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## 'Will It Split The Family?' — Our Italo-Anglo Family's Euro 2020

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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In the world of international soccer, England has been my team for as long as I can remember.

My parents met and married in England before moving to Canada in 1967.

Growing up, my friends would make fun of their strange accents and every summer night was spent on a patch of grass somewhere with a ball at our feet.

**Generations are divided on many things, including how hair and pants are supposed to be. Laura Mullin talks about how Gen Z won't take her faves away.** (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/gen-z-millennials-gen-x>)

When my father died in 2011, we buried him in his team England track suit, something he wore countless time while coaching our house league games or refereeing the beautiful game.

My wife's family has a similar sort of obsession with football but from a more continental perspective.

My father-in-law moved to Toronto from Naples in 1955 and has remained a fervent supporter of the Italian national team, colloquially known as *gli Azzurri* (The Blues). Every Sunday after family dinner, Nonno bounds up the stairs to watch Napoli play (or, when my brother-in-law Luciano is over, Juventus).

## The Big Game

So this Sunday's Euro 2020 final game was a tough one for our kids.

Their father was rooting for England, and their Nonno (and all the aunts and uncles and cousins and neighbours...) were rooting for Italy.

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"I had a taste of this dilemma myself some years ago."

"Will it split the family?" asked one of my kids at one point. "Someone's going to be sad no matter what," said another.

"Think of it that no matter what, someone is going to be happy," said my wife.

But the children's brows remained furrowed as they tried to figure out which colours they were going to wear on the big day.

I had a taste of this dilemma myself some years ago.

## Fitting In

My wife and I were visiting Italy during the World Cup 2014 and were invited over to a cousin's house to watch an Italy game. They were playing England.

Should I be a good guest and root for Italy? Would I be betraying my roots? There were a lot of extended family members present, none of whom could speak English. I wore neutral colours and remained subdued throughout the game, until England scored an equalizer the 37th minute to tie the game and I let out an inadvertent yelp of excitement.

The room went silent and all eyes turned to me.

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"Should I be a good guest and root for Italy? Would I be betraying my roots?"

My father-in-law came to my rescue by saying, “he can’t help it; it’s his father’s team,” with a shrug, in perfect Neapolitan. Everyone laughed and consoled me like I had been trapped into a life of supporting this perpetually losing team based on the twin accidents of geography and genetics. (Update: England lost that game 2-1.)

For the earlier games of Euro 2020 this summer, my daughter wore an Italian jersey and even made a tiny version for her teddy bear out of blue construction paper, complete with the Italian crest, the number 21 and the name PIRLO stitched into the back.

On Sunday she decided to wear her blue shirt but asked if she could have an England scarf as well to wrap around her neck. She also asked my wife to paint an Italian flag on one cheek and an English flag on the other.

## Remembering Grandad

Our eldest daughter stayed neutral, burying her nose in a book, ignoring the family’s weird nationalist negotiations. Every so often she’d look over at me and ask, “how are you feeling?” like a well-meaning therapist. Our youngest daughter couldn’t keep the colours straight. Italy wears blue but also wears white sometimes, and also has red on their flag. England also wears white, but also red, and has some blue on their shirts as well.

“I just want to be part of whatever side grandad was on,” she said finally, referring to my late father. My kids only got to know their grandad through stories, many of them revolving around soccer. They knew that this could get emotional.

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“I just want to be part of whatever side grandad was on ...”

Instead, to break the tension before the game, we had a good laugh at how silly it was that grown men should run around for two hours chasing a ball, and furthermore, that so many people from around the world should care about it.

The rules that define the game, like the prohibition from touching the ball with your hands, are, after all, completely arbitrary, as are the lines that divide up the countries that compete.

## It's All Meant To Be Good Fun

“We might pretend like we’re against each other,” I said to our children, “but everyone knows it’s just a game. It’s going to be fine.”

After the opening whistle blew, England scored first, in under three minutes. I yelled, jumped up from the couch, slapped the ceiling and then hid behind my wife to hide my smile.

It was turning out to be a good game and the kids realized that everyone was enjoying themselves. Italy, as they are so famous for doing, clawed back to tie the game, and then finally won the game, agonizingly, on penalty kicks.

We watched players from both teams wander around the field after the game, some of them crying for joy, some crying from disappointment. The children watched as players from opposing teams embraced each other and issued congratulations on a game well-played.

## Some Post-Game Support

My kids approached me softly, one-by-one, like they didn't want to scare off a wounded bunny. "Are you OK?" they asked. They could see I was disappointed but I grinned and said, "it's fine. It was a great game and we had fun, right? Now let's go join the party."

My brother-in-law lives steps from Corso Italia in Toronto, a 2-3 km stretch of Italian neighbourhood that erupts after games like this.

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"Next year we'll get them at the World Cup," he said, partly to me, partly to his beer."

I

stepped onto the street still wearing my England jersey and scarf and I never had so many Italian-clad people give me high-fives or fist-bumps. My children watched with curiosity as complete strangers, who would have been booing me only moments before, slapped my back with comments like "better luck next time," or, "man, that was a close one."

Another interloper in an England jersey emerged from the throbbing crowd and embraced me. "Next year we'll get them at the World Cup," he said, partly to me, partly to his beer.

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**Sports teams aren't the only divisive subject for families. Craig Stephens describes how a potential name for his child almost started a family war. (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/we-wanted-to-name-our-kid-this-but-it-started-a-war-between-our-families>)**

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## The Not-So-Great Divide

So to answer my daughter's question directly: "no, it won't split the family." Instead, it will bring us closer together because we have participated in an exercise of empathy. Sometimes you win, and need to learn how to win graciously, and sometimes you lose, and need to learn how to lose graciously. It's a lesson that is hard to explain until you feel it: the sting of loss coupled with the grace of acceptance and the flood of sympathy from your peers. It's all just part of the game. A silly game perhaps, but also a beautiful game I hope my children embrace, both when they win and when they lose.

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