Liam, "Is that from the McCartney song? What does 'Hands across the water' mean anyway?"

Liam nearly spits the beer out of his mouth and is aghast. One of the boys giggles and his father admonishes him. Liam recovers to say pleadingly, "Please don't comment on anything on the walls, let's just talk football."

Many times I have acted daft to my benefit, this time there's no acting. Slowly I gather this is a place where some serious issues regarding the repatriation of the Irish Island have been discussed: maybe even matters of life and death. But which side are these people on? Not that it's important because my limited knowledge has never given me cause to choose a side, gratefully in this case. Imperialism of the unionist and terrorism by the radical nationalists are both practices that utilize aggression to the detriment of the innocent. Or more simply stated, to usurp the will of others by any means; neither can be supported.

When I return to Florida, some research enlightens me. I was in the lair of the supporters of Irish unification, also known as the nationalists. Liverpool has the strongest representation of Irish heritage of any city in England. Not sure to what lengths the support of those in this particular Derry Club extends, I at least know where they stand. I find the following verses about the poster's words:

HANDS ACROSS THE WATER

*Just across the Irish Sea
Stirs a heart of Loyalty
Raised in Honour and in dignity
Drives a will to keep us British free
Not alone are we on this journey
For in a land just across the sea
Is a hand that reaches out in friendship
And a bond that's lasted centuries*

*And it's hands across the water
Reaching out for you and me
Helps to keep our Loyal people free
Let the cry be "No Surrender"
Let no-one doubt this Loyalty
Reaching out to the Brave Red Hand of Ulster
Is the hand across the sea*

All the Irish implications aside, Liam is able to deliver a ticket from amongst the Derry faithful and I'm going into Anfield to watch a Merseyside Derby.

Today's affair starts slowly as neither team is looking to leave themselves exposed for a counter. The home side is getting the better of it but Everton's well organized resistance is more than enough to repel the Reds. The deities deliver what is needed most to liven the affair up, an Everton goal. In the 27th minute center back Joleon Lescott turns in Tim Cahill's header across the face of the Liverpool net off a corner kick. With the goal the blue fans start singing:

The city is ours, the city is ours, the city is ooooouuurrrrrsss.....

Of course the red supporters will not be outdone on their home ground and now the atmosphere is rocking. The Liverpool assaults increase but they're denied going into the half.

The second half begins well for the Reds attacking the Kop end, the supporters enthusiastically urging their heroes on. The greatest Liverpool hero of his generation, Steven Gerrard delivers. Sent through on a cheeky back heel by Fernando Torres, Stevie G is aided by American keeper Tim Howard's shaky play and slips a shot inside the Everton keeper's near post. Now it's game on and the Anfield faithful are in full song. The home side continues forward and Howard atones for his earlier gaffe by brilliantly denying

another Gerrard attempt; the Kop is already celebrating an anticipated second goal until the American's cat like reflexes results in them putting their hands to head ruing what could have been. Liverpool attacks continue, but Everton's backline is magnificently marshaled by Lescott and fellow centerback Phil Jagielka. In the 80th minute Liverpool midfielder Dirk Kuyt is to have the best look to clinch it but shoots straight into the chest of a grateful Howard. 1-1 and the teams are now set to play again in less than two weeks. Everton would win the return leg in overtime and advance that year all the way to the final where they would lose to Chelsea.

I didn't sit with any Derry friends but would meet them after the match and return for another pint at the club. There's no political talk; football is the only thing on everyone's mind.