

WHEN NICKY BUTT  
STOLE PELÉ'S PLAUDITS  
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# NICKY BUTT

## BUTT... BUTT...

IT'S 2001. PELÉ SITS ON A SUNNY BRAZILIAN TERRACE WEARING HIS USUAL WARM SMILE. BEHIND HIM LIES THE FOOTBALLING KINGDOM HE BUILT ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE, BUT IN FRONT OF HIM SITS MARTIN BASHIR.

Martin the controversy maker, whose career has seen him interview the likes of Princess Diana and Michael Jackson, but never royalty of this grandeur. Yet, here he is, poking around and hoping one of the game's most illustrious players will say something— anything— complementary and quotable about England's World Cup prospects.

"Anybody else?" inquires Martin, pressing for more names who the Brazilian thinks will stand a good chance at the upcoming tournament,

after he has already spun off a list of nations. "Maybe Korea... Japan," answers Pelé, in his usual diplomatic way. And that's it, Martin has given in: "Japan?! What about England?"

Pelé fails to contain his amusement. He lets out a laugh that inadvertently pities the journalist: "England have qualified?"

Of course, this is actually a scene from the final credits of Mike Bassett: England Manager, a 2001 mockumentary that captures

the many nuanced tragedies of The Three Lions at international tournaments—the tabloid desperation, the self-deprecation, the four-four-f\*\*\*ing-two formation.

Despite remaining hilariously poignant for as long as English fans would like to admit, the film would have never predicted what did occur one year later at the 2002 World Cup. On the eve of England's quarter-final match against Brazil, in front of an audience of mixed nationalities, with no Bashir in sight or an inkling for pleasing English ears, Pelé

was asked who he thought the player of the tournament had been so far. Without hesitation, he named Nicky Butt.

Nicky Butt, who was once England's understudy to the injured Gerrard, and who had spent last season losing most of his club gametime to the silkier Seba Veron. Nicky Butt, who flew over on the same plane as household names including Sol Campbell, David Beckham and Michael Owen. Nicky Butt, who wasn't even selected in Ant n' Dec's starting XI for their 2002 World Cup anthem—in case anyone forgot, it's "Neville to Campbell, Campbell to Rio, Rio to Scholesy, Scholesy, Gerrard".

"The player I like is Butt. He's been the best player up to this point. He's a tremendous midfielder".

Pelé was remarking on a tournament that also starred Oliver Kahn, Zinedine Zidane, and Francesco Totti, along with a wealth of talent from his own country. That's not to say the Gorton-born midfielder doesn't deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as these players — his six Premier Leagues, three FA Cups and one Champions League medal are at the envy of most footballers — but what exactly was it about him that stood out to one of history's all-time greats?

"He's a good marker, he's passionate, he gets forward and he passes well." If England aren't being eliminated from tournaments by penalties or disallowed goals, they're usually being embarrassed by some superior European or South American technique. The knives sharpen,

the inquest begins. "Build more futsal courts like they do in Spain" or "move the ball forward quicker like the Germans do," cry the papers and pundits. Yet, here we have an icon of the game singling out a player for displaying hallmarks of a stereotypically English playing-style.

After Andrea Pirlo chipped Joe Hart to help eliminate England from the 2012 Euros in a match that the Three Lions were totally outplayed in, David Winner, author of the Dutch footballing culture study 'Glorious Orange,' observed: "The English were very true to their strengths and weaknesses at Euro 2012. They've been losing in that way for 60 years."

According to him, England come unstuck against more skillful opposition because they are too rooted in old Victorian values of heart, commitment and valor, with remnants of boisterous medieval games even filtering through into the modern Englishman's style of play.

While it's no secret that England fans love a battling Terry Butcher, Bryan Robson or even Wayne Rooney in his younger, fiercer days, is there really such a lack of appreciation for, and execution of, the game's more delicate side here?

Just hours after Pelé's praise, an underwhelming England performance saw them knocked out by a Brazilian who dared—and we'll assume, meant—to score a 42-yard chip. Even Mike Bassett would appreciate an attempt as elegant as that, but then, even a pioneer of Samba football can appreciate a player like Nicky Butt.