



he said would do well at Euro 2020... England and Italy! Given he clearly
ntest Sunday's final.

Matt Baker

Matt, a lot has happened since we last spoke, not least England have reached their first major tournament final in 55 years! Where will you be watching Sunday's final?

I've watched every game at home with my family and this will be the same. In the past we've organised Euro/World Cup parties in my garden and watched on a screen with friends and then partied into the night. Obviously Covid-19 has prevented that this time so it will be me, my wife and three boys watching it together.

What have you made of the tournament overall?

I've really enjoyed the whole tournament, not just the England games. I think the standard of football has been generally very good and enjoyable to watch. The refereeing has also been of a high standard throughout. There has obviously been the odd decision debated and disagreed with but I don't recall lengthy discussions around VAR (video assistant referee) or how a referee has ruined the game.

You predicted England would do well and now they are in the final! - Have they ridden their luck at times?

England certainly haven't disappointed! I don't think it has been luck at all, we've played very well at times, approached every game professionally and Gareth Southgate's decisions all seem to have paid off so far. The game management has been brilliant, for example keeping the ball by passing around at the end of the semi-final against Denmark game is something I can't remember England sides doing before.

England's semi-final opponents, Denmark, had an extraordinary tournament, with midfielder Christian Eriksen suffering a cardiac arrest on the pitch during the first game. What did you take from that incident and the events that followed?

At the time when it happened there was a lot of shock and concern. There was also a lot of prayer, people often pray in a crisis I know, but this seemed genuine and I believe made a difference. I thought the Denmark team and staff handled it excellently in what must have been a really traumatic situation. The most important thing is that Eriksen seems to be doing well now and improving. Positively it has raised the importance of heart screening and I believe the Premier League have announced they will be funding defibrillators at grassroots clubs and facilities which is great news.

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Twitter / @DBUfodbold

What would be your message to the England players ahead of Sunday if you were speaking with them as a Chaplain?

Play the game not the occasion. I know this sounds like a cliché and is much easier said than done but I'm sure that will be the sort of message Gareth and his team will be trying to communicate. Sticking to routine, going through the usual preparation for a game, staying focussed, believing in themselves. These players are professionals at the top of their game, several have played in high pressure games before, like Champions League finals, so they should be fine.

There's already talk of England's progress having lifted the national mood – do you think that adds pressure to the England players going into Sunday's final?

We all know what a tough 18 months it has been and England's progress and Gareth Southgate's leadership have definitely lifted the national mood. For many it's been a real blessing. The players will be going into the final to win. That's the end goal; just getting there is not enough. But I don't think they will be feeling the weight of the nation on their shoulders, I think they will be looking forward to giving it their best shot and bringing football home!

You said before the tournament that you never pray for a winning outcome to a game of football – what could England fans pray for ahead of Sunday's game?

When I have the privilege to pray with players before a game I pray for everyone that makes the day happen, from ground staff to backroom staff, those in the hospitality lounges to the players on the pitch. We can pray for safety in the stadium, on and off the pitch and for fans travelling. I believe we all have God-given gifts and talents which are not just for an individual's benefit but for the enjoyment of others so I would be praying for God to bless these and that they would bring glory to Him.

"I'm backing England to win and with thousands of fans at Wembley cheering them on I think that will give them the edge."



Twitter / @England

Sports stars are often role models for young people. What do you think their impact is?

Yes, rightly or wrongly young people do look up to those they see on the sports field. Of course this can have a negative impact, the attitudes of players on the pitch in a professional game can have the knock-on effect of encouraging behaviours such as diving and “gamesmanship” at grassroots level. But positively it’s great to see role models like Marcus Rashford who are using their influence off the pitch to make a positive difference in society.

What advice have you given to footballers who come under criticism - either from the media or from fans on social media?

I've seen the effect negative media and social media attention can have on players. The simple advice is don't read it or listen to it but that's sometimes easier said than done. A big part of a chaplain's role is to be a listening ear - so enabling a player to talk about how they feel and trying to offer encouragement can make a big difference.

Finally, who do you think has the edge going into Sunday's final?

Unusually for Italy they started the tournament really well; it usually takes them a while to get going though I don't think they have been as dominant in the knockout stages. England have grown into the tournament and seem to be getting better as it goes on. It's also apparent that the players and staff as well as being focussed are really enjoying it.

I'm backing England to win and with thousands of fans at Wembley cheering them on I think that will give them the edge. It will be close - but hopefully without the need for extra time and penalties!

Matt Baker is Sports Chaplaincy UK National Director for England & Pastoral Support Director in English Football.

Images (top to bottom):

- *Matt Baker wearing an an England shirt from World Cup 1990,*
- *A message from Danish footballer Christian Eriksen following his recovery from an on-field cardiac arrest, tweeted by the Denmark national team,*
- *A photo tweeted by the England team, celebrating Harry Kane's semi-final winner over Denmark,*
- *(below) Matt Baker's collection of England (and even Italy) shirts.*



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More:

- [Read our interview with Matt Baker from before Euro 2020 began](#)

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