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Unpublished paper

Original citation:

Corbridge, Stuart and Corbridge, Joanne (2008) Why is the England football team doing so poorly? A geographical analysis. Other. UNSPECIFIED, UK. (Unpublished)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/3587/>

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2006

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Why Is The England Football Team Doing So Poorly? A Geographical Analysis

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January 2008

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1. Introduction

The England football team went into the 2006 World Cup Finals in Germany on the back of a good deal of public confidence. Even allowing for the huge amounts of money bound up with selling England (newspapers, TV advertising revenues, replica shirt sales and other spin-offs), there was some belief in the country that England was blessed with a golden crop of world-class footballers. Wayne Rooney was cited most often in this regard, indeed to a painful degree, but mention was also made of Steven Gerrard, with some reason, John Terry, Rio Ferdinand, Michael Owen, David Beckham, and even Frank Lampard and Ashley Cole. All of these players had excelled in European club competitions, and had helped Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool, Chelsea and Real Madrid to reach the last rounds of the Champions League on a consistent basis. Not for nothing, then, was it argued that the World Cup would be 'coming home' to England in 2006.

Of course it didn't turn out that way. The team failed to make it beyond the quarter-final stage and played lamentably. It embarrassed most supporters to watch England struggle against Trinidad and Tobago for eighty minutes, and to fail to trouble the Portuguese goal in 120 minutes. The fact that the England team was down to ten men against Portugal after Rooney was sent off was not seen as an alibi for failure. England had been that way before, notably with Beckham against Argentina in 1998. The same might be said of the sudden death penalty shoot out.

So, what did account for England's poor performance? It might be argued that the World Cup is a lottery and that any one of eight teams can win in any given competition. Italy, after all, the eventual winners in 2006, barely survived into the knock-out stages of the competition. They enjoyed the rub of the green, or the referee, against Australia in their third pool match (having not enjoyed the same, it must be said, against South Korea in the second round of the 2002 Finals). If the same teams had played again

three months later, it is doubtful that Italy would have won a second time. Perhaps France would have won, or Brazil or Argentina or Germany.

Nevertheless, while there has been an element of randomness in many recent World Cups (unlike the triumph of Brazil in 1970, say, or Argentina in 1978), few serious punters would have bet against one of the five aforementioned teams winning a second tournament. Outside the British Isles, not many fans think of England as a likely cup-winner, as opposed to a difficult team to play against. A better explanation of England's failure is that the players are not good enough: vastly over-hyped, but not likely to be picked in a squad of the world's best 22 players. Plenty of teams now have excellent centre-backs, not to mention a first-rate goalkeeper (unlike England), but the best teams have players who are comfortable on the ball in close quarters (as Paul Scholes was), speed down the wings, and penetration and inventiveness when going forward. England's team in 2002 was arguably better equipped in these respects, although it needed Ryan Giggs on the left-side to provide balance. (Giggs was an England Schoolboy international, but later played for Wales). In 2006 it lacked quality, a deficiency made worse by the saga of Rooney's injured metatarsal. Failure to qualify for the European Finals in 2008 confirms this view. Blaming Sven-Göran Eriksson or Steve McLaren misses the point, their evident failings notwithstanding. Football is not a complicated game in tactical terms, and coaching the England side, or any other side, doesn't require the sort of preparation or brain-power that marks out coaching in American Football, say, or even basketball. The simple truth is that the team is not good enough.

But this in turn raises a set of deeper questions. Why does the England team so consistently 'under-perform'? (1966 and possibly 1970 were two exceptions to this rule, and 1990, too, albeit with a good dose of luck against Cameroon in the quarter-finals, if not against West Germany in the semi-final]). Is the home of football simply falling foul of the globalisation of the beautiful game, in which case the main problem is that of hype and false expectations? After all, France has only won the World Cup once – although, unlike England, it has also won the European Championship. Perhaps the golden crop of English players is basking in the reflected glory of so many foreign stars. (Crudely put, is it possible that Frank Lampard looks good playing an English style

domestic game with multinational Chelsea, but is out of his depth with the national team, especially alongside the more gifted Gerrard?). Or maybe the problem is precisely that there are too many foreign stars in England's leading clubs, Arsenal being the obvious case in point.

These seem like plausible hypotheses to us, but the aim of this paper – more of an entertainment than a novel, in Graham Greene's terms – is to test yet another hypothesis: that professional football in England is failing to develop talent effectively outside Greater London, Greater Manchester and Merseyside, where, extraordinarily, all of Eriksson's first-choice outfield players in the 2006 World Cup team were born and/or brought up. How likely is this? How does it compare with other England World Cup teams going back to 1950? And how should we account for this unlikely geography? These are the questions which structure the rest of the paper, which are answered here in preliminary fashion with simple descriptive statistics. Avenues for further research are discussed in the conclusion.

2. Data and Methods

We have collected data on the geographical roots of players belonging to England World Cup teams dating back to 1950, the first time the country took part in the competition.¹ The national team took part in the finals of the competition in all years save for 1974, 1978 and 1994. England won the World Cup in 1966, when the final was held at Wembley. The country reached the semi-finals in Italy in 1990, and has reached the quarter-finals on six further occasions: 1954, 1962, 1986, 2002 and 2006. In 1950, 1958, 1982 and 1998 the national team made the finals but did not reach the knock-out rounds.

¹ The first FIFA (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*) World Cup was played for in Uruguay in 1930 by 13 teams. 16 teams played in the finals from 1934 to 1978 (15 in 1938). The Finals are held every four years, but were not held in 1942 and 1946. From 1982 to 1994 the Finals featured 24 teams, and since 1998 have featured 32 teams.

Data were collated from several sources, the most useful of which were www.planetworldcup.com, www.England-afc.co.uk, www.thefa.com/England/ and www.wikipedia.org Where possible, data points were cross-checked. For those years when England made it to the Finals, basic biographical information was collected on the players who were selected for the opening game and for those selected in the team's final game (for example, the quarter-final in 2006). Our analysis was not extended to the full squad (usually of 22 players). We focused on the opening and closing games because these best indicate the manager's vision of England's strongest team. In 1950, a total of 15 players represented England in the team's first and last outings in the World Cup. Interestingly, Stanley Matthews played only in the second game. In 2006, only 13 players made the starting line-ups. Robinson, Neville, Ferdinand, Terry, (Ashley) Cole, Beckham, Lampard, Gerrard and (Joe) Cole played in the opening game and in the quarter-final. Michael Owen started the first game, but was injured thereafter. Peter Crouch also started the first game, but only made the quarter-final as a substitute. (We do not include substitutes in the analysis that follows). Owen Hargreaves also joined the starting XI in the quarter-finals.

It is clear that Sven-Goran Eriksson knew his best team in 2006. Both Owen and Rooney would have joined the nine 'double' players in the starting line-up. Only injuries prevented this from happening. Matters were different in 1966, when Alf (later Sir Alfred) Ramsey was the manager. Of the famous team that won that competition on July 30th, only nine played in the first game: Banks, Cohen, Wilson, (Jack) Charlton, Moore, Stiles, Ball, Hunt and (Bobby) Charlton. John Connelly and the great Jimmy Greaves were both dropped from the team – Greaves at the quarter-final stage – in favour of Martin Peters and Geoff Hurst, both of West Ham United. Injuries were not a factor.

A large number of players have represented England in more than one World Cup campaign. Martin Peters, for example, played in 1966, 1970 and again in 1974, when England failed to qualify for the finals in West Germany. In 1974, and again in 1978 and 1994 when England did not qualify for the finals, we collected data only for the team that represented England in its last qualifying game. In all, we have data on 140 players who represented England in twenty-seven World Cup games from 1950 to 2006.

For each player we collected information on place and date of birth, schools attended, first club, and club at the time of World Cup selection. Place of birth is often strongly correlated with schooling and even, especially in the 1950 and early-1960s, with the club first joined. This might reflect low levels of mobility among the working-class families from which professional footballers overwhelmingly have been drawn. In large degree, such patterns continue. Wayne Rooney, for example, was born in Liverpool in October 1985, went to school in Croxteth, Liverpool as a boy, and joined Everton FC as a youth in 2000. Nowadays, however, a player like Rooney is unlikely to play for England unless he also plays for one of the Premiership's top 4 teams: Manchester United, to whom Rooney was duly transferred in 2004, Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool. All but one of England's starting out-field players in the first game of the 2006 finals played for these four teams or Real Madrid. The exception was Michael Owen, who played for Newcastle United in 2006, but who had previously played for Liverpool and Real Madrid. In 1958, in contrast, the team who played in England's first game in the finals was drawn from Blackpool, Bolton, Burnley, Fulham, Preston, West Bromwich Albion (WBA - 3) and Wolverhampton Wanderers (3). Almost all of these players were playing for their local club, or for one nearby. For example, Colin McDonald, the goalkeeper from Burnley FC, was born in Bury, Lancashire. Only Bobby Robson (WBA, but born and brought up in County Durham) and Derek Kevan (also WBA, but from Ripon in Yorkshire) were non-local players. All the above-mentioned teams were powers in the land in the 1950s or early-1960s. This was an era before the maximum wage was lifted and long-before professional club football in England was turned into big business with help from Sky TV.² The incentive for players to move clubs was far less than it is today.

Most players were easy to classify in terms of location, but there were one or two judgement calls that had to be made. Michael Owen, for instance, was born in Chester in December 1979 and went to school in north Wales, but very close to the Wirral. Given that he joined Liverpool FC as a boy in 1991, however, we have classified him here as a Merseysider. In terms of geographical units, Merseyside comprises Liverpool, Sefton,

² A maximum wage of £20 per week lasted until 1961. Jimmy Hill was a key figure who campaigned for its abolition.

Knowsley, St Helens and Wirral. Its recorded population in 2001 was 1,362,034, or 2.77% of the population of England. (In 1951, long before Merseyside existed as a unit of local government, the population of these five sub-units totaled 1,662,733, or 4.05% of the population of England). Greater Manchester comprises Manchester, Stockport, Tameside, Oldham, Rochdale, Bury, Bolton, Wigan, Salford and Trafford. Its total population shrank from 2,688,987 in 1951 (6.55% of the total population of England) to 2,482,352 in 2001 (5.05%). Greater London comprises the City of London and 32 boroughs, ranging from Hillingdon in the west to Havering in the east. Its population in 1951 was 8,196,978, or 19.97% of the total for England; in 2001 the population was 7,322,400 (on the rise again after forty years of decline), or 14.90% of the total for England. Overall, 22.72% of the population of England lived in these three metropolitan areas in 2001, compared to 30.57% in 1951. Definitions of Greater London, and of the West Midlands, West Yorkshire and Tyne and Wear, which we also refer to in the text, are as provided in standard census and government sources.

3. Results

Crudely put, there was about a one in four chance that someone living in England in 2001 (or 2006) was resident in Greater London, Greater Manchester or Merseyside. Of course, the distribution of England's population by age and ethnicity might change matters when it comes to sport. England's ethnic minorities are more urban than is the general population, and more clustered in certain cities, notably some boroughs in Greater London. For example, the 2001 UK census reports that "Black Caribbeans form more than ten per cent of the population of the London boroughs of Lewisham, Lambeth, Brent and Hackney. Over ten per cent of Southwark, Newham, Lambeth and Hackney are Black African [and] more than two per cent of people describe themselves as Other Black in Hackney, Lambeth and Lewisham".³ Across England, these three groups make up about 2.5% of the population. Set against this, England's Asian populations are also heavily urbanized and over-represented in these three

³ www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/commentaries/ethnicity.asp (p.1); retrieved 8 January 2008.

conurbations. To date, however, no footballer of South Asian descent has played for England, although the captain of Dagenham and Redbridge FC in December 2007, a League Two club, was Anwar Uddin. As a Londoner of Bangladeshi descent, Uddin gives the lie to the myth that Asian youths don't or can't play football. Of the thirteen players who represented England in the team's first and last appearances in Germany, only Rio Ferdinand and Ashley Cole were Black (from Peckham and Whitechapel in London, respectively). Owen Hargreaves, who started the quarter-final game, was born and brought up in Calgary, Canada, an unusual heritage but one that might become more common as players declare for countries other than their place of birth. Arsenal's Spanish goalkeeper, Manuel Almunia, indicated in December 2007 that he was interested in playing for England under its new manager, Fabio Capello.

Given these demographic facts, it is a surprise that all of Eriksson's first-choice outfield players in 2006 were born and/or mainly brought up in Greater London, Greater Manchester and Merseyside (GLGMM).⁴ (We assume that Rooney would have replaced Peter Crouch in game one had he been fit). Even with Crouch in the side – born in Macclesfield but brought up in London from the age of 5, and a youth player for Tottenham - the dominance of these three conurbations stays the same, with only the goalkeeper, Paul Robinson, growing up elsewhere (in Beverley, Yorkshire). Figure 1 also suggests that the dominance of GLGMM has grown significantly since 1950. Only two of the team that started England's first match in the 1950 finals came from GLGMM (three in the last game: see Figure 2), when three in ten English people lived there, and only three in 1958, 1974 and 1978. It is not clear, however, that high levels of player concentration by location are linked to poor team performance, as our underlying hypothesis suggests. The 1966 England team featured 7 GLGMM players in the first and last games of that competition, while the 1970 team also counted 7 and 8 GLGMMers in its ranks. We also acknowledge that England failed to qualify for the finals in 1974 and

⁴ We acknowledge that second-tier England players in 2006 (David James, Wayne Bridge, Aaron Lennon, Stewart Downing, for example) were more often drawn from non-GLGMM locations, but we also note that none of these players has yet (two years later) claimed a regular spot in the England starting line-up. Gareth Barry (Hastings) and Micah Richards (Birmingham and Leeds) upset our argument rather more, but not Shaun Wright-Phillips (Greenwich, London), the other player to push strongly in 2007 for a place in the England first-team.

Geographical Origins of England Football Team Starting XI: First Game In Competition

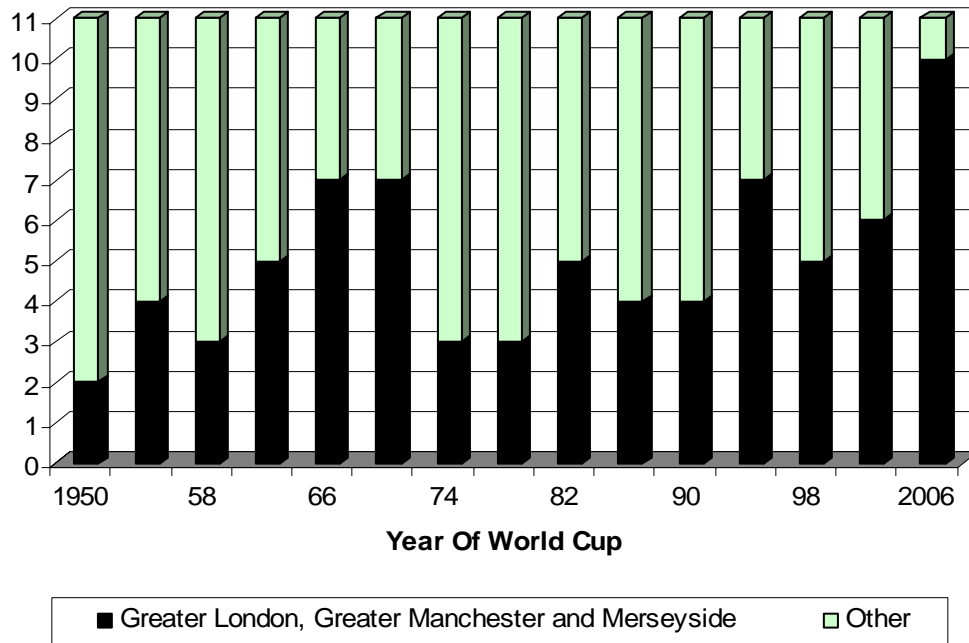


Figure 1

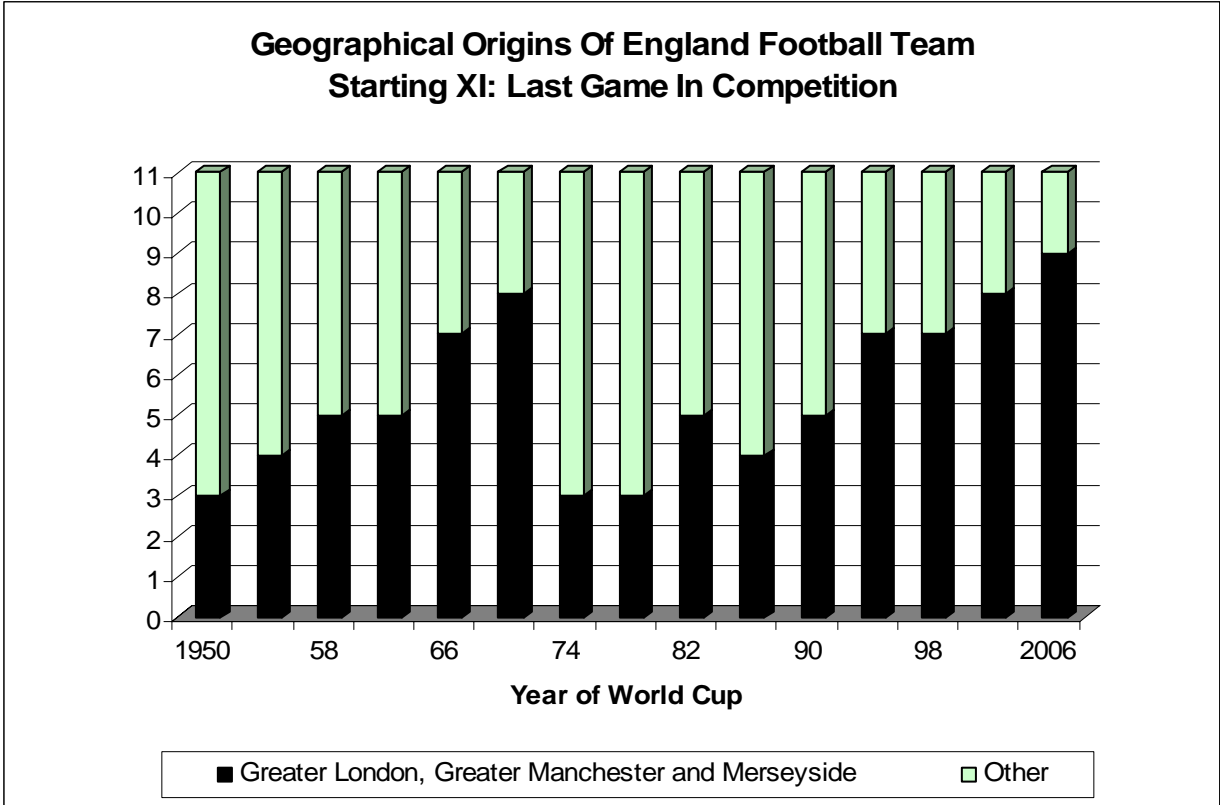


Figure 2

1978, when the GLGMM contingents were back down to 3 of 11. Set against this, we note that the side which played in the 1990 semi-final in Italy featured only 4 players from GLGMM.

Four more points are worth reporting. First, if we break down the GLGMM players by conurbation we see the astonishing rise of London-born or based players since 1950 (especially if we turn a blind eye to Cohen, Moore and Peters in 1966: see Figures 3 and 4). Second, what is not shown clearly here, but which comes through strongly in the baseline data, is the extraordinary decline of Tyne and Wear and the West Midlands as source areas for modern England football players. Alan Shearer, from the 1998 team, was the last player from Tyne and Wear to represent England in the World Cup (as defined here), even though 18 of our 140 players were born or brought up there (including such luminaries as Jackie Milburn, Stan Mortensen, the Charlton brothers, Paul Gascoigne and Chris Waddle). The story of the West Midlands, a much larger conurbation, is more surprising still. Darius Vassell played in the opening game of 2002. But Vassell is hardly of the same standing as Bert Williams, Gil Merrick, Syd Owen, Don Howe, or perhaps even Billy Wright at a stretch (Ironbridge, Shropshire and Wolves), his Brummie and Black Country peers from the 1950s. A similar decline is evident in players growing up in the old Lancashire mill towns, which gave England footballers of the calibre of Tom Finney (Preston) and Bryan Douglas (Blackburn), and in West Yorkshire (Tommy Taylor and Ron Flowers, among others). Third, a recurrent theme since the 1960s has been the importance – the growing importance – of a small number of East London boroughs as source areas for future England players, led by Barking and often fed through West Ham United. Rio Ferdinand, Joe Cole and Frank Lampard from the 2006 team all came this route, and even David Beckham got his start at Tottenham via Leytonstone. Lastly, we looked at the birth dates of our 140 players. There is now an accumulated body of research which suggests that a disproportionate number of professional sports players in the West are born between September and December. Simmons and Paul (2001: 678, drawing on data from Brewer, Balsom and Davis, 1995), note that 473 of the 805 (58.7%) boys selected for places at the English Football Association's centres of excellence in 1995 were born in these four months, with 180 being born in September alone. Other authors have picked up similar forms of

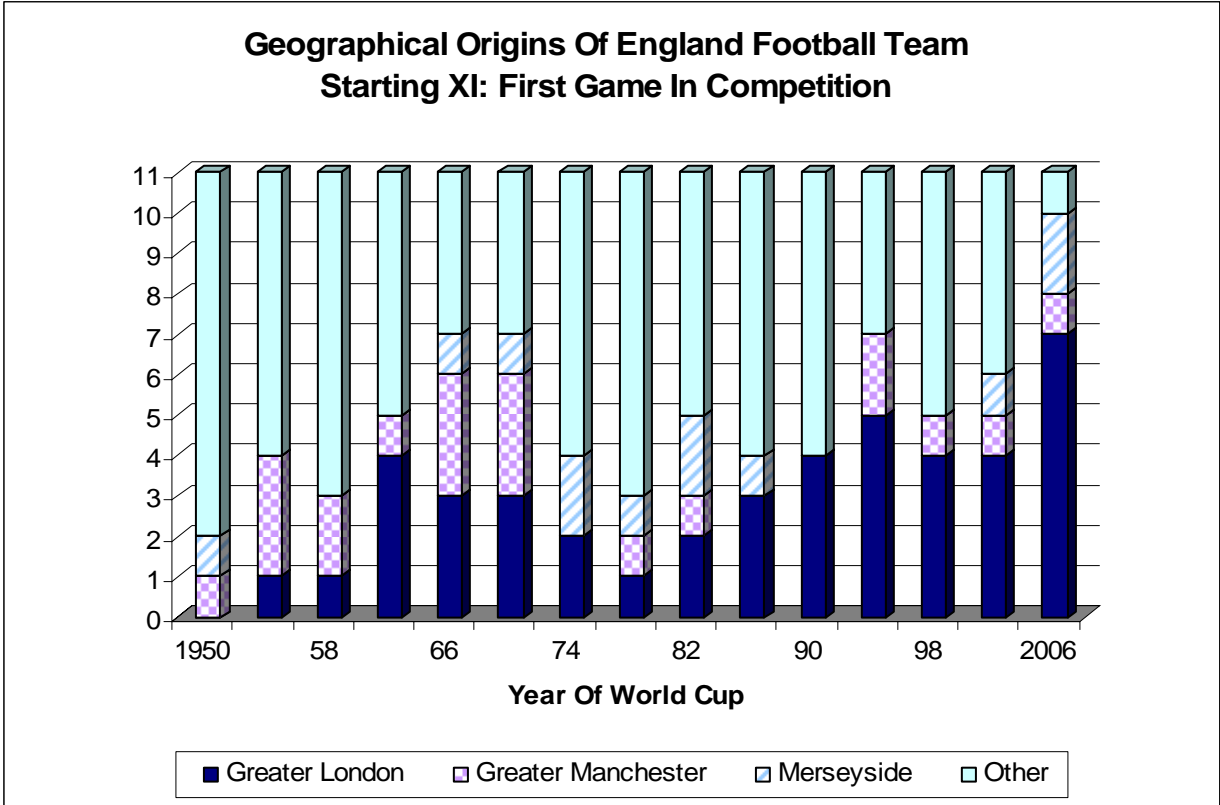


Figure 3

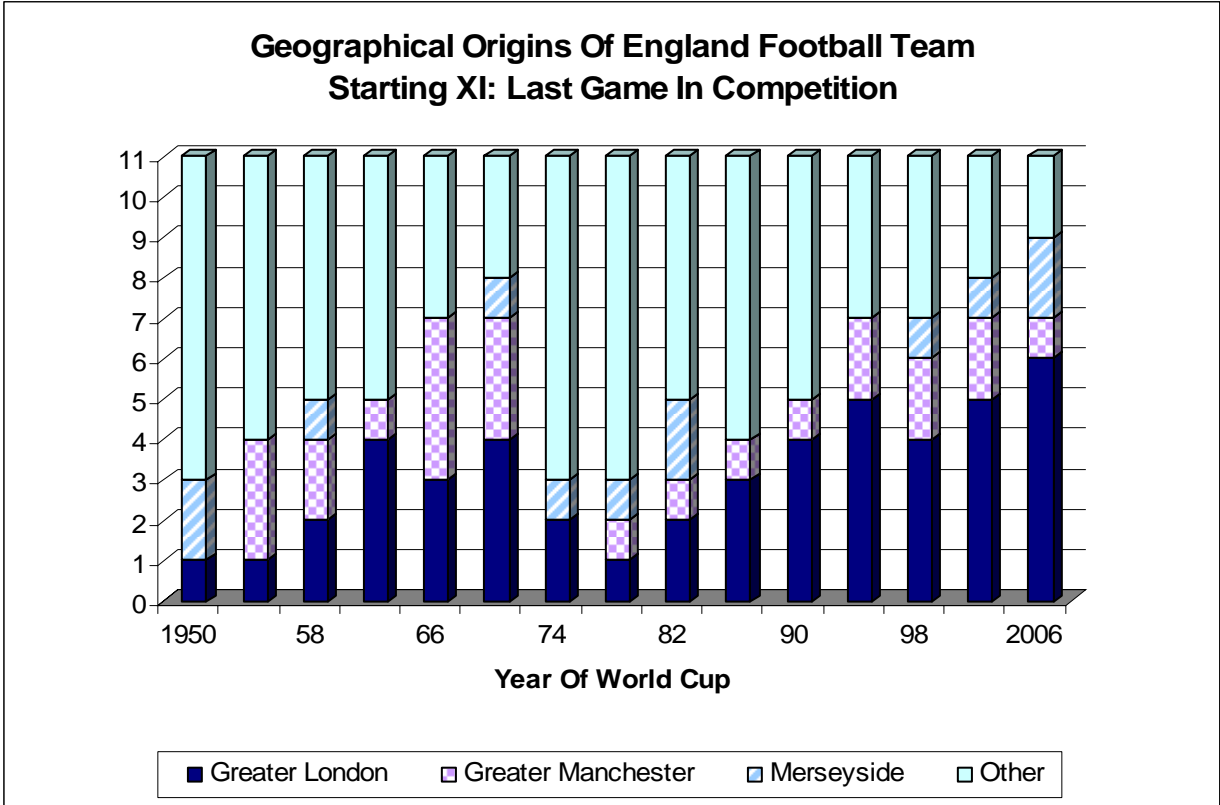


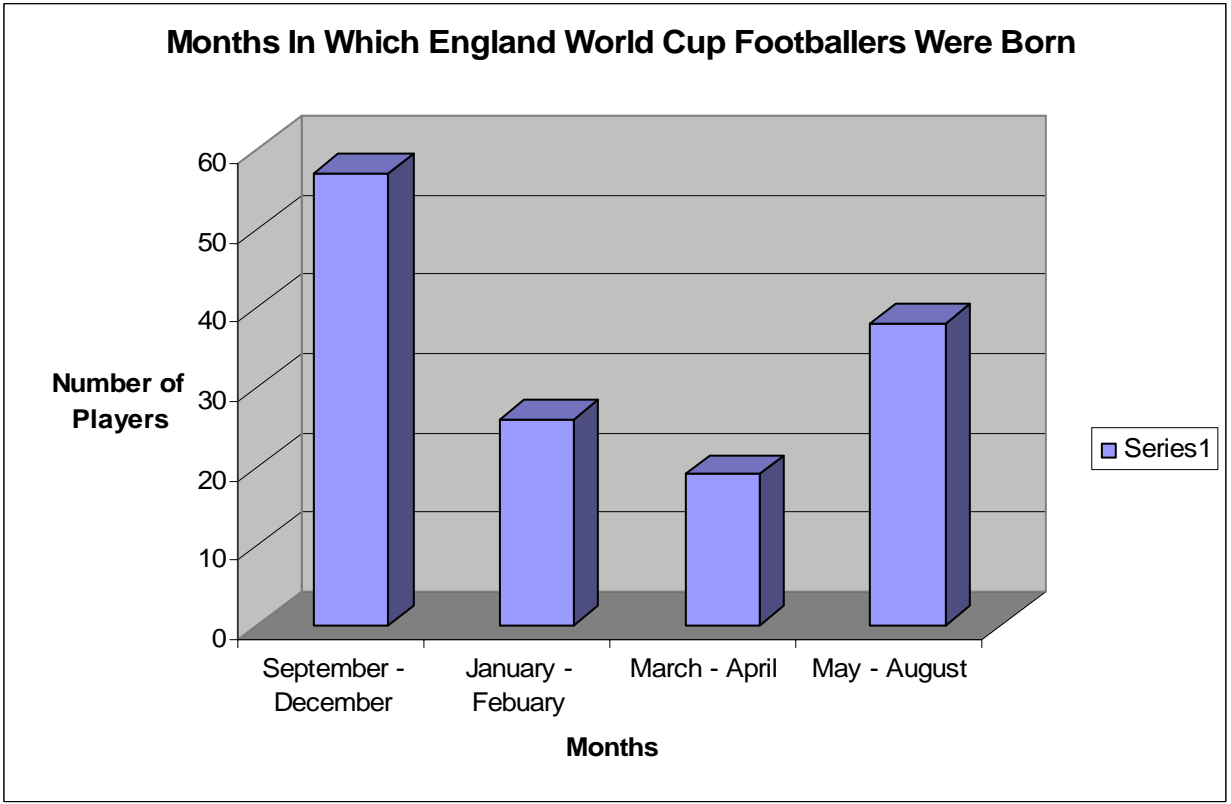
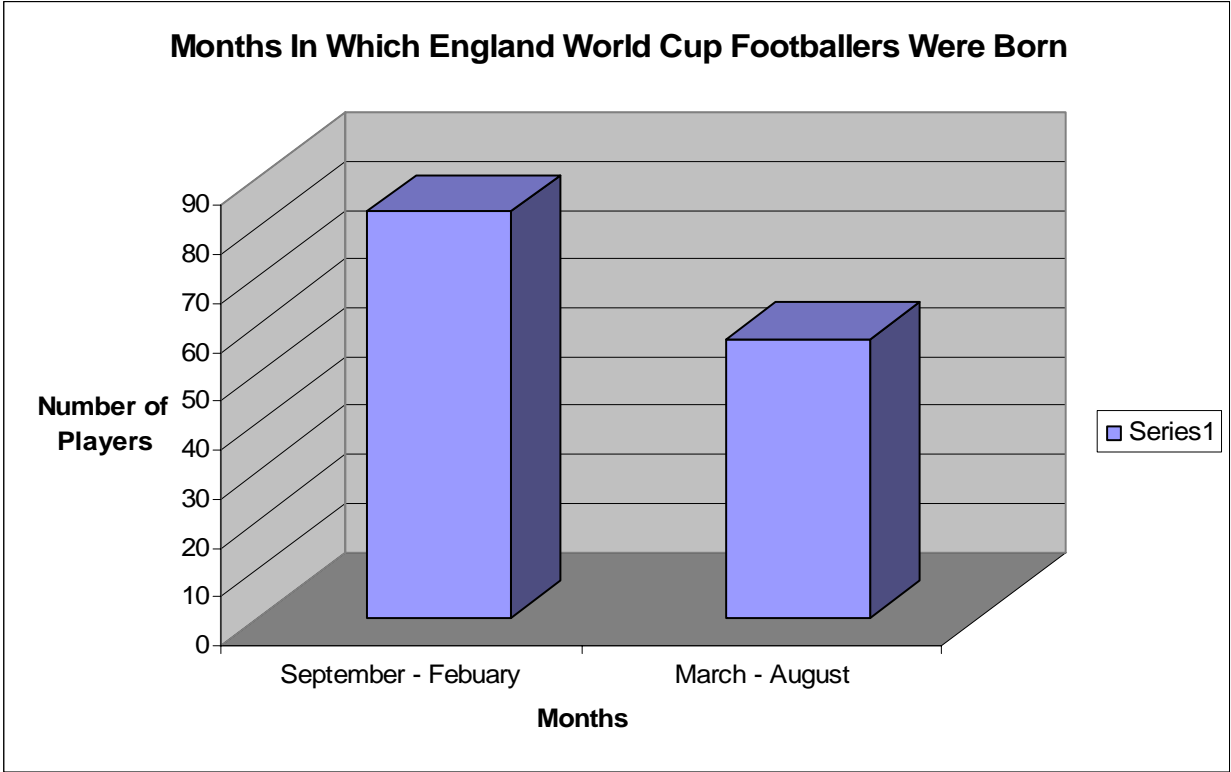
Figure 4

selection bias – apparently beginning with size and weight at the start of a school year, and later magnified by more intensive coaching – in a range of aerobic sports (Dudink 1994). Our analysis (Figures 5a and 5b) fails to pick up a birth-date effect among England team players on anything like this scale, but we do observe a small bias towards September-February births and away from March-August (83 players versus 57, or close to a 60:40% split).

4. Analysis and Future Work

Quite what we should make of these results, we are not sure. A nice headline would have been: “If you want to play for England at football make sure you are born in Greater London, Greater Manchester or Merseyside between September and December”. But this doesn’t quite hold true, at least not on the birth date side. In terms of basic geography, however, we do seem to be picking up something that is worth exploring further. It clearly isn’t the case that all England teams which have fielded a large number of GLGMM players (say 5 or more in a starting XI) have done badly. 1966 gives the lie to this, as we said before. At the same time, the growing reliance of recent England world cup teams on GLGMM players (especially Londoners) is noticeable and should prompt questions about how English boys become future England internationals. In the 1950s and 1960s, English schoolboys could hope to play for their local clubs without damaging their future careers. Now, it is hard to play for the England team on a regular basis unless one plays for a very small number of top clubs, and most obviously the so-called platinum four of Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal and Liverpool.

But how does one gain entry to these clubs? Manchester United did an excellent job in the 1990s of pushing local boys through the youth ranks into the first team: Scholes, Butt, Brown and the Neville brothers all made it to the England team through this route, just as Ashley Cole, Michael Owen and Steven Gerrard came through youth schemes at Arsenal and Liverpool. This route might be closing down, however, to the extent that the biggest clubs routinely stock their first teams – indeed their larger



Figures 5a and 5b

squads – with players bought in the global transfer market. Of course, some English players benefit from increased labour mobility. Frank Lampard and Joe Cole moved from West Ham to Chelsea, for example, just as Wayne Rooney moved from Everton to Manchester United. What’s interesting about these three cases, however, is that they all entailed shifts within the GLGMM zone. They also distract attention from the broader effects of the ‘Bosman’ ruling in 1995, which has been to bring ever larger numbers of non-English players into the English Premier League, including to its richest and most successful clubs.⁵ The (London) *Sunday Times* reported on 9 September 2007 that 311 of the 529 players registered to play in the Premier League in the 2006-7 season were ‘foreign’, with percentage figures running from 38% at Watford and Sheffield United (both later relegated) to 85% at Arsenal (Section 2, page 8).

The possibility that the performance of the England team is being damaged by an influx of foreign stars has been widely debated. It is often forgotten, however, that the 2006 World Cup winners, Italy, also have a large number of foreign players in the ranks of the top teams in Serie A. Indeed, Inter Milan, the champions in 2007, regularly field a starting outfield with no Italian-born players in it. Much less noticed in these commentaries has been the geography of the England team: where the leading players come from. Why is it that so few players from outside the GLGMM conurbations are making it into the highest ranks of professional football in England? Why are so few English-Asian players winning professional contracts? Why is Greater London increasingly dominant in the ranks of England players?

Our suggestion is that future research needs to concentrate on the scouting and coaching networks of English football clubs, particularly the leading Premier League clubs. What efforts are they making to recruit young English talent from areas like Tyne

⁵ A ruling of the European Court of Justice that allows European Union players to move freely within the EU when their club contracts expire. Perhaps most significantly, the ruling prompted UEFA (the Union Européenne de Football Association) to abolish its requirement that teams in the Champions League, and other UEFA competitions, field no more than three ‘foreign players’ in their match-day squads. Employment of African and Latin American players by Europe’s leading club teams is now a matter decided by a country’s work permit legislation. In practice, non-EU players of proven international standard find no problem in gaining employment in the English Premiership, La Liga in Spain or in Italy’s Serie A.

and Wear, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire – areas that once supported championship winning clubs, but which have now been put in the shade by the Platinum Four? Research could also usefully focus on what has been happening to organized club football – school, Saturday league, semi-professional and professional youth schemes – in these traditional source areas of English talent. Why aren't new Gascoignes or Shearers coming through? The answer might be that 'they are', and that we have just been living through a short-run downturn in the supply chain.⁶ Our guess, however, is that more structural matters are at work – fewer contracts with the big clubs; weakened domestic scouting networks; lack of big clubs close to a boy's home; not enough emphasis on skills training at a young age – and that significant investments will have to be made across England if the English national team is to be something more than a shop window for talent from Greater London, Greater Manchester and London. Simply put, the England team might be doing so poorly because it is too English in its style of play, and yet not English enough in terms of player selection.

⁶ Michael Carrick might be mentioned in this regard (born 1981, a schoolboy in Wallsend before joining West Ham at age 17), but few people see him as a future top-flight international player.

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