

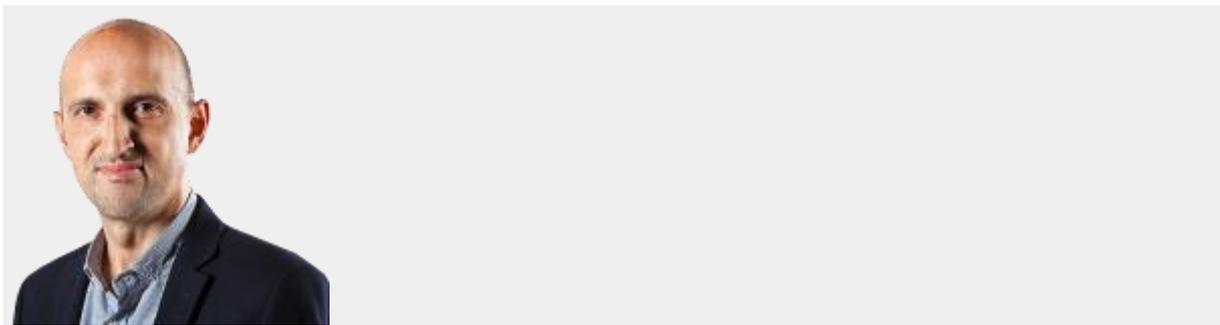
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Southgate is passionate and intelligent but he can't work miracles with England

matthew syed, columnist of the year

The national team's constant failure is systemic and runs far deeper than whoever is in charge



Like many who have met Gareth Southgate, I have been struck by his intelligence and professionalism. He is a keen student of the game, has read widely on player development and exudes passion. Little wonder there was a surge of goodwill when he was announced as England's acting head coach last week.

Yet it is worth sounding a note of caution. Reading through Oliver Kay's elegant chronicling of the national team down the years was to be reminded of the breadth of disappointment. Graham Taylor, Glenn Hoddle, Kevin Keegan, Sven Göran-Eriksson, Steve McClaren, Fabio Capello, Roy Hodgson: all have come into the job with high expectations, only to see them — to a greater or lesser extent — disappointed.

These men brought a wide variety of styles and philosophies. Keegan was chummy, Capello a disciplinarian; Hoddle wished for more panache, Hodgson for more organisation; Eriksson was keen to give his senior players a vocal role beyond the pitch, Capello wanted all authority to reside in him and him alone. These descriptions are somewhat reductionist, but they give a flavour of the variations that have been brought to the England job.

And this tells us something that Southgate will discover soon enough: the England manager is an important role, but its significance is profoundly exaggerated. The head coach only has his players for a few weeks a year. He cannot purchase anybody in the transfer market. He has no control over the tactics they operate under in their club teams. He also has little influence over how they develop off the pitch, as leaders and human beings.

It is not quite fair to say that the England manager is impotent, but it is probably fair to say that he has only about a tenth of the influence of a club manager. And this is why, with all those different personalities and philosophies, the England managers of my lifetime have not

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fundamentally altered the performance of the team. The problem is not with them because, frankly, they can't do very much. The problem is deeper.

To see how, consider that many of the most successful national teams of the past 50 years have had one thing in common: the best players. Spain had Andrés Iniesta, Xavi, Sergio Busquets and Xabi Alonso. They were so good that Cesc Fàbregas couldn't get into the starting line-up. Brazil in the 1970s had Pelé, Jairzinho, Rivellino and Carlos Alberto. France at the turn of the century had Laurent Blanc, Patrick Vieira, Youri Djorkaeff, Zinedine Zidane and Thierry Henry.

With the quality of players at Southgate's disposal, an instant change of fortunes appears unlikely
MICHAEL REGAN/GETTY IMAGES

These were the best players not just in terms of individual skill, but in a richer sense. They combined as teams. Busquets meshed marvellously with Xavi, Pelé with Jairzinho. They also had the psychological strength to step up on the biggest stage, Iniesta, for example, taking conspicuous delight in high-pressure matches. In short, these teams had brilliant individuals, who cohered as a group, and were mentally robust.

And this brings us to the crux of the matter. Skill, in these various guises, is a long-term phenomenon. A seamless first touch or the ability to pass intelligently takes thousands of hours of practice. Likewise, the ability to combine effectively as a team is a skill requiring the ability to look up while on the ball, to create a dynamic picture of the play, and to have the empathy to anticipate the movements of team-mates.

Performing under pressure is also a long-term attribute. It is about having players who've had enriching experiences beyond the pitch, and who have had input into their training and development, thus building leadership skills that matter so much when required to respond to a setback, as England so abjectly failed to do when they went down against Iceland this summer.

Southgate can influence these things only on the margins. Skill cannot be conjured out of thin air through verbal pyrotechnics or charismatic leadership. A head coach may be able to add 1 per cent, but that isn't enough to bridge the gap if the players are 5 per cent worse than the competition. To put it a different way, not even Julius Caesar could turn Jordan Henderson into Xavi Hernández with a rousing team talk or by "putting his arm around his shoulder".

This tallies, I think, with what we have learnt from England rugby. The national team is full of fine players and the difference between them and the rest of the world (with the possible exception of New Zealand) is fractional. That is why Eddie Jones has had such formidable influence through an inspired choice of captain, greater use of tactical periodisation, and a new cutting edge. As he said recently: "I inherited a great team. I have merely given them a few nudges." He has found, in effect, the 1 per cent in an environment of small margins.

For the England football team, sadly, the margins are too wide to bridge through a new head coach. The challenge, therefore, is to create better players. And this, in turn, is about superb

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grassroots coaches, Premier League academies that work more closely with the FA's increasingly impressive technical department and more sophisticated talent identification.

Most of all, we need a new approach to building the psychological qualities so crucial on the international stage. Our players are, shall we say, 5 per cent worse than their most illustrious counterparts in club matches, but in major competitions this broadens to 10 or 15 per cent. We have regularly bottled penalty shoot-outs, we froze against Algeria in Cape Town in 2010 and melted like snow in the sunshine against Iceland. This litany is not coincidental; it is systemic.

Football coaches in this country need to get up to speed with how other industries, such as the military and aviation, are not just developing technically adept people, but leaders. This is important because tactical plans, however enlightened, are disrupted as soon as the action starts, whether in a theatre of war, a cockpit, or a football pitch. We need players who are willing to take responsibility, to think on their feet, to adapt in real time.

And this is where Southgate has a critical role. As manager, he must do everything he can to add 1 per cent to the national team, but he should also be an advocate for the wider changes that matter to the long-term trajectory of English football. This country has the talent to take on the world. But we will never succeed if we keep deluding ourselves that by changing the man at the top, we can usher in a new dawn.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/southgate-is-passionate-and-intelligent-but-he-cant-work-miracles-with-england-0z5fntkql>