

Scotland & the European Championships – a short history

Even though the very first match in this competition's history took place just across the water, in **Dublin** in **April 1959**, there was no Scottish presence in the tournament. Nor would there be in the next one either.

While the **Irish** played the **Czechs** in that groundbreaking game, few in Scotland even noticed the existence of what was then termed the **European Nations Cup**. Just as the **World Cup** had been ignored when it was launched, so too did the new European competition pass us by. In fact, the more you think about it, the more of an aberration it seems that Scottish clubs so readily embraced European club competition, being in at the beginning of both the European Cup and the Cup-Winners Cup.

But in the late 1950s and early 1960s our national horizons extended only as far as the annual encounter with England. Beat the English, especially at **Wembley**, and all was well in our own little football cocoon.



The Wembley match was the be-all and end-all in the 1950s

But perhaps there could be an excuse for missing that first tourney. At a time when UEFA had around 30 members, just 17 took part in a competition that crowds scarcely flocked to. While **127,621** people packed out **Hampden Park** for the **Real Madrid v Eintracht** European Cup Final of **1960**, the inaugural **Nations Cup** was won a few weeks later by the **USSR** against **Yugoslavia** in front of around only **18,000** in the **Parc Des Princes** in **Paris**.

In truth, the tournament lost much of its glamour when **Spain**, still ruled by the pro-fascist Franco, refused to play the Soviets in the quarter-finals. At a stroke the favourites, with players like **Gento**, **Suarez**, and the peerless **Di Stefano**, removed themselves from the competition.

There were still big-name (and big game) players around. **Raymond Kopa** and **Juste Fontaine** of France, **Lev Yashin** and **Igor Netto** from the USSR, Yugoslavia's **Jerkovic** and **Sekularac** and **Masopust** and **Popluhar** of Czechoslovakia. But the deliberate absence of the Spaniards denuded the four-team finals of badly needed gravitas.

So how did UEFA punish Spain for failing to fulfil fixtures? Simple. They awarded them the 1964 Finals!

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With 29 entries the **1964** tournament was much more representative of European football. And British insularity seemed to have vanished too, as **England, Wales** and **Northern Ireland** all entered. Strangely, **Scotland** remained aloof. The SFA had learned little from the damaging experience of 1950 when, having qualified for the World Cup, they refused to send a team because Scotland only finished second in the home championship.

Yet in the early 1960s Scotland possessed what was arguably the best side in our entire history. Even just using England as the yardstick shows how good this team was. For three years in succession (1962-64) Scotland either sent them homeward to think again or parted in the West End after Wembley success.

But even more significantly than that, this Scotland team travelled to the **Bernabeu** in 1963 and humiliated Spain **6-2** with half a dozen different players scoring.

They weren't infallible. Just like any Scottish team before or since they could have their embarrassments against minnows as defeats in Belfast, Dublin and Bergen testify. But this was a team that narrowly failed to reach the 1962 World Cup Finals, losing in extra time in a play-off to the eventual runners-up (the Czechs), a team that was forged out of the disaster of Wembley in 1961 and recorded those three successive victories over England to redress the balance, a team that humbled the mighty Spain in their own back yard.

It was before many of the commonly accepted Scottish greats made their bow. **Billy Bremner** was toiling in the English Second Division with Leeds. **Jimmy Johnstone** was an occasional performer with Celtic. **Kenny Dalglish** was just starting secondary school. And (*hold the image if you like*) **Graeme Souness** wore short trousers in primary school as well as on a football pitch and not even an outline of the famous moustache existed.

Yet this Scottish team **DID** have its superstars. There was **Denis Law**, the first £100,000 player in British football, the greatest striker of his (*and some would say any*) day. There was the '*Iron Man*' – **Dave Mackay** - who defied serious injury to play on well into his thirties at a time when 30 was considered 'past it.' There was **Jim Baxter**, at his best, before injury cut him down in his prime. And there was **John White** – the "*Ghost*" – who could spot a move a week ahead of the rest of the field and whose nickname derived from his ability to arrive in the danger areas unseen and unmarked.

And just below the level of that great quartet were players of high international quality. Men like **Bill Brown** in goal, **Billy McNeill** at centre-half and **Alan Gilzean** up front. That was some '*spine*' to weave the superstars round.

Now, we don't claim this team would have won the trophy. But can there be any doubt that this great Scottish side would have done us proud? Especially when you consider that Luxemburg – yes, **Luxemburg!** – only missed out on the semi-finals in a play-off against the Danes.

The crowds came out in force for the 1964 Finals. There were over 100,000 in the Bernabeu for the grudge match that was the Final – **Spain v the Soviet Union**. Only **Luis Suarez** of the great Spanish team survived but aided by new colleagues like **Zoco, Amancio** and **Jose Iribar** in goal, the home side did just enough to beat the ageing Soviets – with **Yashin** still their mainstay – 2-1.

For once, we could have been contenders.

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Denis Law: all-time great

And perhaps also in **1968**. At last Scotland entered the fray. The home internationals of 1966-67 and 67-68 were used as a qualifying group. When Scotland did the hard bit by winning at Wembley in 1967 the job looked done. But the old propensity to shoot ourselves in the foot manifested itself when a **George Best**-inspired **Northern Ireland** stole the points in Belfast. From pole position to dole position. Scotland had to beat England again to qualify and despite a hard-fought attempt, were forced to settle for a 1-1 draw.

Three out of the four points on offer against England yet still we were out. And there was nothing our fabulous foursome could do about it. **Baxter** had his career-defining glory at Wembley but there was little left in his tank after that – a consequence of both lifestyle and a horrible leg break in Vienna. **Mackay** had broken his leg twice and had returned to the fray but was a veteran by the later part of the sixties. Time had caught up with the *'Iron Man.'* **Law** was still the best striker in British football but his appearances were becoming more sporadic as injuries – the inevitable result of his fearless style of play – took their toll.

But most tragic of them all was **John White**. *A brilliant footballer, aged just 27 when he was struck dead by a bolt of lightning on a golf course in 1964.*

The 1968 tournament was another triumph for the hosts. The **Italy** of **Zoff**, **Facchetti**, **Mazzola** and **Riva** proved too strong for the Yugoslavs but they had been lucky in the semi-finals when after a goalless draw they called correctly on the toss of a coin to advance past the Soviets.

How far might Scotland have gone? Well, the group winners, England, while distinctly inferior to the Scots, were beaten in the last four by Yugoslavia.



The match that destroyed Scottish dreams

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After that near-miss the European Championship was strictly off-limits for the Scots for the next quarter of a century. It appeared we could qualify for World Cups but spent the years between rebuilding the side.

The **1972** tournament is best forgotten. We won our home games, lost the away ones and finished third behind Belgium and Portugal. The most notable event of the qualifiers was the arrival of the flamboyant **Tommy Docherty** as manager. The *proto-Ally McLeod*, Docherty talked up the team's chances and restored some self-belief to a down-at-heel squad.

The Finals saw the emergence of the then **West Germany** as a footballing superpower. The Germans had won the 1954 World Cup but their record afterwards was that of '*nearly men*' – this was the competition which provided them with the springboard for an astonishing quarter of a century of success in which they won **three European** and **two World** titles between **1972-1996** and were runners-up in **four** major tournaments as well.

Even more than thirty years later, the names of the stars of this victorious German side still trip off the tongue: **Maier, Beckenbauer, Breitner, Hoeness, Netzer, Heynckes, Muller**. Who can remember any of the Soviet team they crushed **3-0** in the Final in the **Heysel Stadium**?



Scotland won all their home games in the 1972 qualifiers

There was a mood of optimism at the outset of the **1976** qualifiers. Scotland, unbeaten in the 1974 World Cup, were on a high. But dreams of glory were swiftly dissipated by a **2-1** defeat at home to **Spain**. Although Scotland didn't lose another match the damage was done and once again we finished third, behind Spain and Romania.

The effect of the Spanish defeat can be seen from attendances. There were over **90,000** inside Hampden for the opening match and under **12,000** for the closing one.

The 1976 Finals saw the tournament come of age. Played in **Yugoslavia**, every one of the four final games was a manifestation of thrilling, attacking football. There were nineteen goals in total and every match went to extra time.

The **Czechs** demonstrated their capacity to shock by depriving the **Dutch** of the chance to gain revenge for the 1974 World Cup Final. Holland – **Krol, Neeskens, Rep, Rensenbrink, Cruyff** included – were beaten 3-1 after 120 minutes.

Both of these fine sides were beaten by Scotland in World Cup matches in the next two years.

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In the other semi, the **Germans'** famous capacity to recover from impending disaster was displayed to the full as they came back from 2-0 down to **Yugoslavia** midway through the second half to win **4-2**, thanks largely to a **Dieter Muller** hat-trick.

The Final itself has become legendary. Yet again the Germans trailed by two goals. Yet again they hauled themselves back into contention – **Bernd Holzenbein's** last-minute equaliser sending the match into extra time.

With no further score in the extra 30 minutes, the trophy was decided on penalties. The first seven were safely despatched, including one from current Scotland Under-21 boss **Rainer Bonhof** (*Berti Vogts was in the team but didn't take a spot-kick*).

The eighth penalty – from **Uli Hoeness** – flew over the bar. Then the Czechs' **Antonin Panenka** coolly chipped **Sepp Maier** to win the trophy. So ended the last - and best – of the four-team Finals.



Defeat in this game ended Scotland's hopes

In **1980** the Finals were extended to eight teams but it didn't affect Scotland's fortunes any differently. If anything we were worse than usual. Starting in the aftermath of the 1978 World Cup didn't help and the only games we won were two against bottom team Norway and the 'dead' final game v Portugal. Belgium won the group with Austria second. Scotland were fourth of five.

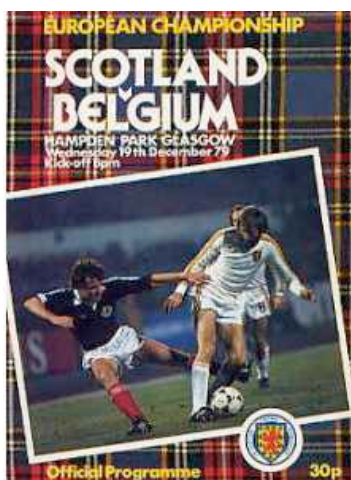
No one could know at the time but Belgium's 3-1 win at Hampden was our last defeat in a qualifier against continental opposition for almost two decades.

The Finals themselves were marred by violence – chiefly instigated it has to be said by English hooligans. This was the first time the English had travelled abroad in any great number and the scenes witnessed in Italy that summer have been repeated in numerous venues ever since.

The competition can be summed up by the stats. In **four** games in **1976** there were **19** goals. In **fourteen** games in **1980** there were **26**.

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The **Czechs** demonstrated their penchant for penalties once again, beating hosts **Italy** 9-8 for third place. In the Final, while **Belgium** kept star **German** striker **Karl-Heinz Rummennigge** safely shackled they ignored his partner **Horst Hrubesch** who scored both in a 2-1 win.



Scotland's last competitive defeat by a continental side for nearly 20 years

Belgium proved to be Scotland's hoodoo team yet again in the **1984** tournament, as they won the group and despite some memorable goals from **Kenny Dalglish** and **Charlie Nicholas**, this was Scotland's worst performance ever as **Switzerland** and **East Germany** also finished above us, leaving Scotland **bottom** of the group.

A slow-burning Finals in **France** burst into life in the last four with both ties going to extra time before **France** overcame **Portugal 3-2** and **Spain** edged out **Denmark** on penalties. The Final was a triumph for that marvellous France side of the 1980s that was so unlucky at World Cups. Inspired by the midfield of **Giresse**, **Tigana** and **Platini** they defeated Spain 2-0.

Just as two years later it would be **Maradona's** World Cup, so this was **Michel Platini's** tournament. At 29 and the peak of his powers the French star wrote his name all over the tournament from start to finish, not just for his intuitive and incisive passing but also for his striking abilities. Platini scored **nine** goals in the Finals, including the opener in the Final itself.



Dalglish: scored some marvellous goals

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In the **1988** qualifiers only **Luxemburg** finished below Scotland in the group. Actually our performance wasn't as bad as that suggests. Yes, we finished behind **Ireland, Bulgaria** and, as always, **Belgium** but only two points separated winners from fourth.

And we could take two crumbs of comfort from the competition. This time we managed to beat the Belgians at home. And **Gary Mackay's** late strike in Bulgaria not only gave us a rare away win, it also sent the Irish off to their first major tournament.

On the down side, Luxemburg took just one point from eight games. No prizes for guessing who the opponents were.

Aside from the disappointing Danish and English sides – who both lost all their games – the Finals proved to be cracking entertainment. Highlight of the group stages was **Marco Van Basten's** hat-trick against England.

Van Basten was playing at the time with the best club side in Europe – **Milan**. So too were teammates **Frank Rijkaard** and **Ruud Gullit** and this trio combined to turn the **Dutch** – perennial runners-up – into winners.

They beat old rivals **West Germany** thanks to a Van Basten goal a minute from time to reach the Final against the **USSR** who had already beaten the Dutch in their group. But Van Basten set up Gullit to put the Dutch ahead before exhibiting a sublime piece of skill for the second goal. *On the right side of the goal and from what looked like an impossible angle, he blasted the ball into the top left-hand corner of the net.*

How good a goal was it? Even better than Archie Gemmill's in 1978. That's how good.

At long last the talented Dutch had won a major prize. As for Marco Van Basten he finished top scorer and now possessed another medal to go alongside those from Serie A and the European Cup. Before the year was out he had added the accolades of European and World Player of the Year to his 1988 honours list.

This wonderful player saw his career cut short by a thuggish tackle from behind by Basile Boli in the 1993 European Cup Final – an offence that contributed to FIFA's decision to ban such tackles.

Boli of course later played for Rangers and it was the 1988 European Championship Final which first contained players later to play in Scotland. Sadly for us it wasn't any of the Dutch team but the wayward **Alexei Mikhailichenko** of the Soviet Union and his team-mate **Sergei Baltacha**.



A win for Scotland – but a great day for the Irish

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By the time the **1992** qualifiers came round, you could forgive the Scots for thinking this tournament was more of a burden than an opportunity. But at the seventh time of asking **Scotland finally qualified**. It would be nice to say we did so in style. Nice, but incorrect. Just as in 1988 only two points separated the top four teams but this time we came out on top. We did so by the simple, stuffy yet highly effective method of avoiding defeat away. Only in **Romania** did we lose a match. That was balanced out by a home victory over the same opponents. We drew home and away with **Bulgaria**, beat the **Swiss** at home and drew away and won both games against **San Marino**.

Even so, it was the Bulgarians – who we had deprived of a place in the 1988 Finals – who helped us get to Sweden in 1992. For if Romania had beaten them by two goals in the last match in the group once again Scotland would have failed. Fortunately for us the match finished in a draw and so for the first time Scotland strode the European stage.

It was a strange tournament in which to make our debut. The **USSR** had qualified but collapsed by the time the Finals came round. So it was that we found one of our opponents to be the oddly-named **Commonwealth of Independent States**, or **CIS**. Alas, that acronym was already familiar to many Scots and many were the jokes to the effect that if Scotland couldn't beat the *Co-operative Insurance Society* then perhaps we shouldn't be playing the game at all.

Even worse was the situation regarding **Yugoslavia**, which had descended into civil war. UN sanctions were upheld by UEFA who admitted **Denmark** – runners-up to the Yugoslavs – in their place.

All of this made the first group – according to the '*experts*' easy to predict. Surely **England** would qualify, along with **France**. After all the French had won every match in qualifying and England – well, they were England, weren't they?

Egg (*or oeuf, depending on nationality*) was left all across the '*experts*' chins as **Sweden** topped the group, the late-coming Danes finished second and France and England flopped miserably – the latter scoring one solitary goal.

Thus was born the great English tabloid tradition of comparing the national team manager to a root vegetable when after their last game the '*Sun*'s' back page headline read: "**SWEDES 2 TURNIPS 1**"

Scotland, unfortunately, were in what looked like the harder group, alongside **the holders, the previous finalists and the World champions**. And if it wasn't already hard enough, it wasn't just the World Cup-winning **West** Germans we had to face but the first unified German team for over half a century.

We made a decent fist of it all the same.

A solid performance against the Dutch was spoiled by **Dennis Bergkamp**'s goal fourteen minutes from time. Just as in the 1990 World Cup against Brazil it seemed we hadn't learned to defend against top quality sides for the full 90 minutes.

At the interval in the game against **Germany** we were a goal behind but far from out of it. **Stefan Effenberg** struck at the start of the second half and not only were we out of the match, we were also out of the competition.

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The final game won us back some pride. It may have been a 'dead' game for us but it wasn't for the **CIS**. A draw might have taken them through to the semis; a win would certainly have done so.

But it was Scotland's day. From the moment **Paul McStay** put us ahead in six minutes it was clear Scotland were going out in style. Even **Brian McClair** – the target of many in the Tartan Army's wrath – got in on the act with a goal. And **Gary McAllister** – later to take over from McClair as an undeserved hate figure – converted a penalty late in the game to give us a **3-0** victory – the highest winning margin of any game in these finals.

Time then for us to return to the sidelines as the **Germans** despatched the **Swedes** more easily than the 3-2 scoreline suggests. But the World Cup holders v European Championship holders Final that most thought in prospect failed to materialise when the party-pooping **Danes** twice led **Holland** before their game went to extra time, then won 5-4 on penalties.

The final was supposed to be one-sided. It was, but not in the manner the critics forecast. With the solidity of **Peter Schmeichel** in goal and the inspiration of **Brian Laudrup** up front, the Danes took the lead through the unlikely **John Jensen**. A second from **Vilfort** near the end was enough to give them a 2-0 triumph.

Surely this was the most unlikely and unpredictable victory in any major Final? Here were the Germans, the World champions, now augmented by the best talent from the east, like **Matthias Sammer** and **Andy Thom**. **Beaten by a team that initially had their holidays booked for the same time as the tournament.**

The incredible Danish triumph was welcomed across Europe. Certainly it was enthusiastically received in Scotland. For some strange reason the idea of a country that likes to think it's a world-beater being done over by their small northern neighbour was one that met with the approval of many Scots!

What is often forgotten about this tournament is that even though we failed to get out of the group, this was the only major tournament in which Scotland have featured in the last eight!



Scotland qualify at last

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Much has been written about the **1996** Finals in **England** but the qualifying campaign has been largely forgotten. A pity really, for even though we were runners-up, this was probably Scotland's most impressive performance ever. With the tournament extended to sixteen teams, all but two of the group runners-up were guaranteed a place in the Finals.

The minnows of **San Marino** and the **Faeroes** were both beaten twice as were the dangerous **Finns**. Defeat in **Greece** was rectified by victory at home. And we drew twice with **Russia**. A record of seven wins, two draws, one loss, nineteen scored and only three conceded in ten games left us three points behind Russia but five ahead of Greece.

It was as comfortable a qualification as any in our history.

And of the 270 minutes we played in the Finals, 269 of them were either good or adequate. Alas, our fate hinged on the sixty seconds that weren't.

A backs-to-the-wall draw with **Holland** in the opening game gave us hope we could progress. And even though we trailed to England we were having the better of things when we were awarded a penalty. **Gary McAllister's** miss has gone down in history. Some say it was a wonderful save by Seaman. This writer disagrees. **No keeper tries to save with his elbow.** McAllister hit his shot too close to the keeper and Seaman got lucky.

Within a minute we were undone as **Paul Gascoigne** showed a glimpse of the player he once was, going on a powerful run past the defence, leaving **Colin Hendry** on his backside and slotting home with aplomb.

It was a magnificent goal but even then we still had a chance in our final match. We led the **Swiss** 1-0. With England cruising against the Dutch at 4-0 we were through on goal difference. Then the 'wonder' keeper Seaman let the ball trundle through his legs for what the Dutch must have thought was a mere consolation but turned out to be the goal that eliminated us by virtue of goals scored.

The remainder of the tournament was notable for penalties. **Five** of the **seven** games from the quarter-finals onwards went to extra time and penalties decided **four** of these.

There should have been no need for extra time in the game between **England** and **Spain** as the Spaniards had one, and possibly two, perfectly good goals ruled out in normal time. But for once, England won a penalty shoot-out. As usual the **Dutch** lost theirs, this time to **France**. Both **Germany** and the **Czechs** reached the last four by the traditional method of scoring more goals than the opposition but it was these two countries – dead ball specialists of yore – who both won their semi-finals from twelve yards out.

Yet another penalty – this time during the 90 minutes – gave the Czechs the lead in the Final. Germany came back and just as in 1980 it was an unheralded striker who proved crucial to their cause. **Oliver Bierhoff** equalised then struck the winner five minutes into extra time.

This was the 'golden goal.' Competition rules decreed that the first goal in extra time would be the winner, regardless of when it was scored. **Berti Vogts** had the honour of leading a united Germany to their first international success.

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At 'home' at Wembley!

By now Scotland had got the hang of this qualifying lark. Even though the **Czechs** were runaway group victors in the **2000** qualifiers, winning all ten games and in the process becoming the first continental side to win any qualifier in Scotland since 1979, second place was always ours in what was hardly the toughest of groups. **Bosnia**, **Lithuania** and **Estonia** were all really battling for third. So, despite the embarrassment of a draw in the **Faeroes**, Scotland made the play-offs to determine who would play in **Belgium** and **Holland** in 2000.

The luck of the draw brought **England** north for the first time in a decade. A dull, evenly-matched game turned on two barnstorming raids through the Scottish defence by **Paul Scholes**. The Man Utd man's double left Scotland facing an uphill task in the return.

The team went about their business with gusto. Clearly the superior side, **Don Hutchison's** goal gave Scotland hope. But try as they did, a second wasn't forthcoming. Once again, it was a tale of 'might have beens' in another 'glorious defeat.'

Some of us would prefer the occasional 'jammy victory.'

The Finals produced the best football since 1988. Yet again two of the bigger countries – **England** and **Germany** – thought their game would determine the group winner when all it did was settle the destination of the wooden spoon as **Portugal** and **Romania** came through to qualify.

Co-hosts **Belgium** set an unwanted record in failing to get out of the group. They became the first hosts to fail to reach the last four as **Italy** won their group and tournament debutants **Turkey** joined them in the last eight.

The truncated **Yugoslavia**, back for the first time since 1992, were involved in two amazing games – a **3-3** draw with former countrymen **Slovenia** and the incredible **4-3** defeat by **Spain** which ended with both countries involved progressing

Like Italy and Portugal, **Holland** won all their group games with **France** taking second place.

Once again the Yugoslavs were involved in a high-scoring affair in the last eight –only this time it was a **6-1** thrashing from the Dutch. France edged out Spain in a close game while Portugal and Italy took care of Romania and Turkey.

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Once more both semis and the Final went to extra time. **Nuno Gomes'** opener for Portugal was cancelled out by **Thierry Henry's** equaliser for France. A match which saw Portuguese tempers boil over ended in ugly and controversial fashion with **Zinedine Zidane's** penalty winner three minuets from the end of extra time.

The free-scoring Dutch lost their shooting prowess against Italy and with the game goalless after 120 minutes, penalties settled affairs. It was no great surprise that the Dutch lost **3-1** at this stage.

Italy were more open in the **Final in Rotterdam** and were deserving of the **Del Vecchio** goal that gave them the lead. Deep into injury time and with the Italian bench ready to celebrate, **Sylvain Wiltord** equalised for France. And it was the World champions who finished stronger as **David Trezeguet** struck in extra time to secure victory and give France the European crown to sit alongside their World Cup.

They were the first World Cup winners to go on to secure the European title though the West Germans also held both trophies at the same time by winning in Europe in 1972 and taking the World Cup two years later.



Don Hutchison – scored the Wembley winner

And so to **2004**. After just **eleven minutes** of the qualifying campaign, **Scotland** looked dead and buried – an embarrassing two goals down in the **Faeroes**. Although a partial recovery ensured a draw, it was clear from that moment that a long, hard road lay ahead.

And so it proved as two good wins over **Iceland** were offset by a controversial penalty loss in **Lithuania**. A fighting draw and a much improved performance against **Germany** at Hampden augured well for the second half of the group games. The Faeroes were duly despatched, but not until after they caused a fright by equalising Scotland's opener. Defeat in Germany left us needing to beat Lithuania at home to make the play-offs.

It was a long time coming but **Darren Fletcher's** strike was good enough to secure the points and when **James McFadden's** goal gave us an unlikely 1-0 first leg win over **Holland**, hopes were high that Scotland could make the Finals in Portugal.

It wasn't to be. Scotland were sliced apart by the mercurial Dutch in the second leg, losing by an embarrassing **6-0**.

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Beating Iceland twice put Scotland into the play-offs

But it's really only in the past four tournaments that Scotland have done any good at all. Pre-1992 our record was abysmal. Twice we failed to enter and in six attempts only managed to finish as high as second in the group once – and that was when the home internationals were used as qualifiers!

From the 1992 competition to date we have qualified twice and lost out in the play-offs twice. It might not be much consolation as we sit at home watching others on the TV but the truth of the matter is that Scotland's record over the past dozen years is far superior to the quarter of a century beforehand.

Whether the names of **Fletcher** and **McFadden** will feature as prominently in future histories as those of **Law, Baxter, Mackay, White, Bremner, Johnstone, Dalglish** and **Souness** is something only time can tell.

As to this year, we don't care to make predictions other than to note that this is a competition where fancied sides – ones that have done really well in qualifying – have often come unstuck. It's a tournament where – unlike the World Cup – the smaller teams have a genuine chance of winning as the Czechs and the Danes have proved in the past.

And, like all tournaments, it's one where our nearest and dearest neighbours really - *no really, this time, more than any other time, honestly* - fancy their chances of winning.

Our view is simple. Those who forecast that **England** will win a major tournament are like people who tell you the world is about to come to an end.

One day, they're going to be right. We just don't know which will come first.

And for many Scots there's also the question as to how to tell the difference.

Meanwhile, enjoy the tournament and get ready for **World Cup 2006**. Germany, here we (*mibbes*) come!