

The UK's National Director for Sports Chaplaincy, Matt Baker and his deputy, Christian Wienkamp, have a great working relationship, but fall down on either sides of one of football's most famous rivalries. Matt is an England fan, and Christian supports his native Germany! In addition to their



...serves as Chaplain to West Bromwich Albion FC. We caught up ahead of ...
..., and whether it's really possible to practise for a penalty shootout...

The 2022 World Cup has been steeped in controversy ever since it was awarded to Qatar 12 years ago. From sports stars to politicians, concerns have been voiced over conditions for overseas workers, the human rights record of the host nation particularly in relation to LGBTI+ people, and the process for awarding the tournament in the first place.

Should we be looking forward to this world cup at all?

Matt: The whole thing feels very different to previous World Cups. That is partly the time of year, being in November, but chiefly because all of the controversy means that rather than sporting questions like who should be selected or what formation to play, the questions instead have been about whether it should be going ahead at all. People are not so excited in the build-up to this world cup as they would be normally. Of course, sport doesn't really matter at all, and because of that it matters enormously. That sounds a bit nonsensical, but when there is a lot of other bad news around, focusing on a major sporting tournament can be a useful change and hopefully once the football begins, what happens on the pitch at least is something we can still get excited about.

Christian: Football doesn't operate in a vacuum either, and it's a tough time for the world in general right now. The World Cup with all its controversy comes alongside a cost of living crisis, war and climate disasters around the world – that all affects the extent to which people can be excited about a football tournament.

So what can we pray for as the tournament begins?

Christian: My prayer for the tournament is that there can be unity amidst the challenge. Football can be a unifying force which brings nations and the global community together, and so there is a lot of potential for good if that happens.

Matt: I don't think the World Cup should ever have been awarded to Qatar, but it is going ahead. We can choose to be 'a voice in the room' or not. My prayer is that by being in the room and engaging courageously the conversations that we have could even help to bring about positive change. We can also pray for the safety of players, officials and fans. Thinking back to the Euros, nobody can forget the images of Denmark's Christian Eriksen, and the physical demands on the players in the heat of the desert, mid season will be significant.

You mentioned Christian Eriksen who suffered a cardiac arrest on the pitch at Euro 2020. In the aftermath there was a very public call for prayer – do you think that had an effect?

Matt: Well, speaking as Christians, we believe that prayer makes a difference, so yes definitely. God moves in different ways, including through the incredible work of the medical teams who saved the player's life and then coached him back to being fit to play in a world cup just over a year later. That also came while we were still in the Covid-19 pandemic too, and I think society was more attuned to what really matters in life.

Christian: And when you wake up the next morning and the newspaper headlines are saying 'pray for Eriksen' then in one way that was _____

wonderful to see, and a reminder that we can be unified in prayer as well as in sporting hopes.

Last year, the England Women's team went one better than the men and lifted the European Championship – how have you observed the progress in the women's game?

Matt: The Lionesses' achievement was fantastic, and the recognition the women's game is beginning to get is long overdue. This follows a disgraceful period where women were banned from playing football on FA members pitches until 1971. No doubt we'd be a lot further on today if that hadn't happened. More investment and TV coverage means a huge number of young girls will have been inspired to play the game. I have those conversations with members of my church, whose daughters are now playing football and will aspire to be footballers. I hope the women's game will continue to go from strength to strength.

Christian: And chaplaincy involvement in women's football is growing too. We now have 17 chaplains in women's teams, and that's something we



Twitter / @Lionesses

(Image: Leah Williamson and the England Women's Team celebrate winning the Euro 2022 tournament)

We've seen members of both the England Women's and Men's teams criticise the decision to play the men's tournament in Qatar. Does it add to the pressure on players if they are expected to make a political stand as well as preparing to play?

Christian: Let's not forget that football is a player's job. I'm not saying that they shouldn't be outspoken, but they are going into an international tournament and there's immense pressure to perform. It's important there is space for players who wish to make a stand, but players need to be helped by the governing bodies of those nations, and that should have come much earlier than the immediate build-up or during the tournament. Players and coaches aren't politicians. They're footballers, and they have got a hard enough job to do as it is. I think that the FA and the governing bodies have a duty to help them as much as possible on the pitch by taking decisions off the field.

Matt: If individual players want to speak out then they should have space and support to do so. Last Year Marcus Rashford made a huge difference in campaigning for free school meals, and that was his personal decision. But it would be wrong to expect every player to stand up and say something, or criticise any player who chooses not to speak out. The players didn't make the decision for the tournament to be in Qatar, but perhaps the national football bodies around the world could have done more in advance.

How do players handle the pressure of social media criticism?

Matt: Social media has a huge effect on players. When I started out as a Chaplain 20 plus years ago, if you wanted someone's opinion on how you'd played you'd pick up a newspaper the next day. Nowadays, as soon as a player gets off the pitch, views are all over social media, and not always kind! That can be hard to ignore, and I've come across a number of players whose esteem and mental health has been adversely affected. Social media in one sense means that footballers are more accessible than ever, but we have moved from a time where most players came from the local community and earned maybe a couple of times more than the fans, to one where they are signed from around the world and can earn hundreds of times the salary of the average fan. That helps to create a disconnect which can dehumanise interactions.

Christian: Football players have choices about how much to look at social media, and let's not forget that social media is still relatively new. People are still learning how to deal with it and how to take it. Football is about pressure, but it's also about community, and players need people who can see the value in them and draw out their identities, and clubs should try to protect players as much as they can – at the same time fans need to remember that footballers are human beings. They might earn a lot of money (the market rate for what they do!) but no player goes out to lose or to not perform to their best on a given day.

How can football clubs help to look after players' wellbeing and protect them?

Matt: It's a conversation I'd like to have with clubs in the Premier League because the problems with abuse over social media seem to have escalated over the past two or three years. Some players and clubs are bringing in social media support to monitor and screen messages on behalf of players, but it's hard to shield them completely. I don't think anyone has a right to insult or vilify players in that way though – whether they're sitting in a football stand or sitting behind a keyboard. The kind of vile personal or racist abuse that we saw after Euro 2020 is completely unacceptable. The onus should not be on players to learn how to deal with that, it's a problem with society, and something we need to address.

Christian: As Chaplains we are pastorally proactive and spiritually reactive, and the privilege of being a chaplain in football is that we can sit and journey alongside these players, managers, coaches or whoever, and listen to them. We know our limits as chaplains as well and if there are issues we feel need addressing then we can signpost to the appropriate place to go.

Do you know any players who thrive on this kind of criticism?

Matt: Everyone is different and has different needs. When I played football, I captained a team with a player who constantly needed encouragement. There was another who, if he put a foot wrong, I'd call him out on it because I knew that's how I'd get the best response from him. That's the same in the professional game. Some players respond well to harsh criticism, others need an arm round their shoulders. Of course it's a professional environment, and criticism is needed within that. Players will get that from coaches and the backroom team, and that probably has a more constructive outcome for players than what they hear from the stands or on social media.

Christian: I had a conversation with a group of players recently about how productive external criticism is – whether it's from the fans or the media. The conclusion was that it's not very productive at all – quite the opposite. No team is entitled to perform well every game, and every team has their off days, but if fans really want to see their teams do well, they should know that crossing the line and verbally attacking players or coaches doesn't help. It's a unifying cause to get behind your team.

Christian, what's it like being a Germany supporter based in England, and why do Germany always seem to play well at tournaments?

Christian: In my experience it's been great – banter among friends ramps up around major tournaments of course! I don't think it's a rule any more that Germany will do better than England – certainly if we look at the last two tournaments. A lot of Germany's consistency and success comes from keeping faith with a manager over a long period. The previous manager (Joachim Löw) was with the team for 15 years, and the current manager (Hansi Flick) was part of that previous setup, and that all creates consistency and cohesion, so just two managers over 16 years.

Matt: And if you compare that with England I think we've had seven managers in the same period. The most successful of those has been Gareth Southgate who has been there for five years, and was England Under 21s Coach before that, so sticking with people seems to be the way to go.



Twitter / @Euro2020

(Image: Raheem Sterling scores at Euro 2020 to help England towards their first men's knockout tournament victory against Germany since 1966)

But why do Germany *always* seem to win penalty shootouts?

Christian: Ha, penalties are a lottery! All the international teams will practise them. Success breeds success, but it's always a lottery. Germany have done well in the past, but that doesn't necessarily mean the same will follow again. And isn't that the joy of football? As much as you support your country, anything can happen!

Matt: I don't think it's quite as much of a lottery as we make out. I think you can practise penalties, even if you can't recreate the pressure of being in front of 80,000 fans. What I would say is that my sons' generation didn't have to live through 1990, 1996, 1998 etc. And in recent times England have actually won a couple, so it's a generational thing and something that's hopefully changing!

So it's time to put your money where your mouth is and tell us how far you think your respective teams are going in the tournament – and which other team do you think will do well?

Matt: I think England will reach the quarter finals, and beyond that who knows... but I think that Brazil will win the tournament. I've always been a bit of a Brazil fan, thinking back to the days of Pele. I've got to be a bit careful here because last time I got the right teams for the final and it made life a bit busy... but I think we are looking at a France v Brazil final. Unless England do well, in which case it would be England v Brazil!

Christian: I think Germany will reach the last 16, but my tip for the tournament would be France.

See also

- [Who is losing out at the Qatar World Cup?](#) - the **Bishop of Derby, Libby Lane**, the Church of England's Lead Bishop for Sport writes about the tournament

Some ideas for making the most of the timing of this year's World Cup:

- [Making the Most of the World Cup Final - 18th December 2022](#)
- [Football Nativity Services for use on World Cup Final day](#)
- [Football in a Nativity Box](#)

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