

## OPINION

# ***A couple of miskicks expose racist few in England's underbelly***

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Last year, Manchester United striker Marcus Rashford was a hero to millions in the UK as he campaigned for free school lunches and other support for impoverished children in the UK. Once, he had been one himself. His crusade prompted a change in government policy and a slew of awards for himself.

All Rashford's influence derives from his renown as a footballer, which in turn derives from his ball skills. On Sunday, those skills failed him when he missed a penalty kick for England in a shoot-out in the Euro 2021 final, one of three misses by England players that precipitated defeat at the hands of Italy.



*Marcus Rashford after missing his penalty in the Euro final.*

Suddenly, Rashford was an anti-hero. He was vilified foully on social media. Rashford, by the way, is black, so you can imagine the thrust. A mural of him in the suburb where he grew up in Manchester was vandalised. Meantime, crowds rampaged through London's Leicester Square, trashing it.

Every country likes to think that their sport is a unique expression of their identity. This especially includes Australia. But it is a limited and crude conceit. For a start, it contemplates only winning.

Throughout the Euros, the mostly winning England team was acclaimed for the way it brought the country together in a fractious time. This was especially poignant because the manager, Gareth Southgate, had been the fall guy in a previous penalty shoot-out misadventure. Redemption for all was at hand in England united. Then a couple of miskicks exposed the chimera.

But sport as an avatar for life is a blunt tool. In soccer, this is manifest. Either the ball goes in, or it doesn't. Don't blame the shoot-out system. You have to arrive at a winner somehow. But life is not like that.



*An upturned portaloo in Leicester Square after the Euro 2021 final.*

“I can score penalties in my sleep, so why not that one?” Rashford wrote in a highly affecting social media post on Tuesday. “It’s been playing in my head over and over since I struck the ball and there’s probably not a word to quite describe how I feel. All I can say is sorry.”

It’s a shame he felt the need to apologise. England, team and country, is not the sum of his miss, any more than it would have been another sum if he had scored. It’s not even right to say skills failed. The shoot-out system means that someone is going to miss, sooner or later. It depends on it. Yet always about the loser, we infer some weakness of character and failure of vocation, personal and national. It’s quite absurd.

We’re prey to it. On the same weekend as the Euro final, Ashleigh Barty entranced Australia by winning Wimbledon. Immediately, her triumph became all of ours. But I know some who bang on about mental frailty and were waiting with baseball bats if she had lost. At least we know Barty herself would have handled it with equanimity.

If England is to claim some sort of national ennobling by its bold performance in the Euros, it cannot ignore the underbelly. Early in the tournament, fans booed the England team for taking the knee. A run of wins muted the bigotry.



*People place messages of support on a defaced mural of Marcus Rashford in his hometown.*

But after defeat in the final, the racists and louts emerged, if not en masse, then in large enough numbers to disquiet. The existence of this streak in the national psyche won't be a surprise to anyone who lives there - or here, for that matter. It's generations deep.

But we ought not to dwell on them; it's what they want. By and large, England the country *was* a better place for the efforts of England the football team.

In Manchester, fans papered over the damaged Rashford mural with love hearts, and Manchester City reached across the great (but ultimately ethereal) divide to hug him. One scuffed penalty kick notwithstanding, he could be sure of the score.

"I can take critique of my performance all day long. My penalty was not good enough. It should have gone in. But I will never apologise for who I am and where I came from. I'm Marcus Rashford, 23-year-old black man from Withington and Wythenshawe, South Manchester. If I have nothing else, I have that."

In the end, no matter how many trophies sit on any national mantelpiece and how much haughty store we set by them, that's all any of us have.