

MATCH REPORTS IN SPORT SECTION

# By now, the writing is on the wall — or at least it's on the World Cup wallchart

**I**N the film *Invictus*, the fictional Nelson Mandela was starting to get absorbed in the Rugby World Cup of 1995, filling in the wallchart in his office as if performing a solemn duty of State.

I guess the film-makers were using the wallchart to convey the largeness of Mandela's personality, which along with the great seriousness for which he was revered, had this playful side.

But maybe it is more than just an outbreak of childish enthusiasm, this desire in the human heart which erupts for a few weeks every four years, to put up a World Cup wallchart and to fill it in with ritualistic zeal.

At the very least, it gives us the feeling that we are involved in this thing that is much larger than ourselves, that though it is a gargantuan event, we own a small part of it.

If we are young, it makes us feel a bit grown-up to be keeping score in this way — and if we are old, it makes us feel young to be openly allowing ourselves this supposedly juvenile indulgence.

Yes, we feel free to talk about the wallchart, we know that for this month only, we have permission to perform this exercise which at any other time might

## RUSSIA 2018



Declan Lynch's World Cup Diary

mark us down as being a bit, well... unusual. A bit, shall we say... a bit odd.

So we make light of it, just in case, we see it as an excuse to escape back into our youth, just as the World Cup in general offers us the best excuse available to mankind, to drink fantastic quantities of beer at strange times of the day.

But maybe there is more to it than that, maybe this wallchart business is something that we need more than we care to acknowledge — which itself may sound a bit odd until I refer you to the BBC's classified check of the football results, and how it was done.

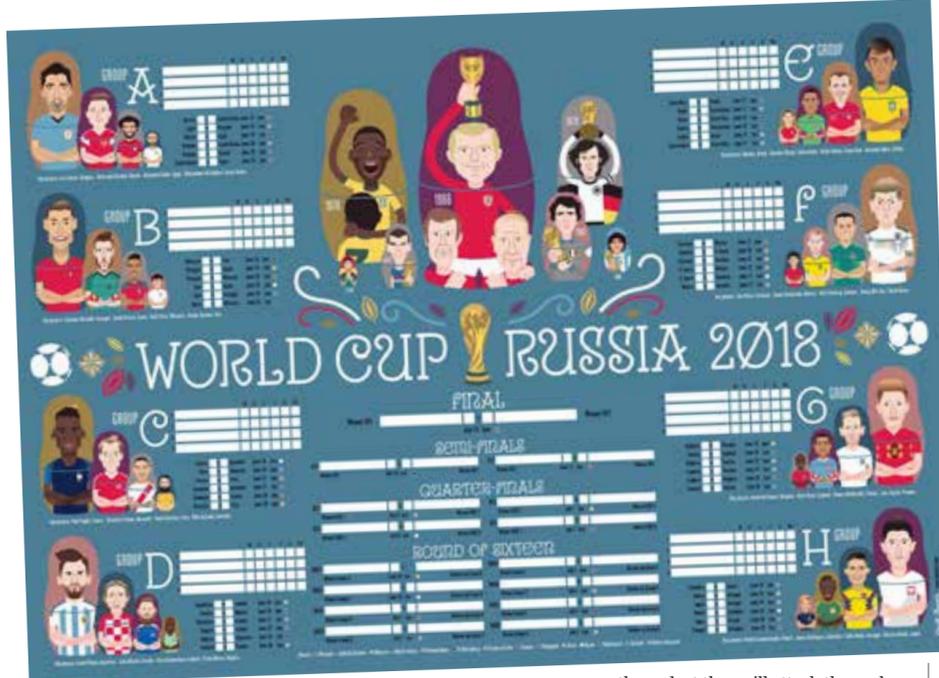
Every Saturday of the football season, about 5pm, a man would read out all the football results of the day in England and Scotland, in tones of the deepest seriousness — of

the many things that the BBC knew back then, this one was remarkable, this insight of theirs that the result of Arsenal v Chelsea was to be conveyed in tones which were no less grave than a statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer; and moreover that the result of Cowdenbeath v Stenhousemuir was to sound just as important as anything coming out of Highbury, or Stamford Bridge, or Downing Street.

The classified check became a ritual as sacrosanct as the shipping forecast, based on this understanding that much of our existence may be fragile and may be tormented by doubt, but when this day is over, these things at least are true, these things at least are settled — Arsenal beat Chelsea 2-1, and Cowdenbeath drew 0-0 with Stenhousemuir. And on through all the divisions, all the results, all these facts which are now incontrovertible.

It has been written. It has been read out on the classified check. It is done.

Raise this up to a global scale, and we are looking at our wallcharts, and we are thinking that this world is full of madness and catastrophe, that it is being laid waste by the worst of men — some of whom



are disporting themselves in the VIP enclosures of Russia 2018 — but that the World Cup is not like the world. It's better than that.

The wallcharts which represent it are giving us some vision of order,

even of justice. There is something deeply satisfying about the design and the lay-out, about the way that it is all organised so that the mere pretenders can be seen to fall away, and excellence will eventually emerge, standing alone at

the end, triumphant — roughly the opposite indeed, of the way things tend to be organised in our everyday lives.

Yes, the worst of men with their endless appetite for corruption will try to interfere even in this ancient pursuit of greatness,

they will attach themselves to it in their parasitical way, they may even consider the possibility of influencing the results of games the way they influence everything else that they touch — by bribery and coercion.

But for once, they will not actually win. This is not

Brexit or the election of Trump. At the end of this tournament there will be a true winner, a sense

**'The wallchart gives us a sense of order, even of justice. There is something deeply satisfying about it'**

that the most talented and the most dedicated have prevailed. There will be some kind of truth, the kind that makes us feel better about the world.

And like Mandela in the movie, we are noting each result on the wallchart, we are

paying our respects every day to this superior way of doing things — until July 15 at least, that day which now seems so distant, when we will take one last look at how the World Cup has turned out, and we will take down that wallchart, and face the world again.

## Fast forward is finally dropped

**T**HE World Cup on TV has another thing going for it, the fact that we tend to watch the whole game while it is actually happening.

In recent years, the Sky Plus machine and the virtual destruction of the human mind by the internet have led even the aficionados of the Premier League to watch the game at a time of their choosing, and perhaps skipping the boring bits.

But I think we all understand that the whole point of a World Cup game is that most of us are watching it at the same time, and that rather than fast-forwarding it, if anything we want it all to slow down to prolong the experience.

Our support of a top, top Premier League club is effectively a job, so it's natural that the main thing we are looking for, is

the result. We are also sometimes tormented with anxiety, our nerves unable to take the full 90 minutes, even if our attention spans hadn't been destroyed by Google.

But for large parts of the World Cup we couldn't give a monkey's about the result or the quality of the game, it just feels like we're on our holidays.

Which is perhaps the secret of its eternal charm — this is not just a holiday from life, it is a holiday from football.



**T**HERE will be those who do not understand these things, who will also be calling for some sense of "perspective" when they hear the Spain manager, Julen Lopetegui, describing being sacked two days before the tournament as the "saddest day of my life since the death of my mother".

I wouldn't doubt the man for a moment. And I have never doubted a certain William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon and England, whose work on the nature of tragic heroism resonates at Russia 2018 just as it did in 2002, in Saipan.

For allegedly failing to inform Luis Rubiales, the head of the Spanish Football Federation until the last minute that he was about to be announced as the next Real Madrid manager, Lopetegui was sacked by Rubiales on what you might call a point of principle — you might also call it a point of big swinging macho recklessness, for which there was no need.

Yes it was startlingly similar in its dramatic construction to the horrors of Saipan, with the same maddening forces in play — as Shakespeare has taught us, a tragedy is not just about some terrible person doing terrible things, but



about a person who may be quite right, up to a point, a person who is even quite admirable, up to a point, doing terrible things.

And what is that point, up to which you are sympathetic with that person — but beyond which you are appalled? Aye, there's the rub...

Now the Spaniards are finding out what we have known since 2002 — that this conflict is not really between Lopetegui and Rubiales, just as ours was not really between Keane

**'You might also call it a point of big swinging macho recklessness'**

and McCarthy. It is ultimately a conflict within ourselves. This is why we are torn, we have our own struggles trying to figure out if we should do the noble thing which could result in chaos, or just let it go for the sake of a quiet life.

Though traditionally the troubles of Spain were

more straightforward — they just didn't like one another, the players of Real Madrid which was associated with Franco, and those of Barcelona which fought Franco. Throw a few of your Basques in there and you can see why it wasn't easy to get them all on the same page, until this century at least.

So when football commentators would muse on the mystery of why Spain, with so many wonderful footballers, could never get it together to win a major international tournament, there was no real mystery — it was our old friend, the Spanish Civil War.

Ah, it was simpler then...

## More the merrier with 48 teams

**O**N Twitter, the eminent gastroenterologist Dr Anthony O'Connor put forward the "unpopular opinion" that he thinks a 48-team World Cup would be brilliant.

I tend to agree with him, because on the whole if you were to offer me a choice between the 64 games in Russia, or the 80 that will be tried in the USA, Canada and Mexico in 2026, I can't really hear myself saying "ah no thanks, it's fine as it is, don't give me any more of that stuff" — after all, you should never not watch a football match.

I would just question the official rationale behind the 48-team tournament, which is "an attempt to increase global interest in the World Cup".

Right. They've tried everything else and all they've got to show for it is a few hundred million watching Morocco v Iran in the afternoon. Desperate times...



## Life's looking good after road rescue

IT was a very bitter November morning. I was just three weeks old. Cold, hungry, scared and lonely.

I had been dumped by the side of a very busy road. Cars were whizzing by just inches from my face as I sat there too scared to move. Then a car began to slow down. A lady had spotted me but was unable to stop as there were too many cars coming up behind her. I was devastated as she drove past. A minute passed and another young lady spotted me and put on those flashing orange lights. She pulled up beside me to protect me from the other traffic. Her name was Alyssa. She picked me up and put me into her lovely warm car. I was saved.

She took me home where her dad, Richard, was waiting with warm diluted milk and a blanket bed with a hot water bottle. When Alyssa told him the whole story he decided to name me Rambo after my ordeal. I did not like that name. Her mum, Helen, brought me

### MY PET

Name: Smudge

Finest hour: Being rescued

Likes: Climbing up people's backs and meowing in their ears until they feed me

Dislikes: Cold weather and scary fast cars



kitten formula that evening and it was yummy. I felt warm and safe.

When Alyssa got back to work, word spread around the office that she had picked up a stray kitten that morning. A lady in the same office heard this and asked her to describe me. She was the first lady who tried to stop. She had turned around and had come back to rescue me. She thought the worst had happened when I was not there any more and went to work very upset. She was thrilled to hear that I was alive and well and being looked after in Alyssa's home.

The next day Richard took me to see a vet in Kildare town. His name was Alexis. He checked me over and declared that I was healthy and in good shape, despite my ordeal. He

asked if I had a name and when he heard Rambo he said that it was a very "odd name" for a female kitten. Richard changed it on the spot to Smudge and I really like that because of my colouring.

I now live happily with the family's other animals. Rescued cats Dennis and Maya, who are brother and sister, and my best friend, Oliver. He is Alyssa's "big" kitten that joined our home a year before me. There are three rescued dogs, Marley, Rocky and Dolly, as well as lots of horses and ponies. In time I will be allowed to go outside to play with the other animals.

Life certainly has taken a turn for the better for little old me.

Alyssa O'Neill, Co Kildare

■ If you would like your pet featured in this column please send a story of 440 words and a photograph to [snews@independent.ie](mailto:snews@independent.ie) clearly labelled MY PET

## Deadly bread diet killing wild ducks

### COUNTRY MATTERS

Joe Kennedy

WILLIAM Allingham remembered "with tears" four ducks on a pond, a grass bank beyond, blues skies and white birds on the wing.

The tears of this poetic snatch were no doubt prompted by sentiment. This was before a sight of a sad sail of dying birds could rend his heart.

No one had heard of 'angel wing' and maybe mid-19th Century bread crusts thrown on the waters contained more calcium than today's white pan. A century later, the sight of bedraggled pond ducks with tiny, sprouting wings dying from a mysterious ailment concentrated scientific minds on something called "bilateral valgus deformity of the distal wings" and the feeding of white bread in quantities was sourced as a cause of what was to be called 'angel wing' in waterfowl.

PLEASE: Don't feed the ducks white bread — give them 'duck seed' instead



The bread was a high calorie diet of proteins and carbohydrates — but seriously low in vitamins D and E, calcium and manganese, vital for ducks. Angel or slipped wing is when the last wrist joint is twisted with wing feathers pointed out instead of against the body. More mature birds become hopeless cases as the disease is incurable.

Another Kennedy, the Rev PG (no relation), author and ornithologist of the last century, writing in an issue of *Studies Review* in 1947, told the delightful story of a Mrs Rathbone, of Castlecaldwell, Co Fermanagh, hand-rearing

a clutch of common scoter (*Melanitta nigra*) wild duck, the eggs being hatched by a domestic hen. The resultant brown-black ducklings proved to be great pets — and, said Fr Kennedy, "showed a dog-like affection for their mistress".

Each morning she would take the birds in a basket to a local lake where they would rush into the water and "gambol, dive and chase one another". When the lady felt the ducklings had had enough sport, she used to hide in bushes and then the little ones would miss her from the bankside and scramble ashore "running hither and thither

with much anxious cheeping". Then, when a bird found her, its call-note would change and the others would be quickly at her feet and then all would climb into the basket to be carried home!

There was a sad ending when the birds got older, became ill and died. Tests showed death was caused by bone disease due to lack of calcium. Fr Kennedy pointed out that scoters in the wild feed on molluscs and crustaceans which were vital for survival.

Scoters are sea ducks occasionally seen here in some coastal waters during winter in straggling groups offshore in sandy-bed areas where they dive for mussels and sand-eels. The naturalist David Cabot reckons 12,000 birds winter here from northern Europe and Iceland. The last "suspect" of Irish breeding birds I can find is in Major Rutledge's *Irish Birds* for Mayo and Fermanagh.

Angel wing persists in some pond places where mallard frequent so please feed 'duck seed' to the birds instead of stale bread.



# Boys and girls come out to play on the potholed pitches of football punditry

**A**LLEX Scott, who has played 140 times for the England women's football team, was on the BBC panel analysing Colombia v Japan, which Japan had just won 2-1.

She made the point that when the game was at 1-1, the Colombia manager had been brave in his substitutions, sending on attacking players even though Colombia had had a man sent off early. She suggested that if the manager had been more cautious, perhaps bringing on more defensive players, holding on to what he'd got instead of trying to win the game, it might have been the wiser course.

Sitting immediately to her left, Phil Neville made the point that when the game was at 1-1, the Colombia manager had been brave in his substitutions, sending on attacking players even though Colombia had had a man sent off early. He suggested that if the manager had been more cautious, perhaps bringing on more defensive players, holding on to what he'd got instead of trying to win the game, it might have been the wiser course.

It seemed like a text-book case of the ancient practice — whereby a woman makes a contribution to a conversation which is disregarded, only to find that a man makes the same contribution later on, and is hailed not just

## RUSSIA 2018



### Declan Lynch's World Cup Diary

as a fine fellow but an original thinker. In the most troubling cases, he may even be hailing himself.

It requires a special technique whereby the man is somehow paying attention to what the woman is saying, and yet is completely ignoring her. Though it was a somewhat unusual feature of the Neville intervention, that he took the woman's line and made it his own, directly after she had spoken.

A more accomplished 'It's still too early in this experiment for the football men to be regarding the female pundit next to them with a sense of relaxation'

operator might have bided his time before making his move. But Neville was apparently so keen to display his knowledge — or rather, her knowledge — he just piled in without hesitation.

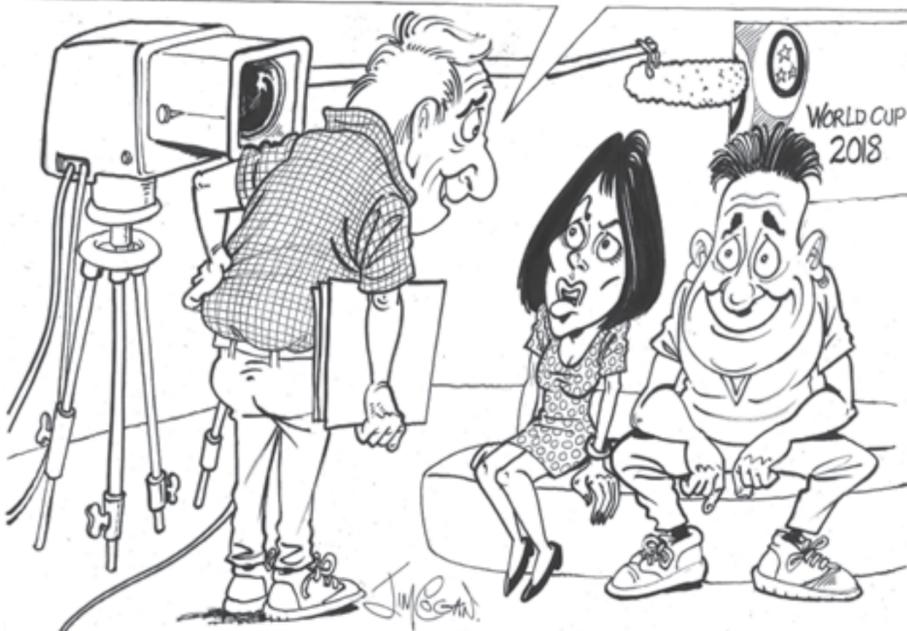
As is now mandatory, he was brought before the court of Twitter, and found guilty — massively so, though in a more forgiving world which does not exist any more, he might have been able to construct some sort of a defence.

For a start, Phil Neville is a very boring man — indeed during the 2014 World Cup, some 440 viewers contacted the BBC to say that he was just too boring to be on television.

It's a hard one to call, and you wouldn't want to be calling it on Twitter — but (in theory at least) a case can be made that his offence, though egregious, was rooted not just in his deafness to the voices of women, but in his overwhelming dullness as a human being, which naturally leads him to repeat what he has heard, because he can't think of anything else to say.

Moreover in the dark trade of the football pundit, long before the voice of women was heard, there were only about three men in the world anyway with original opinions, and two of them were John Giles. The rest of them would put in their shifts just making noises that they'd heard someone else making.

THE WAY THIS 'PANELLING' WORKS IS YOU DO YOUR ANALYSIS AND THE 'LAD' SITTING BESIDE YOU REPEATS WHAT YOU SAID AS IF HE THOUGHT OF IT FIRST!



So are we saying here that Neville was just being the boring repetitive pundit which he would have been anyway, regardless

of whether he was sitting beside a woman, with all that that implies? Well, yes and no. Well, no.

It is still too early in this great experiment for the football men to be regarding the female pundit sitting next to them with the same

sense of relaxation that they feel in the presence of their own kind. Thus Patrice Evra on ITV was so impressed by Eniola Aluko's analysis of

Costa Rica v Serbia that he ostentatiously applauded her, instantly finding himself before the court of Twitter, guilty of being patronising to Aluko, who has played 102 games for England.

In mitigation — if there was such a thing — Evra might be seen as something of a French eccentric, a trait which he seems anxious to advertise by favouring a bow tie and jumper combination.

If he is capable of that — the argument went — perhaps he lives so far outside society's norms, he cannot be judged in conventional terms.

John Terry can be judged though, for posting an Instagram message that he was watching Portugal v Morocco with no volume, a match which — wouldn't you just know it? — had Vicki Sparks becoming the first woman to do a live commentary of a World Cup game on British television. But "JT" had his reasons too, in theory at least. He later explained that he'd just got home from the Maldives to find that there was "no audio working in the house whatsoever."

Great save, JT, great save.

All the same it is a terrible fault in football men, that we can still be embarrassing ourselves in these ways, in our dealings with women who know and love the game as much as we do. This is not the MacGill Summer School here. We're better than that...



## VAR would have saved us from Henry injustice

**O**F all the foolishness that is spoken about VAR, the least acceptable is the one about the video replay taking away some essential element of controversy — the uproar that a poor refereeing decision can generate, the arguments long into the night which football people are supposed to love.

But, in fact, we don't love those arguments, we hate them. We don't love those controversies, we hate them.

Two words: Thierry Henry.

If we'd had VAR in 2009, the trauma of that event would have lasted for perhaps 90 seconds — which admittedly seems like a long time when there's a game going on, but which is considerably less than the nine years which have elapsed since then, during which we have contemplated the extent of our loss.

So then, 90 seconds or nine years? It's a tough one alright.

## What England's World Cup tells us about Brexit

**A**FTER the first week there was a consensus that this is a very bad World Cup. There was also a consensus that this is a very good World Cup. And personally I'm going with the good vibe.

But really I don't recognise these distinctions, this state of mind whereby you can be watching three games of football a day and you can be thinking: "You know what? This is bad".

Moreover it is so self-evidently good, it hardly needs to be stated that "this is good". And even if

it is not technically "good" in whatever way you choose to define that, you are always aware that it might very well get "good" at any moment — let us never forget one of the first principles of the game, that we are not necessarily there just to enjoy ourselves.

If that was the case, then those of us who went to see Athlone Town on so many of the days of our precious youth might somehow be looking back at all that, and doubting ourselves.

And into which category — good or bad — could you possibly put the story of England at this or

indeed any other World Cup? Some things are just beyond good and bad, but they are deeply absorbing anyway.

Do I give a damn if England are playing "good" football as long as they are out there doing whatever the hell they think they are doing? Not at all, because I am looking for other things, for these revelations of an entire culture which emerge from the England performance at a major football tournament, every time.

This time of course, it is all about Brexit.



There are about 100,000 irrefutable arguments against Brexit, but the one that is better than all the rest of them put together, is the England football team.

It represents what is left when you take away the foreign influences which have made the English Premier League the most successful sporting phenomenon of the age.

They are good lads — Harry Kane and Jordan Henderson and John Stones

and Kyle Walker — but dear God they are a whole lot better when they are part of the multi-cultural arrangements which have reached their apogee in English club football.

Without all those immigrants who are usually in the picture, the England team just looks a bit weird, a bit lost, like they've wandered in from the 20th Century, and are not sure how things work these days.

It is clearly of the utmost importance for all of us — but chiefly for themselves — that they do not succeed.

## Why consensus isn't working in Euphemism City

**A**NOTHER consensus that isn't working out too well, is the one that Russia would be rubbish — "the lowest ranked team in the tournament" was a popular line, as was "the worst ever Russia team".

Which may or may not have been true, prior to the

event, but then it seemed to escape the attention of the finest minds in sports commentary, that this is, well, Russia. And that Russian athletes who may not be very good during certain phases of their careers, can suddenly become quite outstanding. I remember when the

tournament was originally bought by Russia, the prospect of some serious performance-enhancement on the part of the host nation was a given. Yet somehow in



the meantime we let that one get away from us, with some supposedly intelligent people even suggesting that Putin is a Winter Olympics

man who "doesn't care about football" — leaving aside the fact that Putin doesn't care about anything. And now all the talk is of the Russia players being "tireless", and "fiercely energetic", and "full of running".

A special attraction of this tournament is these

venues in places such as Nizhny Novgorod, unknown to most of us, creating this impression that it is being played in some other dimension.

But by the time this Russia side has run their race, all commentaries will be coming from Euphemism City.

## Read all about Paddington's story

HELLO all, my name is Paddington and I'm a 16-week-old Newfoundland.

I started out in Co Cork, but now live in Dublin.

Paul and Ruth (my new best friends) lost their last Newfie called Bo Bo.

She apparently lived a great and long life, living to nearly 13, and I'm informed I have a lot to live up to.

Paul, who likes to think he's the boss, tells me he could never replace Bo, but he had to have a Newfie in his life. So here I am.

I must say I'm having great fun here.

I've met the local vet, who insisted on sticking a needle into me (ouch), but otherwise seemed to be very kind, and I heard Ruth say he's very professional — whatever that means.

Last Sunday I went to pre-puppy school, where two other puppies were both a little rougher for me.

One of them, a Welsh Corgi, mistook me for a black sheep. I put him right about that, discovering at the same time that I had a

### MY PET

**Name:** Paddington

**Finest hour:** Sorting out the Welsh Corgi

**Likes:** Everything

**Dislikes:** The vet's needle



deepish kind of bark which got the Corgi off my back.

Paul's car is an estate with an automatic back door. I've tried a few times to get my head caught in it — as Ruth nearly has a heart attack — but I'm getting the hang of it.

I seem to have acquired an awful lot of new toys and heard Paul mention something about money disappearing — but I didn't quite get that.

Apparently, I have to have very good puppy food, because I'm going to grow very, very big, and as I have webbed feet (oh yes I do, I'm the only breed of dog that does by the way), swimming will have to play a major part in my life.

My ancestors have shown great deeds of bravery throughout history and even had poetry written about them.

Ruth mentioned Lord Byron, but to be honest, I haven't read any of his books

At the moment my main hobbies consist of sleeping and playing with all my new toys and biting Ruth and Paul.

Ruth seems to make more noise than Paul when I dig my teeth in, but apparently the fun won't go on forever because they are due to fall out soon.

Does this involve a trip to the dentist?

I'll have to check that out. Well, that's about it for now, but I'll keep you all up to speed as I continue this great adventure.

I'm pretty sure it's going to be a lot of fun, even if Paul does run out of money.

**Paul Lees, Dublin**

■ If you would like your pet featured in this column please send a story of 440 words and a photograph to [snews@independent.ie](mailto:snews@independent.ie) clearly labelled MY PET

## 'The little things that run the world'

### COUNTRY MATTERS

Joe Kennedy

A TUNE called *The World Turned Upside Down* was reportedly played by a British band after the surrender to George Washington at Yorktown in the American War of Independence in 1781.

I have never heard this piece of music but it could be appropriated today by environmentalists, considering the diminishing of natural resources and living creatures, habitat destruction, misuse of pesticides and herbicides and general destruction of nature in mankind's pursuit of gain.

Many years ago, I read of a warning by the distinguished Harvard biologist Dr Edward O Wilson about the "little things that run the world" that if insects were wiped out, the environment would collapse in chaos.

He also famously said that destroying rainforest for economic gain was like burning a

Renaissance painting, or most of those in the Louvre, in order to cook a meal.

It appears that not a week passes where scientists and naturalists do not express grave concern about the disappearance of insects — flies, bugs, bees, beetles, moths and butterflies — from their usual habitats with dire forecasts of Armageddon.

Insect life is the basis of a food chain that makes up the natural life of the countryside. First of all, they provide life-supporting food for birds because without them, especially in the initial stages of chick-rearing, insect protein is vital. Bird tables of various seeds and fats are later supports.

Birds are also predators of aerial mites and flies and will suffer without them. Even mature birds, such as visiting cuckoos, need the hairy caterpillar of the tiger moth to keep going until eggs of host birds are grabbed from nests.

The lack of insect food is causing a serious decline in farm and garden bird numbers — some spe-



**ECO DISASTER:** The disappearance of ladybirds is worrying for the environment

cies have fallen by half. This is a worrying time. Consider the scarcity of butterflies and evening moths, the low numbers of bumble and honeybees, the disappearance of wasps and ladybirds.

Be concerned and question, where possible, the uses of herbicides in public parks, around trees and pathways and adjoining roadsides.

Do so courteously, realising the operatives are following an

order from the local authority depot. Phone the depot, and question elected councillors about pesticide use, if you can find them.

When insects are shattered by chemicals, the birds that pick them up do badly, too, when the poisons get to work. Many insects, as well as bees, are also pollinators in orchards and fruit nurseries. They are also useful eliminators of mammal remains and evacuations of grazing animals. All have a purpose under heaven.

Intensively farmed land, with hedgerows cut down almost to stubble height and headlands of grassless tracts cleared by chemicals, look as ordered as military parade grounds, but have been achieved by the elimination of a vital living element of the biosphere.

One British scientist, Dr David Goulson, of Sussex University, said last week: "We appear to be making vast tracts of land inhospitable to most forms of life. If we lose the insects, then everything is going to collapse."

# When you start thinking you win when you lose, then you've got the fever bad

**I**T was the broadcaster Danny Baker who declared during Japan v Senegal that "unless this World Cup now goes into an inexplicable slump, we might just be witnessing the most entertaining spectacle of modern times".

Great shout Dan, I thought to myself, one of many great shouts that have come from the same Danny Baker as a brilliant writer with the *NME*, on the radio and the TV and on Twitter.

But then there is a shout that is not so great, a shout that Danny Baker is not alone in making, but that seems somehow more wrong when it is coming from him — "it's a fuzzy, fussy, muddled, complicated, bloated, hopeless fudge of a con foisted on to the game. It does not make things better or clearer or decisive. F\*\*k off VAR and all your supporters".

Now, one of the odd things about these VAR arguments, is that they can be resolved with almost comical ease — resolved in favour of those of us who love the VAR, of course.

So that when the referee looks at the video replay and wrongly gives a penalty for handball against Portugal, there is

## RUSSIA 2018



Declan Lynch's World Cup Diary

nothing wrong with the VAR, as such. The VAR is just showing pictures of what happened. All that is wrong is that the referee makes a poor decision, just as a referee will make a poor decision when he is watching the game in real time — except now with VAR there is at least more information at his disposal, so how bad can that be?

Meanwhile, the VAR ensures that South Korea are given a goal against Germany that would otherwise have been disallowed, and all of humanity rejoices at such a rare and decisive victory for The Truth — well, most of humanity.

I do believe that something comes over people during the World Cup, that leads them towards the path of child-like unreason with VAR and

other phenomena, that makes even a shrewd like Liam Brady start wandering into these strange places. It's the fever, I suppose, this feeling that we have all been transported to another planet for a few weeks, to an environment in which the usual relationship between the head and the heart is no longer a matter of much significance.

For example, I have Denmark in the famous Cleary Family Sweep, and Denmark are now in the last 16 — and there are moments when, with a knowing air, I have allowed myself to imagine that Denmark might go considerably further than that.

These moments do not last long — no longer than it takes to identify Christian Eriksen as their only world-class player — but that is how it is, with the fever.

They are also in "the easy side of the draw" (though they are the "easy" bit) an idea which found its time last week, and which ended up shattering the terribly delicate balance of the English mind.

Just when England appeared to be enjoying a few rare days of peace at a World Cup, "the easy side of the draw" rose up and



England manager Gareth Southgate applauds fans after the defeat by Belgium

hit them with a dose of the fever, leaving them helpless in the manner of Father Jack following the scent of a bottle of whiskey like a distempered hound.

Now they got it into their heads that losing to Belgium would be the smart play, which had the massive upside for the England lads of turning failure into a virtue — as if the gods had finally recognised that they

were so good at failing, they had brought so much to that side of the game, they really deserved some kind of recognition for it, some meaningful reward.

Or so it seemed — until one or two people started to notice that on "the easy side of the draw", the first team they will play is Colombia. Whereas if they had gone for the "harder" option, they would be playing... Japan. Which... how can I put this?... would probably

be much... much easier, not "harder". Or at least as easy as it gets for the Three

**'There was massive upside of turning failure into a virtue — as if the gods had finally recognised that they were quite good at failing'**

Lions in these situations. Ah, but the fine minds who had seized on "the easy side of the draw" were thinking beyond the next game, to the one after that... and maybe even to the one after that.

And frankly, given what we know about such flights of the English imagination, there is nothing that any of us can do to help such people.

They could have beaten Japan, then lost to Brazil with a light heart and a quiet mind and much talk of "the future". Now they've got the fever.

## Bookies odds-on to lure punters

**I**T was during the World Cup of 1998 that Tony O'Reilly had his first bet. He would later become better known as 'Tony 10' — his online username with Paddy Power. He would stake more than €10m, of which €1.75m was stolen from his employer, An Post.

He would go to jail and somehow emerge from it alive and well enough to help others addicted to gambling.

But on the day of that 1998 quarter-final between Argentina and Holland, he had not the slightest inkling of the notoriety which would eventually consume his life. He was working as a barman in Scraggs Alley in Carlow when one of the regulars said he was going to have a bet on the game. Tony went along with him, to have an interest, just to pass the time really. He was 24, and he had never been in a betting office before.

He had a pound on a double of Holland to win 2-1 and Patrick Kluijvert (below) to score the first goal. It won at 45/1. It was a beautiful feeling, a beautiful day.

There will be a few more Tony 10s signed up at this World Cup, of that there is no doubt. The betting corporations are out there looking for them, inveigling them into the game with free bets and with lavish expenditure on promotion. Indeed, it seems strange to us that unlike so many club sides, none of the international teams has a bookie's logo plastered across their shirts — not yet anyway.

But the message is getting through all the same, with ITV in particular being inundated with gambling ads.

So the bookies are spending fantastic amounts on this World Cup recruiting drive, but then they made more than a million out of one Tony 10. And back then, they were hardly even trying.

**N**OTHING could be finer than that the World Cup is happening during a heatwave.

These tournaments are like a supremely heightened version of the school holidays, during which you have a golden period of uncomplicated happiness, which all too quickly starts moving into a more troubled phase — soon you are starting to feel the days getting away from you, there is no longer this sense of endless summer, you are approaching a time when there is more of it behind you than ahead of you.

Time, that errant whore... as Shakespeare may or may not have written.

We are now more than halfway through Russia 2018, and we're getting that feeling we used to get when we could see August coming and increasingly we would be visited by these waves of melancholia. Yes, we would still have some way to go, with much to be looking forward to, but we would also be entering that darker zone in which we would be starting to experience a few fragments of the great song by Mick Hanly — "all I remember, is dreading September and school".

There's an occasional flash of anxiety now, that wasn't there in those early days



when it all stretched ahead of us, when we were so far from the end of it.

Yet we must also appreciate that we have now reached the highest place. That opening game between Russia and Saudi Arabia might seem like a long time ago now, yet we will eventually look back at this weekend at the start of the last 16 and we will think: how happy we must have been then.

Already we have had our first full day without football, which is nature's way of giving us a glimpse of the eternity of

**'Already we have had our first full day without football — which is nature's way of giving us a glimpse of the eternity of nothingness to come...'**

compensate for that — and yet still we pine for that perfect vision of the three matches a day, even that magical Saturday when there were four games, and we would gladly have watched a fifth, and yes, life was sweet.

So we have not stopped relaxing, as such, we just understand at a visceral level that the World Cup — like the school holidays — is what life should be like all the time.

In the years to come we will remember these days as one glorious moment, under a blue sky.

nothingness which is to come. And soon there will be more days without football — though again nature has ordained it that the football which is left to us will be of a higher order than some of the games in the group stages.

Yes it is wonderfully structured, this process whereby the volume is reduced but the stakes are heightened to

## Flip-flopping in form has Juan hell of a name

**T**HERE is usually a demand for a "legacy" from great events like the World Cup — but since many of them are held in countries run by extremely bad men who are concerned mainly with the amount of money they can steal from the people in the next 30 minutes or so, mostly it doesn't often happen.

Perhaps a word, or a phrase might last longer than any material benefits to be handed down the generations... which brings us to Juan Cuadrado, who was brilliant for Colombia during the 2014 World Cup, and brilliant again last week — but not so brilliant for his clubs Chelsea and Juventus during the four years in between.

It is not uncommon for this to happen, for a player to establish his reputation at a big tournament and then to have a few "dips in form" in regular situations. It happens in real life too, when somebody creates a tremendous first impression, and then becomes a tad unreliable.

Let us call it the Cuadrado Syndrome or the Cuadrado Effect. You know when you've been Cuadradoed.



## The tortoise who came out of his shell

MY name is Mr Phobal and I'm a Hermann's tortoise (NOT to be confused with a turtle, I am a land animal so don't even try to dunk me in a pool of water!).

I'm not your typical household pet as I don't live in a house, I live in a school! Most pets only have one or two owners but not me; I have 600 people to take care of me (and give me strawberries).

You may not be aware, but I'm also a superstar. I've appeared in numerous newspapers and you may recognise me from the children's news programme *news2day* — I always knew I'd hit the big-time.

I lived a pretty chilled-out lifestyle with my old owners for five years, but things have surely kicked up a notch since I came to Colaiste Phobal Ros Cre.

This, of course, is all thanks to the school chaplain Fr Lorcan Kenny, whose idea it was to adopt me. He took me to my new home

### MY PET

**Name:** Yoshi Phobal

**Finest hour:** Interview on 'news2day'

**Likes:** Strawberries

**Dislikes:** The cold



and takes great care of me. I spend my days in the school and then retire to Fr Lorcan's house for a rest every evening.

Two transition year girls (with help from a few boys) made me a kickin' crib.

It is handmade with plenty of bark and pebbles, which I love to kick around the place, and a warm heat lamp that I spend most of my time basking in.

There's also a poster that two other TYs made at the reception of the school, telling visitors what I'm all about. I fit into Colaiste Phobal so quickly, I'm truly a community tortoise (it's in my name!).

You could say that I'm spoiled rotten, with fresh strawberries every day and 600 people looking after me, but I have something to give as well.

I'm not just a fun friend, I'm a therapeutic animal. I have a great relationship with the students. They come in and give

me a pet and tell me what's on their mind. I'm a great secret-keeper, you know. I make lots of friends because I have optical recognition — so I'll know when you come to see me again! I know when you're sad, and when you're happy, so I can help people manage their emotions.

Here's some advice; take it nice and easy, don't rush and small steps are key.

Do what I do: only carry on your back what you need, and what you don't need, don't carry. Be kind, and slow and steady wins the race.

Love, Mr Yoshi Phobal — the tortoise that came out of his shell.

**Eve Du Berry, Transition Year, Colaiste Phobal Ros Cre, Roscrea, Co Tipperary**

■ If you would like your pet featured in this column, please send a story of 440 words and a photograph to [snews@independent.ie](mailto:snews@independent.ie) clearly labelled MY PET

## Jellyfish bring 'message from the sea'

### COUNTRY MATTERS

Joe Kennedy

STINGING jellyfish off the Atlantic seaboard may well be an advance guard of a pending invasion. The troublesome marine wobblers encountered last week by swimmers in Galway, who sought medical attention as a result, have made their presence felt earlier than usual.

The incredible weather and global warming generally are the chief culprits. Add over-fishing and the way is clear for them to prosper, say experts. Their population explosion around these islands and in the Mediterranean is part of an international phenomenon. As predators disappear, population surges occur with greater frequency.

"This is a message in a bottle from the sea," a researcher at Barcelona Institute of Marine Sciences, Josep M Gili, has said of large numbers of jellyfish washed up on



TASTY: A green sea turtle makes short work of a Lion's Mane jelly in the seas off Queensland, Australia

beaches. "It says 'look what is happening to me'".

Galway swimming clubs have alerted members to dangers from an old regular, the Lion's Mane (*Cyanea capillata*), usually found on the Irish Sea side of the country. Three people were hospitalised in Galway with Lion's Mane stings last week. Galway Water Safety has warned swimmers to stay within designated bathing areas.

Marine biologist Dr Tom Doyle of UCC says specimens are so big they appear to have "overwintered". Jellyfish are simple marine creatures. Some species are

harmless, others can deliver painful stings which can cause anaphylactic shock.

The most common nasty ones in European waters are Mauve Stingers (*Pelagia noctiluca*), about two inches in diameter, luminescent when agitated and mushroom-shaped with a purple and red-brown speckled bell.

The Lion's Mane, more than three feet across with a brown bell, is a painful stinger, as is a smaller blue version, the *Cyanea lamareckii*.

The most common 'Irish' one is the Moon (*Aurelia aurita*) with a bluish tinge and four pale violet horseshoes at

the top of its transparent bell. Tentacles round the edge can stun small sea creatures.

Who eats jellyfish? Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese have been harvesting them for thousands of years and in the sea swordfish and tuna chase them as do leatherback turtles which will follow them through the oceans. (Many turtles are being killed by ingesting plastic which they mistake for jellies).

There is also an "immortal" jelly called *Turritopsis dohrnii*, found on the sea floor near Italy, which can transform itself back to a polyp and start life again! And a more interesting one called "the fried egg" (*Cotylorhiza tuberculata*) which scientists say is a potential source of raw materials for cancer treatments and antioxidants.

If you are unlucky, an old-fashioned remedy for jelly stings is vinegar — but seek medical attention for severe encounters. A good smearing with sun-block before entering the sea helps stop venom entering the skin. Lash it on. Forewarned is forearmed.