

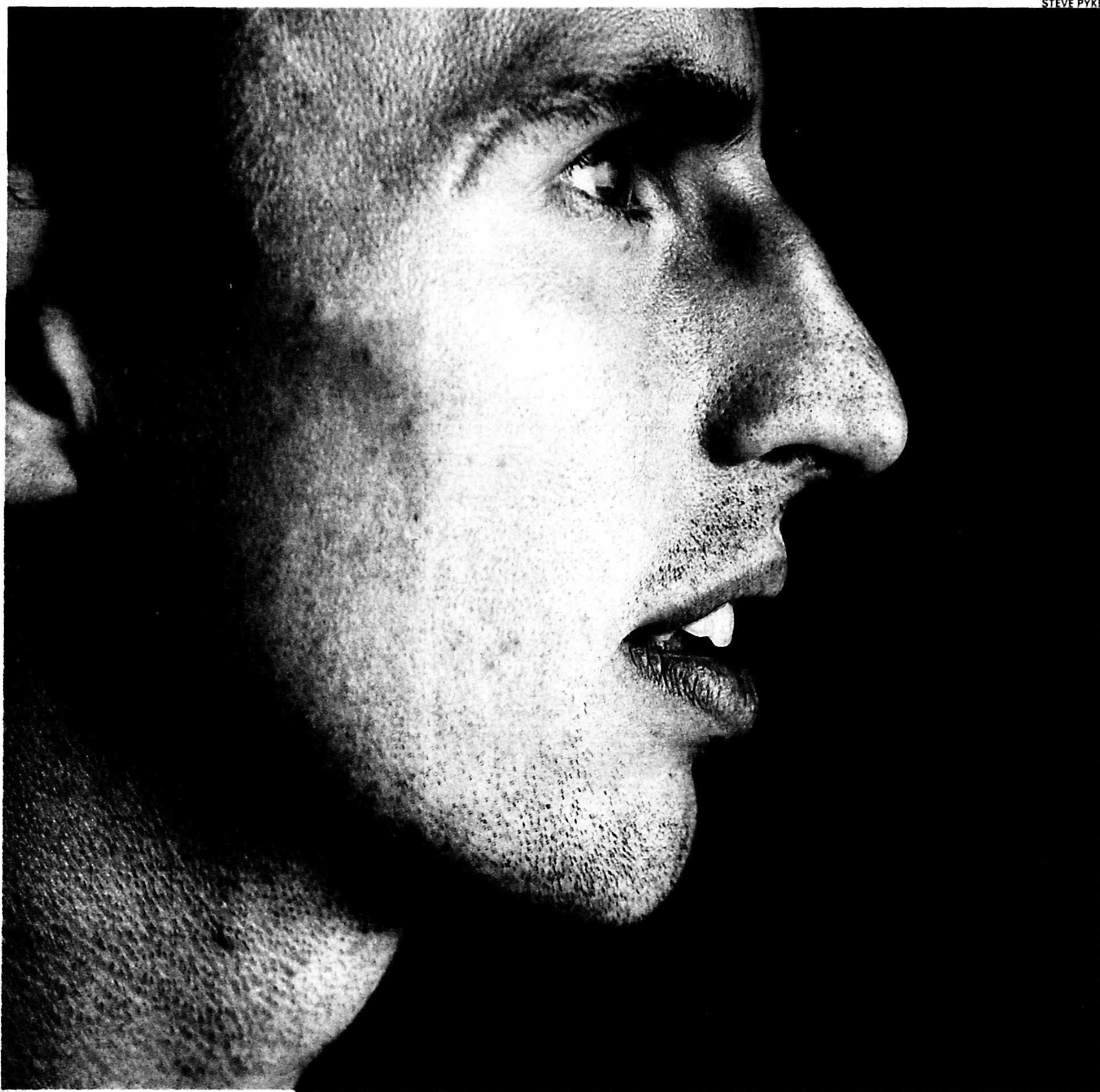
Don't cry for me, England



Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

Gareth Southgate knows he will always be remembered for 'that terrible shot', but he can laugh about it — just. And, yes, he would take a penalty again



STEVE PYKE

HALF-WAY up a volcano in Bali, Gareth Southgate was stopped by a local man who asked him stiltedly if he was English. Southgate nodded and the man chuckled delightedly. "Aha, you penalty drama!"

"I was absolutely in the middle of nowhere," says Southgate, shaking his head in disbelief. "I looked at Alison, my girlfriend, and said, 'That's the way things have changed now'."

Southgate has become famous worldwide for the closing seconds of the Euro 96 semi-final, when Germany beat England at Wembley. As a defender, he had played brilliantly until then and had been mentioned as one of the three best players of the tournament; but the kick that shot him irrevocably into international consciousness was the weak ball he sent to the German goalkeeper.

in a black T-shirt, shorts and trainers with untied laces. Several people stare and whisper but nobody approaches him.

"No one knows what to say to me. Every time I meet somebody I have to make some sort of joke about it and you can see them thinking, 'Oh, so we can mention it.' Things have worked their way round from the initial grief — grief is too strong a word, but from the initial sadness. I lost the script for a while... but I suppose it's like anything in life, if you lose a member of your family, the initial feeling is very emotional but you learn to cope. My incident is not nearly as serious as that and I'd rather people took the mickey than soft-footed round it."

Straight after the Germany match, he went to the bar where his girlfriend and best mate were waiting for him. "I just wanted to crawl away and, well not die, because that's over the top. But I wanted to just creep away and nobody to notice me. Having said that, I thought it was important to stand upright from the minute it happened and to show that I wasn't going to be beaten by it."

I ask him if he cried at any point. He hesitates. "I don't really want to answer that," he says, half smiling.

That night he stayed up late talking to Stuart Pearce, who had suffered the same fate in Turin in 1990. "He told me that it had made him a better, stronger person. I think we're similar characters and I would like to react in the way he has. What probably hurt me more than anything was knowing that I'd let down people like him. He's since retired from international football and that was his last chance to reach a major final."

The next day he went home, packed his bags and left for Bali with Alison. He did not even watch the final. "I turned on my TV when I got there. I had no idea what time it was and, ironically, it was half-time during the final. I just switched it straight off again — I was going through a bit of a crazy stage mentally."

With a huge effort of will, he has learnt to put "the incident" into perspective. The earth has not spun off its axis just because he missed the penalty and he says that even the rest of the England team were instantly supportive and philosophical about the defeat. "Stuart Pearce came up with a great line. We were travelling back from the semi-final and he said, 'I'll feed the horses tomorrow and I'll look at them and I'll say, 'We missed out again' and the horse will just say, 'What are you going on about, I just want my carrot.'"

Back from Bali last week

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and straight into training for his club, he has not had a chance to speak to any of the players or even to his parents.

"Why didn't you just whack it in?" his mother famously asked him straight after the match. "At the time I thought, 'That's a strange thing to say, Mum,' but I didn't think any more of it. The next day it was all over the papers and she was so upset. She felt she'd almost turned everybody against me. But of course she hadn't. Everyone's been magnificent."

He has received thousands of letters from all over the country, including an invitation to address the Oxford Union.

When I meet him, he has just collected another huge sack of mail from Villa Park. "I suppose it's very English, people sort of rally round a loser, well not a loser but..." he tails off.

In his latest mailbag is a consoling letter from Tony Blair. John Major saw him in person after the match. "I just bumped into him and the first thing he said was, 'How are you feeling?' Then he said, 'Oh no, I shouldn't ask you that.' It was all quite bizarre; I suppose that summed up the month really. I was doing things like introducing the Sex Pistols at concerts whereas 12 months previously I wouldn't even have introduced the Croydon boy's choir."

He chuckles at the absurdity of his sudden fame: "I suppose that summed up the enormity of the tournament."

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The nation was drawn together in a way which normally happens only during wars or royal weddings. The song was *Football's Coming Home* and all of a sudden — he clicks his fingers — "that one incident ended it."

He has watched a couple of replays of the shoot-out. "I haven't sat there with my video, but I've seen it by chance — I thought it was a terrible shot."

It seems brutally unfair that one man should have to shoulder the responsibility of plunging his country into despair — more people were tuned in to his anguish than to the Princess of Wales's *Panorama* interview. Penalty shoot-outs can seem gratuitously cruel spectacles which perhaps owe as much to luck as pure schooling. Southgate himself disagrees and says he would not hesitate to take a penalty again.

"Even having been the guilty party, I still think it is the only way. It's a test of footballing ability and probably a mental test as well. At least it's part of football and it's got to be better than tossing a coin."

Brian Little, manager of Aston Villa, plucked Southgate from relative obscurity last summer, paying Crystal Palace £2.5 million for him. Within two months, his judgment had been backed by Terry Venables, who named Southgate in his squad for a game in Norway. His first full match for England was in March and he has gone from strength to strength, only put-

ting a foot wrong at the end.

Born in Watford, he grew up in Lancashire and Sussex. His father was a building services contractor for IBM, moving around the country. His family has no footballing history but Gareth always stood out in school matches. He trained with Southampton for a year but when he was 15, he received a letter coldly dismissing him without explanation. "I've still got that letter and every time we play Southampton, I read it. It was sent to my father and said, 'Dear Gareth Southgate — my father's name is Clive — we will not be keeping your son.' At that age particularly, it's end-of-the-world stuff."

Nevertheless, he bounced back with the Crystal Palace youth team. He passed eight O-levels but resisted his

mother's pleas to take A-levels and go on to university. "I felt the opportunity with Palace was too good to miss."

His judgment proved right and he successfully became captain of Palace's youth, reserve and first teams. "I've captained every team I've ever played for, except of course Aston Villa and England." He is widely tipped for future captaincy of England.

Glenn Hoddle, the new England coach, is said to prize Southgate's versatility and there seems little doubt that he will continue to play for the team.

Bobby Charlton compares him to Nobby Stiles in the sense that the former England player, like Southgate, could sense where danger was emerging and nip it in the bud: "You can't teach people

that — it's an intuitive sense of where to be and when. I thought Southgate was just sensational."

Friends and managers, past and present, speak of Southgate as a man of great moral rectitude and integrity. His articulacy and level-headedness have already propelled him forward as the voice of the England team — he writes football columns and works as a match summariser on Radio 5. It was he who addressed the press after the so-called "mayhem in the skies", when a television screen was destroyed on the now-infamous Cathay Pacific flight. Although the players took collective responsibility, one can be sure that Southgate was not involved.

Never a man for flamboyance, he had an aura of anonymity before Euro 96, even receiving mail addressed to "Neville" or "Darren" Southgate. "I'm not a particularly eye-catching player and I've not gone out of my way to grab attention. I haven't dyed my hair or anything, I'm not really like that."

But he says it would be wrong to dismiss him as a "bit boring" or a loner. "I have a sense of humour and if somebody had done what I did I would be one of the first to wind them up. I like the involvement of being in a team and the wisecracks that go with it."

He is an engaging personality, easy to talk to and sincere. There is not a trace of arrogance, although he is clearly ambitious. "I would say that's one of my strong points as a player and as a person — there is nobody more determined or more focused on what they want to achieve. I know where I want to go, and in the back of my mind I think I always knew I would play for England."

Although totally dedicated to the game, he says that football is no longer the sole pivot of his life. Next year he will marry Alison, who is not a football fan and has succeeded in making him less intense about the game.

"When I was captain of Crystal Palace, I took on far too much responsibility. I was losing touch with reality, everything revolved around football. One evening I went home after a match and sat in the flat on my own. It was New Year's Eve and looking back it was an absolutely pathetic thing to do. That would never happen now because I've got things in my life that are more important."

Despite the cruel personal ending to Euro 96, Southgate is determined not to wallow in self-pity and to use it, if he can, as a positive experience. "That's not going to bring back the opportunity to win Euro 96 but there's nothing I can do about that. I have got to look forward. A sports psychologist once said that only an idiot would replay his misses in his mind — and I am not an idiot."

No truer test of friendship...

YOU'RE looking very small today," said Mary, on the first day of my two-week working holiday in a 16th-century farmhouse in the Tarn et Garonne, where the English outnumber the French.

"Well there's not much I can do about that," I replied breezily, not wishing to have the wind taken out of my sails so early in the day.

"Push your hair back and take off those pervert's trousers," she said.

"But these are my painting trousers," I grinned.

With temperatures of 86°F in the shade, children screaming by the pool all day and Mary suffering from an "unusually florid reaction" to insect bites once again, it was not surprising that she had begun to find me more irritating than usual.

Things went from bad to worse when I made the admittedly irrational remark that if she were to swim more rather than just stand in the water like Pavarotti in Barbados, then she might

attract less attention from the insects. On the other hand she had wounded my feelings by passing off my triathlon around the local reservoir, which had involved me mountain biking through scrub and at one stage wading through the reservoir with the bike on my back, as a "completely pyrrhic achievement".

Neither was it surprising that she soon began to exhibit a marked preference for the company of our host over my own. I was philosophical about it. Euan is 6ft 5in tall, a dead ringer for Christopher Lee and has a voice like Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady* which cuts across the general murmur of conversation like a machine gun. By contrast I'm 5ft 11in tall with a light voice which can verge on grating and has been unkindly compared to that of the late Sandy Richardson of *Crossroads* fame.

It was worrying for me. Would the unfavourable contrast between myself and Euan have long-term effects on our marriage? Moreover,



Family Life

Giles Wood

would the iron bond of our family's friendship with 71-year-old Euan be tempered by his two-week immersion in the crucible of family life, or would it snap, like the branch of the catalpa tree had, when the entire Wood family climbed into the hammock for a photo opportunity?

"That branch has stood up for centuries to drought and tempest and now it's gone," said Euan. "But it couldn't matter less!" he added unconvincingly.

"Nu-nu", as the children call him, has had his patience tested to breaking point.

Coming from my arbour on the fifth day of our holiday, I could see that Posy was swinging the pool thermometer around her head. Nu-nu boomed at her to put it down in case the glass broke and Posy started bawling inconsolably.

"Whose fault was it for letting her have the thermometer in the first place?" I shouted at Mary across the parched scrubland of *pays perdu* (the weather has turned us all into hot-tempered Gauls).

A conciliatory voice boomed back from behind a gnarled box tree. "There is one word which I am going to ban the use of for the remaining duration of your welcome stay in this house," said Euan. "And that is the word 'fault'. If I may say, from my ever-growing experience of the Wood family, I see that the attribution of *fault* is something of a pivotal activity among all those members of the family old enough to articulate.

"What is more," he

continued, "my irritation at the use of the word is how frequently its direction is misaligned..."

Needless to say, Mary was delighted by his intervention. It was time to take defensive action. Seeing that the relationship between Mary and Euan would be put under strain if he took her on a shopping trip to the nearby town, I arranged for this to take place.

The outcome, I am pleased to say, was favourable from my point of view. Euan returned complaining about the time that Mary had spent in "picking up, examining, deciding to buy and then rejecting various items of merchandise. Even a very good-natured woman in a shoe shop was driven practically to distraction by Mary's various indecisions," he said.

I am pleased to report that I think this episode has stabilised the relationship which exists between the three of us with the pendulum of favour swinging slightly back in my direction.

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