

DIARY OF A WORLD CUP WIDOW

REBECCA HOSSACK, 36, is an art gallery owner who lives in central London. But for the next three weeks she is also a football widow, one of the thousands of women who have lost their husbands to the World Cup. In Rebecca's case, the errant husband is Matthew, a writer and Arsenal football fan (not necessarily in that order). Here, Rebecca describes Matthew's initial preparations for the World Cup...

EVEN on our wedding day I should have sensed something was wrong. As we walked out of the church, the organist played a jaunty rendition of something which turned out to be the Match Of The Day tune. 'The most evocative piece of music in the world,' Matthew explained. 'And a very apt pun.' When I first met him, Matthew seemed almost the epitome of Englishness — thin and bookish, with impeccable manners and bags of understated charm. He was writing a book on the English decadents of the 1890s. How was I to know that beneath his rumpled shirt and corduroy jacket there beat the heart of a football obsessive?

For the first two years of married life he had a weekend job as a football reporter. He disappeared every Saturday morning to Coventry, Wimbledon or Aston Villa, returning hours later smelling faintly of stale cigarette smoke and fried onions. But beyond even this weekly interruption I found our domestic harmony was being controlled by something beyond my influence — the fortunes of Arsenal F.C.

I have learned that the mood of our Saturday evenings (if not our Sunday mornings as well) hinges upon the Arsenal result, and become used to sudden doldrums of depression occasioned by mid-week Cup exits, and equally sudden explosions of crockery-endangering euphoria brought on by last-minute Cup victories. Matthew even took me to see A.C. Milan on my last birthday.

I can't pretend to understand my husband's obsession, and — although it is less socially damaging than morris dancing or model railways — I certainly don't approve of it.

The months of June, July and August were the only brief respite from the tyranny of football — until this summer, that is. Over the past few weeks I had noticed an air of abstraction about Matthew. His study of the back pages of the newspaper was as sedulous as ever. In company, he was likely to huddle away with other agitated males and converse earnestly about people called Roberto Baggio and Jack Charlton.

But it wasn't until I suggested getting rid of the television that I discovered what was at the root of this unseasonal behaviour. 'How can you think of such a thing?' he exploded. 'Don't you realise the World Cup begins next week?'

HE FILLED me in, sketching an awful scenario of four football-packed weeks, almost ceaseless television coverage at all hours of the day and night, myriad fixtures between teams from countries I had scarcely heard of.

I inquired about England's chances in the competition and was amazed to learn they were not even playing. Matthew seems quite undeterred by the fact. He has already introduced a wall chart into our home, on which he is plotting the entire course of the tournament.

He is happily working himself up into a fine fever of anxiety about Italy's latest team selection and the Irish game plan. He is concerned about the Swedes (as they include Limpar, whom Arsenal have just sold, and some other player whom Arsenal have just bought). He is praying that the Africans will do well. He is praying that the Germans will do badly. And he has a particular interest in the fortunes of Bulgaria, having picked them in a sweepstake.

But even his irritation that I had arranged a trip to Brussels on the opening weekend of the competition was quickly tempered by the observation that Belgium was in the World Cup and we would be able to savour their partisan excitement at first hand.

This moment of optimism was all too brief. Our flight was delayed, and we arrived in Brussels just as the opening game was ending. Matthew, never a happy flier, was all for demanding a public apology — if not a cash refund — from the late-arriving passenger who had occasioned our hold-up. The stewardess thought he was joking.

Our hosts, quite uninterested in the goings-on in America, had planned a busy weekend of gastronomic and cultural treats, without any reference to the World Cup. But by Saturday evening we took pity on Matthew, whose mind was clearly elsewhere. Reluctantly, the schedule was revised, and we were reduced to a quick omelette in a bistro before hurrying back to watch Ireland beat Italy on the box.

Matthew was uncertain where his loyalties lay. As an ardent Italophile he wanted to support Italy, but Ireland was the closest thing to a home interest in the competition. Whatever indecision he might have had was dispelled when Ireland scored. After that, both he and the game seemed to settle down, and there was little to disturb our hosts as they slept in their armchairs.

We got back to London late on Sunday. Exhausted, I flopped into bed, dimly aware of the persistent buzz of the TV in the next room as Matthew settled down to a whole night of World Cup indulgence.

■ *Diary Of A Divorced Man is taking a short break.*

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THE World Cup is a week old and already I know more about football than I ever intended to. The game is everywhere. It is inescapable — at least in our tiny flat it is.

That's the trouble. If I were a proper World Cup widow, I would be free to mourn in peace. Matthew would be thousands of miles away in America and I would be safe at home, confronting the world with a brave face and a sneaking delight in my own freedom. That, however, is not the case. Matthew, although mentally elsewhere, is physically only too present. It is rather like being haunted in reverse.

Matthew's principal haunting ground is the sitting-room. Before him is the television, behind him the World Cup wall chart. In one hand, he holds the TV remote-control, in the other a glass of beer.

It is, of course, perfectly possible to escape from this spectre, simply by going out. Matthew, except for brief football-free periods, refuses to stir from the flat.

I am more than happy to go out on my own. But I always return to discover him engrossed in some clearly unimportant match and quite unwilling to hear my tales of a night out in the wider world. Matthew seems to maintain an almost constant vigil. He can be found at his post before the television at any hour, as so much of the World Cup coverage starts at midnight.

For the first few days, Matthew insisted on 'enjoying' the whole event as it happened. He would stay up into the small hours to watch Cameroon-Sweden or Holland-Saudi Arabia live. But a diet of five hours' sleep a night soon began to undermine even his constitution.

He complained of drowsiness during Tuesday's mid-evening match (Germany v Spain according to the wall chart) and so thereafter he has taken to recording late-night games for early morning consumption. Going to sleep with the television commentary droning in the next room was bad enough, but even more galling is having to head off to work, leaving Matthew installed in his armchair (the glass of beer replaced by a cup of coffee), watching the full 90 minutes of USA-Colombia, or some such tosh.

In a wily attempt to soothe my irritation over the whole event, Matthew has started trying to interest me in the World Cup. He is aware that I don't care about the football per se, so he feeds me little tit-bits of obliquely-related trivia.

NOW I find myself knowing that the Brazilian player Rai has a brother called Socrates; that Roberto Baggio is a Bhuddist; that the American goalkeeper is anxious about his weight; that the Saudi Arabian royal family often interfere with the team selection of their national side; that Jurgen Klinsman is famous for falling over.

If I show the smallest flicker of interest in such facts, Matthew then feels justified in following them up with a whole host more.

I made a dangerous error in this direction the other evening, when — returning from the theatre to find Matthew watching the Nigeria-Bulgaria match — I remarked casually upon the similarity between some of the Nigerian side and the Benin bronzes in the British Museum. In a trice, Matthew had the Benin-bronze book down from the shelf and was busily confirming my observation. At the same moment, Nigeria scored. The players all looked so happy, so jubilant, that I said I was glad. (I had forgotten that Matthew had drawn Bulgaria in the sweepstake.)

This brief incident has been enough for Matthew to claim that I am now 'supporting' Nigeria. He refers to them constantly as my team. He gave me a full and unasked-for account of their unfortunate 2-1 defeat by Argentina, and congratulated me warmly on their safe progress into the second round.

I cannot pretend, though, that the World Cup has not bestowed some domestic benefits.

The first of these was reaped on Wednesday evening. Although we were on the plane down from Glasgow, Matthew's new-found confidence with the video timing device — won while striving to capture the South Korea-Bolivia game — is such that he had been able to set the machine to record the programme about Prince Charles.

It was waiting for us on our return — two-and-a-half hours of REAL excitement.

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