

So that's what became of the Golden generation by Stuart Fuller

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There has been millions of words written about the most remarkable game in the history of the World Cup Finals. The six or so first half minutes when Germany scored four goals in Belo Horizonte stunned 60,000 fans in the Estadio Mineirao, the 200 million Brazilians watching on TV and hundreds of millions more around the world. The Germans showed little mercy for some appalling defensive play, yet they came into the tournament not even favourites to win Group G, let alone progress to the latter stages. Their opening game thrashing of Portugal made people sit up but nobody expected the utter domination of the Brazilians. Irrespective of the result in the World Cup Final, that one game has re-defined the notion of Brazil as one of the best teams in the world.

The records came tumbling down in just an hour and a half of football. Brazil's first competitive defeat at home for 39 years, their biggest ever defeat, the biggest margin of victory in a World Cup Semi-Final, Germany's biggest away win outside Europe and so on. Is our shock at the result due to the strength and ruthlessness of the German side or the lack-lustre performance of the Brazilians? A bit of both I'd say, although the home nations weak performance in the 3-0 defeat to the Netherlands four days later would suggest that they were rabbits caught in the headlights of 200 million fans. The Brazilian media have naturally focused on the weaknesses of their squad and team management rather than the German performance. Is that fair? Perhaps not.

Ten years ago the English media waxed lyrically about our "Golden Generation", the core of players who would go on to dominate world football. Beckham, Ferdinand, Lampard, Owen and Rooney. We went into the 2004 European Championships in Portugal full of hope that this time we would get it right, finally delivering some glory after nearly forty years of wasted effort. Unfortunately injuries once again were our undoing (as well as penalties) as we crashed out in the Quarter-Finals to the host nation on penalties after Rooney, the 19 year old talisman of the England team, was injured early in the game. Two years later in Germany it was déjà vu as Rooney was sent off in the repeat performance against Portugal in Gelsenkirchen and England crashed out on penalties once again. The Golden generation slowly faded as age caught up with them and off the field issues became distractions.

So who would replace these potential world class stars? In theory they should have been already moving up through the ranks, gaining experience in the England Under 18's, 20's and finally Under 21's. Stuart Pearce was working very closely with Fabio Capello in nurturing the young talent. In June 2009 Pearce took his young squad to Sweden for the UEFA European Championships, full of confidence that they would come home with the title.

Two wins and a draw from the group stages took England into the Semi-Finals where they raced into a 3-0 first-half lead against the host nation. The English media in the stadium couldn't dream up enough superlatives for the team, already pencilling a number in for Capello's World Cup squad the following year in South Africa. In an all too familiar story, England then conceded three second half goals and had to rely on penalties, winning for once, to progress to the final where Germany would be waiting. The only black mark was that keeper Joe Hart would miss the final having picked up a second tournament booking needlessly in the penalty shoot-out.

Hart's absence would be crucial. On the 29th June in the impressive Swedbank Arena in Malmö, nearly 19,000 fans saw the unfancied Germans destroy England. The final score was 4-0 but it could

have easily been double that, mustering 17 shots to England's 6. The star of the game was a small midfielder of Turkish descent, Meztut Özil.

Fast forward five years and six of the starting line-up from that game in Malmö took the field in Belo Horizonte. A seventh, Thomas Müller, scorer of four World Cup goals already in Brazil wasn't deemed good enough to make the squad back in 2009. From that same Swedish night, only James Milner had made the squad for England's squad in Brazil.

Whilst the likes of Martin Cranie, Nedum Onuoha, Mark Noble and Michael Mancienne have failed to progress further than the Under 21's, the Germans have continued to produce young talent, constantly pushing them into the national team if they are deemed good enough. In the squad that got on the plane for Brazil, nine were aged 24 or less. Some players, such as the Bayern Munich trio of Müller, Kroos and Götze with an average age of 22 have over 30 caps.

So why have the Germans got it so right? The whole issue of the number of coaches has been discussed before, with Germany having over 30,000 qualified coaches to England's less than 5,000. But that doesn't tell the whole story. We have some decent young players in England. The issue is that they simply do not get enough game time to progress and develop.

Many Premier League teams have simply abandoned the principals and process of bringing young players through their Academies. The chances of ever seeing anything like the Class of '92 at Old Trafford is about as likely as Arjen Robben staying on his feet for more than five minutes. Today, Premier League clubs seem more likely to invest in overseas players rather than investing in the development of their home-grown youth players. Consequently promising youngsters often ending up with a career moving from club to club on loan. Look at the example of Michael Mancienne, still a Chelsea player when he took the field as a second half substitute in the Under 21's final back in 2009. He went on to play just four times for the Blues, including two cup games where they fielded weakened teams. He was forced to go on loan into the Championship to get game time, finally leaving Chelsea in the summer of 2011 for a fee of £1.7 million to Hamburg. Since then he has played 40 times in the Bundesliga, but is nowhere near an England call up.

Compare that to the likes of Kroos and midfield anchor man Bastian Schweinsteiger. They have Bundesliga and Champions League medals to their names despite their relatively young age. The German model of building their teams around young home developed talent is now reaping rewards for the national side. Seven of the squad have been regulars for champions Bayern Munich over the past two seasons, with an eight, Marcus Reus only denied a place through injury. Just over a year ago Germany's two biggest clubs faced each other at Wembley in the Champions League Final. Seven of the German squad played in that game.

The introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) is supposed to ensure that the best young players have access to the best facilities, although many see it another way for the big clubs to simply Hoover up the best young talent at an early age, stockpiling them to stop anyone else getting them.

We have a number of promising youngsters playing at the top level, with the likes of Jordan Henderson, Daniel Sturridge, Jack Wilshere and Alex Oxley-Chamberlain playing regularly at the highest level of the Premier League. If English clubs can realise the error of their ways then there is hope for us yet. Could the next "Golden Generation" be waiting in the Premier League wings already?

