

# THE CONVERSATION

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The England team's Euro 2020 was full of moments the country should be proud of. Sportimage/Alamy

## Euro 2020 set England up for a strong World Cup in 2022

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Following Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma's save of Bukayo Saka's penalty in the final moments of the Euro 2020 final, attention has been fiercely focused on the appalling and unacceptable racial abuse of the England players. Rightly so: we should all stand together with Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, Bukayo Saka, and the England team as they unite in an exemplary manner against all forms of racism.

I was very lucky to experience Euro 2020 at England's games against Scotland, Germany, Denmark and Italy – all at Wembley. At the final, the behaviour of England fans was alarming. Countless fans were violent, engaged in illegal activity and breached stadium gates, leaving many people frightened and injured. These acts continue to take the limelight away from what has been an inspiring performance from the England team at Euro 2020. This England team win together and lose together and have provided all of the team's supporters with memories that will last a lifetime.

As I stood in Wembley stadium, one of 40,000 fans, celebrating the goals going in against Germany in the 2-0 win, that feeling of excitement and pride was bursting. The energy of the crowd, singing “football’s coming home”, or “Sweet Caroline” will forever give me goosebumps. That’s the feel-good factor this England team have delivered to thousands in the stadiums and to millions more across the country.

Remember it was only 13 years ago, in 2008, that England failed to qualify for the Euros. But England has shone in the last two major tournaments: reaching the World Cup semi-finals in 2018 and the the final of a European Championship. England’s fans now have a team that is exciting, resilient and competitive when it matters.

## England’s evolution

This does not happen by chance and has been carefully masterminded by the team’s manager, Gareth Southgate. A true gentleman and patriot, he has delivered an unforgettable month of football and entertaining media coverage.

Following on from Russia, England’s fans have been able to peek behind the scenes like never before, get to know and love the players and staff. Perhaps the most eye-catching image from this campaign has been Saka on the unicorn pool inflatable.

Ex-England and Manchester United footballer Gary Neville has said: “Gareth, whether he has won or lost, talking about an incident like racism, talks with dignity, compassion and it connects with the people of this country”. England legends Frank Lampard and Rio Ferdinand were quick to attribute the success of this England team to the culture, standards and staffing appointments Southgate has made during his management tenure. I believe Southgate just gets it and this was evident in his open letter before the tournament. He delivered on his promise of “a summer we can be proud of”.



Gareth Southgate has supported his players and spoken out against racism throughout Euro 2020. DPA Picture Alliance/Alamy

Some might argue the team could have been more attacking-minded with the likes of Raheem Sterling, Mason Mount, Phil Foden, Jadon Sancho, Jack Grealish, Bukayo Saka and Harry Kane in the forward line. They could also suggest that England's in possession game needs to improve before the World Cup in Qatar – England only had 34.6% possession in the final.

But the facts remain. Out of 24 teams at the Euros there can only be one winner, and England played seven matches, two of which went into extra time, yet the team remained undefeated until the lottery of penalties in the final. With 11 goals scored from five different players and only two goals conceded, England were history makers by going five games in the tournament without conceding a goal.

### **Much to be proud of**

There are many aspects of England's Euros journey that should be celebrated and continue to be highlighted. On the pitch, Jordan Pickford's goalkeeping charisma, highest amount of clean sheets (five games without conceding a goal) and not to mention those penalty saves won the fans over.

Despite some early concerns with Sterling's form and Harry Maguire's injury, both players deservedly made it into the official Euro 2020 team as wide forward and left centreback respectively, alongside the formidable right fullback Kyle Walker. Left fullback Luke Shaw's performances at Euro 2020 have been excellent, with even ex-manager Jose Mourinho – who had publicly been critical of him in the past – commenting on "Shaw's amazing tournament". His goal at the final, his first for the country, was the fastest ever scored at a European Championship final.

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The relatively unknown Calvin Phillips, at international level, has been accepted with his battling midfield performances, ball recoveries and goal assist against Croatia. Phillips' total distance covered of 82.99km in the tournament was second only to Italy's Jorginho's (86.61km).

It's not just Phillips' on-pitch performances that have taken the plaudits: he was also the first player to console Saka after the penalty. He kissed his runner-up medal and stood on and applauded Italy as they lifted the trophy. This gesture warmed the nation's hearts as a display that embodies what this England team are about: compassion and class.

The last month the people in this England team have perhaps most importantly helped to spread joy after a very difficult pandemic. I am left with a feeling of hope, pride and enthusiasm to see England compete in the Qatar World Cup in 2022. This group continues to take steps forward to "bring it home" – and often the last step is the biggest.