



# Damo's Bedside Guide to the World Cup

Everything you never knew  
you needed to know



**DAMIEN LOVELOCK**

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SCRIBE  
*Melbourne*

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First published by Scribe 2006

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Text design and typesetting by Pauline Haas  
Cover design by Darian Causby, Highway 51  
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data

Lovelock, Damien.

Damo's bedside guide to the World Cup.

ISBN 1 920769 89 7.

1. Socceroos (Team). 2. World Cup (Soccer).

3. Soccer. 4. Soccer – Australia. I. Title.

796.334668

[www.scribepub.com.au](http://www.scribepub.com.au)

# Preface

In 1968, through an expression of mutual consent, I changed schools and came into contact with football (or soccer, as we called it then) for the first time. My grandpa, who was unfathomably old, had played for Woolwich Arsenal Gunners in England in the 1890s and early 1900s and a cousin had taken me to a match when I was six. These moments aside, I had never been exposed to soccer — aka wog-ball — in any meaningful way. I had been an A grade rugby union and league player for my entire sporting life, and happily so. My friends were the same.

My first day at the new school, I made several new friends, from Polish, Hungarian, and Greek backgrounds, who were football fans one and all. When autumn came I finally succumbed to my curiosity and agreed to play goalkeeper in the under 15B team, for one game. By half-time I was hooked. We lost 1–0 and I won man-of-the-match.

England was basking in the glory of its 1966 World Cup triumph and all the guys at school followed one of the English teams, be it Manchester United with George Best and Bobby Charlton, Leeds with Bremner and Lorimer, or Chelsea with Osgood and Harris to name but a few. Every Monday night we watched Match of the Day from the BBC. Sometimes they showed the Home Internationals featuring England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Sydney we went to the Sports Ground to see teams like Moscow Dynamo, Manchester City, and AS Roma play against NSW. I found the mixture of cultures, accents, and languages absolutely intoxicating.

Then in 1970 my life changed forever when I experienced my first World Cup and the joys of Pele's Brazil, Booby Moore's England, Beckenbauer's Germany, and Facchetti's Italy. We followed it in the newspapers, on the radio, and on TV — a snippet

here, a fragment there. We discussed, imagined, and debated the results of matches we had never seen. I listened to the final, broadcast in Portuguese, on a crystal set. And then it was over — for four years. I thought I'd die.

This, then, is a subjective account of my love affair with the world game and its pinnacle, the World Cup — not just a football tournament but a carnival of cultures and a celebration of life itself. I hope you enjoy it.

I'd like to thank John Hunter from Scribe; Les Murray, Craig Foster, Jorge Lazo, Simon Hill, Andrew Orsatti, and Tony Palumbo from SBS; and Kate Gill from the Matildas.

Also thanks to Patrik and Margo Pollnow, Alex Walton, Lee Matthews, Lucy Kemp, Margaret Edgar, Kevin Long, Pommy Mick, Damo from Carlito's, Rocket, and the high cost of living.

Finally, thank-you to John Logie Baird, Mexico 1970, Johann Cruyff and Holland 1974, Matt le Tissier, Belgium 1986, Italy 1982 and Cesare Maldini.

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# **The curse of the Socceroos**

**Many lives, Arjuna, you and I have lived.**

**I remember them all, but thou dost not.**

**— Bhagavad-gita, iv, 5**

‘I don’t believe in an interventionist God’, sang Nick Cave in ‘Into My Arms’. This makes one thing about Nick Cave perfectly clear: he is not now, nor has he ever been, a supporter of the Socceroos. For if ever there was a team that prompted its faithful followers to look to the realm of the metaphysical for answers, it’s the Australian football team. I’m not talking about a single, conclusive phenomenon, like statues that cry or relics that levitate. Rather it’s a series of foully unjust events that have collectively cursed every campaign from the early seventies to 2005. Since qualifying for the 1974 World Cup finals (our solitary appearance at the greatest show on Earth), we have contrived to avoid a repeat appearance no less than seven times, and in a variety of circumstances that mere causal logic or Newtonian physics cannot adequately explain.

In that time Australian soccer has been in exile, lost on a vexed journey of self-discovery that has assumed the increasingly desperate qualities of some weird, epic endurance event strung out over thirty years and five continents. Three decades of disaster, betrayal, failure, and sheer bad luck that were finally put to rest when John Aloisi slotted home the winning penalty to eliminate Uruguay and send us on our way to Germany 2006. Somewhere along the line you’ve got to ask yourself: ‘What did we ever do to deserve this?’ Like so many tales that assume mythic proportions, the truth behind the curse of the Socceroos is a simple, if an unnaturally strange story. It begins back at our first World Cup campaign in Phnom Penh in 1965. The man we have to blame for

our trail of tears is former Australian Soccer Federation honcho Jim Bayutti, who finally convinced all parties to take the plunge and try our luck at the 1966 tournament being held in England. As Oceania representatives we were lumped in with the best teams from Asia and Africa to play-off for one place in the finals. When this was announced most African nations withdrew in protest, arguing that the African federation should be guaranteed a spot in the final sixteen. The Asians thought likewise and before you could say 'mass exodus' the group representing three continents had been reduced to two nations: Australia and the mysterious North Korea.

The two qualification matches were played in neutral Phnom Penh in November 1965 with a three day break between matches. Australian spirits were high and a general feeling of optimism was all pervasive — and why not, after all, who had ever heard of North Korea? The Aussies learnt all they needed to know about their opponents very abruptly when the first game finished 6–1 in favour of the 'football nobodies' and the dream was well and truly over when they cleaned up the Socceroos again, 3–1, in the second. The Anglo-Aussie soccer press pronounced it a disaster and we were warned to 'stop fooling around with the World Cup' by London based soccer scribe Eric Batty. The North Koreans went on to enjoy a brief, but brilliant, cameo in the limelight at the 1966 finals, eliminating Italy 1–0 and leading Portugal 3–0 before being run down by a rampaging Eusebio. Then, as mysteriously as they had arrived, they disappeared into the mists of time never to be seen again at this level, thanks to a wild combination of boycotts, withdrawals, and failed attempts to qualify.

Undaunted, preparations began immediately for the 1970 World Cup being held in Mexico, and Australian tours by Scotland, Greece, and Japan were just part of the Socceroos' build-up to the 1969 qualifiers. Official qualification began in earnest

in Seoul on October 10, 1969 where we met Japan who, without their brilliant centre-forward Kamamoto, we accounted for 3–1. We then beat the hosts, South Korea, 2–1, leaving the pitch under a hailstorm of bottles, cushions, and fruit. Two draws from return matches against the Japanese and South Koreans over the next ten days were enough for us to win that qualification group and go on to meet Rhodesia in Laurencio Marques. Surely this would be just another mere formality before the globetrotting Aussies went on to meet Israel for a place at the big show.

It was around about now that things started to get weird. The two ‘mere formality’ matches against Rhodesia ended in 1–1 and 0–0 draws, requiring an unscripted third match to break the deadlock. Our problems were threefold: one, the referee seemed to be under instructions to allow the home side to kick us to death, and getting into the spirit, they attempted to do so with unbridled enthusiasm; two, Rhodesia’s beanpole goalkeeper Robin Jordan, who looked as though he couldn’t catch a cold in an Antarctic blizzard, had nonetheless proved to be a hero for the locals; and three, we had no time to waste as we had to beat the Rhodesians and then get to Israel within the week for the first leg of the play-off for a place in Mexico.

Panic set in after the second draw. In a moment of mephistophelian inspiration, Australian liaison officer Fernando Fernandes, whose office was contained within the best cat-house in Laurencio Marques, contacted the most powerful witchdoctor in the country. In return for the princely sum of £50 he offered to place a curse on the Rhodesian goalkeeper. The Australians quickly agreed and lost no time in relaying this information to their opponents. Sure enough, in the third and deciding match, the keeper had a shocker and we aced the game 3–1. Israel, here we come. After a night of victory celebrations, the team assembled at the airport the next day to fly to Tel Aviv when suddenly the

witchdoctor appeared. In an unfortunate oversight it seemed he had not been paid. The team manager, still recovering from a vigorous night on the turps, refused to honour the Socceroo's debt. The witchdoctor calmly replied that he could just as easily place a curse on the aeroplane and all those in it. But the team manager remained unmoved . . . and so did the curse, for over thirty years. The Aussies left Rhodesia with the debt unpaid and flew to Israel, losing 1–0 in Tel Aviv four days later, then reconvened in Sydney after a fortnight, where a 1–1 draw was the best we could manage. Israel went to Mexico and we went back to the drawing board to prepare for the 1974 campaign.

Over the next three years the Socceroos played Iran, Greece, Israel, Mexico, South Vietnam, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Bulgaria in preparation for the elimination round. Our qualifying group got under way in Auckland on March 4, 1973 with a 1–1 draw against New Zealand. We followed this with victories over Iraq and Indonesia and another draw with New Zealand. With coach Rale Rasic at the helm things were starting to look good: a nil all draw with Iraq and a 6–0 thumping of Indonesia, with goals to Mackay, Atti Abonyi (2), Richards, and the great Ray Baartz, gave us victory in our sub-group and placed us in the box seat. Next up we met Iran in Sydney and stitched them up neatly 3–0: we were almost there. The return leg in Tehran resulted in a 2–0 triumph for the home team; we lost the battle but had won the war 3–2 on aggregate.

Australia's final hurdle to qualify for the 1974 World Cup would be South Korea. The two teams met for the first leg before a capacity crowd at the Sydney Sports Ground on October 28, 1973 where they fought out a nil all draw — the Aussie's inability to score, let alone win, at home was something we would see repeated for the next 28 years. The re-match was in Seoul on November 10 and we got off to a fabulous start, falling behind 2–0

inside the first thirty minutes. But even as the Korean cheers for the second goal were still ringing in the stadium, Col Curran got away down the flank and crossed to Branko Buljevic, who headed home to give Australia a lifeline. Just two minutes into the second half, a Ray Baartz bomb tied the game at 2–2 and that was the way it finished, requiring a third, deciding match to be played in neutral Hong Kong three days later.

Although both games had been drawn, the pendulum had definitely begun to swing Australia's way. Blowing a 2–0 lead at home had damaged the Korean's morale and self-belief, whereas we'd got ourselves out of jail and we weren't about to go back for our hats. For the first sixty minutes in Hong Kong the Socceroos played their best football and dominated, but the elusive goal would not come. Then, twenty minutes before full time, midfielder Jimmy McKay picked up a loose ball thirty yards from the Korean goal and hammered home a thunderbolt to clinch victory and a place at the 1974 World Cup finals.

*All Hail  
The Holy Grail  
And Jimmy McKay  
Who did not fail. (Anon)*

History shows that Australia took its place at the tournament in West Germany in Group One, alongside Chile and East and West Germany, returning home with a 2–0 and 3–0 loss to the respective Germans and a nil all draw with Chile. Upon returning, preparations began immediately for our inevitable return to the big show in four years time in Argentina. For the Aussies had made the big-time, the Socceroo juggernaut was rolling and nothing would stop it now: certainly not some ludicrous curse placed on the team by some ridiculous witchdoctor at some long-forgotten airfield in Mozambique.

Following the Socceroos' 1974 triumph in reaching the finals, the Australian Soccer Federation (ASF) responded by sacking the coach, Rale Rasic. The reasons for this were never made clear. Rasic was succeeded by an Englishman, Brian Green, who began well but suddenly resigned and flew back to England following a match at the MCG in which Australia defeated New Zealand 3–1. The official explanation was contained in a curt press release which announced that Green had been arrested for shoplifting. A ballot was hastily arranged to fill the vacant position. Again successful coach Rasic was overlooked, as was another eminently logical choice, the former Socceroo captain Johnny Warren. Instead, the ASF chose Jim Shoulder, another Englishman about whom virtually nothing was known. Australia was eliminated from the 1978 finals after home and away losses to both Iran and Kuwait. The players and the media placed a large portion of the blame squarely on the shoulders of Shoulder. The ASF's response? Retain him as national coach immediately.

Perhaps an appropriate motto for the ASF would have been 'confused in victory, magnanimous in defeat'. Yet a little over a year later, Shoulder was dumped and replaced by the West German Rudi Gutendorf, again without adequate explanation. All that was known about Gutendorf was that he had been recommended to the ASF by the world governing body, FIFA. Immediately he set about guiding the Socceroos' campaign for qualification in Spain in 1982. Between 1979 and 1981, Australia defeated Taiwan and Israel and drew with Czechoslovakia, Northern Ireland, Mexico and Greece. The signs were very good, but when the World Cup campaign began, the Darkness descended. Herr Gutendorf crowned his period as national coach with a 3–3 draw against New Zealand in Auckland in the first leg — a game in which the Socceroos lead three times — followed by a 2–0 loss to the All Whites in the return leg in Sydney. Okay, upsets happen — but the

Socceroos conceding five goals in two matches to New Zealand is like Australia losing a Test match to Greenland by an innings. Following the second leg loss, Gutendorf was quoted as saying: 'Australia still has a chance to qualify'. Yeah right ... and Harold Holt will re-surface and be back on dry land any day now.

Following Gutendorf's departure came the appointment of Frank Arok. Beginning as a caretaker for the caretaker (Les Scheinflug, who was overseas at the time), Arok quickly established himself as a popular figure with both players and officials — something Gutendorf had demonstrably failed to do. With his sights set firmly on Mexico 1986, Arok began the process of sifting through the post-Rudi rubble to rebuild a team. It was with a tangible and growing sense of optimism that the Socceroos approached their qualifying round against New Zealand, Israel, and Chinese Taipei. Beginning in their usual World Cup style, with a guns-a-blazing nil-all draw in Auckland, our boys then defeated Israel away, drew with them at home, destroyed Chinese Taipei in both matches and then caned those pesky New Zealanders 2–0. Normally this would have been the signal for mass celebration among devotees across the land, but in this case, no. Because, in a demonstration of their total lack of commitment to the development of the world game in the Oceania region, FIFA had added two final qualifying matches against the runners-up in European Group Seven. What had we done to deserve this cruel twist? Nothing — except that otherwise it would've been too easy, wouldn't it?

And so it was that we headed off for another rendezvous with fate in the form of Scotland at Hampden Park. The Scots, full-time professionals to a man, triumphed 2–0 over the gallant Socceroos and their coach 'Mad Dog Arok', as the Scottish media endearingly dubbed him. In a scene that would become all too familiar in the next decade, Australia, in the return leg at the MCG,

battled valiantly and sometimes brilliantly, but could only manage a 0–0 draw. And so our most successful campaign since '74 came to nought thanks to the addition of a new qualifying criterion which seemed to defy logic.

Surely now the pattern is starting to emerge: forces beyond the ordinary physical plane were at work to thwart the Socceroos at every turn. Still, they pushed on in their quest for glory, blind to the fact that fate was conspiring to manufacture their doom in a never-ending variety of colours and flavours. Arok was retained as head honcho as the Socceroos set sail for Italy 1990. Again the usual suspects were assembled, again the Aussies came out firing, and again they went down 2–0 in Auckland. They were nothing if not consistent. But they recovered from that setback, and the subsequent 1–1 result in Tel Aviv — with defender Charlie Yankos putting in a direct free kick from 50 metres out which must rank as one of the greatest individual efforts of all time — was achieved in such a manner that great optimism was re-kindled among the faithful.

And so we trooped to the newly erected Sydney Football Stadium to witness the Socceroos rampant in victory. Our lads launched wave after wave of attack, but alas, no goal was forthcoming. Then, with ten minutes remaining Israel scored following a mix up between Socceroo defenders Yankos and Van Egmond, which allowed Israeli striker Ohana to swoop on the loose ball. Turning to chase back, Yankos stumbled giving Ohana the priceless headstart that he needed: 1–0 to Israel. The Socceroos clawed one back and had their opposition on the ropes, but the referee inexplicably ended the match six minutes early. Despite coach Arok and Socceroo Oscar Crino's best efforts, the blundering referee survived and left Australia alive. Would a microscopic examination of the playing surface have revealed the cause of Charlie's sudden loss of footing? Could the most skilful Swiss watchmaker detect the flaw in the referee's match-timing device

that robbed us of impending victory? No, for the hands that practised such malevolent magic are clearly not of this world.

The heartbroken Frank Arok stepped aside, handing the coaching mantle to Eddie Thomson. Again, the Socceroos rose to embrace their long-awaited date with destiny at USA '94, and again the signs were good: new players, new tactics, and a new beginning. Again, FIFA rose to the occasion and gave us a brand new friend to play with — Argentina! World Champions in '86, runners-up in '90! Thanks a bunch, guys. And just to top it off, Diego Maradona decided to come out of retirement for the two qualifying matches.

In Sydney, the Aussies played Argentina into the ground but could only draw 1–1. In the return leg they lost 1–0 after an own goal from Socceroo captain Alex Tobin. Again the bewildered fans could sense the unseen world at work, for which two players would have been voted the most reliable in their respective teams — the two least likely to hand a match to their opponents? Charlie Yankos and Alex Tobin.

Following the tragedy of World Cup '94, Eddie Thomson resigned and headed to Japan. David Hill, boss of Soccer Australia, promptly secured the coaching services of none other than former England mentor Terry Venables. His brief was simple: France '98, the World Cup or bust. In contrast to previous campaigns, Venables was given more than a hearty handshake and some frequent flier points to go with his ambitious assignment, in fact, he virtually scored an open cheque book. And so here's how it all goes down ...

The Socceroos waltz through the qualifiers and win the Oceania zone. Then come friendlies against Macedonia, Hungary and Tunisia and we win them all. Finally, we learn that our opponent will be none other than Iran, back from a twenty-year self-imposed exile — why couldn't it have been twenty-one,

haven't these guys heard of numerology? Johnny Warren warns us that Iran is one of the best teams in Asia. No matter — they've got the arse out of their pants, we'll kill 'em. This is OUR time. So the Aussies head for Tehran. Half our team hasn't played any football for months and are wearing name tags to get to know each other at the last practice session in Dubai: 'Hi, my name's Harry, I play left wing'. We play poorly but defend well, pulling off a 1–1 draw. Now we know we've got 'em. This is the team that has played great and lost for twenty years. It seems as if the karmic worm has turned.

We return to Melbourne for the return leg, where the MCG looks more like a set for 'Lord of the Dance' than a sudden-death World Cup qualifier. The nouveau 'fans' love it. They watch intently as the teams warm up, drinking it all in, but the older heads are looking skyward. Surely nothing can go wrong now. The god of football couldn't have any nasty tricks left, and if he has, surely it's someone else's turn: go and pick on Brazil, they can afford it.

The match begins and it's like the Socceroos are playing to 'The Ride of the Valkyries' while Iran are stuck with a Donny and Marie Osmond cassette that's so old it won't play at the right speed. As Johnny Warren later observed: 'If it was a fight, you'd have stopped it after ten minutes.' The Socceroos dominate the Iranians but somehow contrive to lead only 1–0 at half-time, courtesy of Harry Kewell slotting home a cross that had eluded the disorganised Iranian defence. The second half begins where the first ended, with the Aussies so superior they seem irresistible and within three minutes the second goal comes. 2–0, as Aurelio Vidmar cleans up a header that had rebounded off the crossbar: we're going to France, no doubt about it. I'm sitting amongst the Iranian print journalists and they can barely bring themselves to watch: a third goal can only be minutes away and then the party will begin.

But the Other World is nothing if not resourceful. So you think you've seen it all: holes in the ground that open up to trap unwitting defenders, own goals from impossible angles, defeat by New Zealand? Think again, brother. From out of the crowd comes serial pest, Peter Hoare, who's spent thirty-odd years rehearsing for the moment. Unseen by virtually everyone, including a sizable police and security contingent, he races across the field and tears down the net. No big deal, just a short delay for running repairs. The new fans continue to party. The players, coaches and officials look dumbfounded or bemused. But for the older heads in the crowd this was the first sign that things were about to get weird: reach for the Prozac, silver bullets, holy water, cloves of garlic, prayer wheels . . . whatever. They sense what's coming because they've seen it all before. The hand of fate is upon them, the Darkness is creeping in . . .

Six minutes later the game gets going again, but the atmosphere is no longer celebratory: it's surreal. Iran grabs the flimsy lifeline like any drowning man would, and in the time it takes to eat an MCG hot dog, the dream is over. 1996 Asian Player of the Year Khodadad Azizi creates the first goal for team mate Bagheri and then knocks in the second himself after a delightful through ball from the grand old man of Persian football, Ali Daie. It's 2-2, and that's good enough for the Iranians. The Socceroos fight desperately for a third goal, a goal they so obviously deserve, a goal they have earned ten times over in this match. But we know that it's not going to happen. It's fate, and that's all there is to it.

The impact of the Iran game at the MCG was tsunami-like. I know people who will tell you that they've never quite gotten over that terrible evening's events. I know because I'm one of them. Johnny Warren, weeping on television unable to find the words to complete his match summary, spoke for all of us. In the fallout from the disaster, first Venables and then David Hill