

## Overreacting with Style: Danish Football According to Morten Sabroe

Over the course of his career as a writer and journalist, Morten Sabroe has used Denmark's performances in international football matches as occasions to "freestyle" his literary journalism. Danes invest much attention and emotion in the game of football, and Sabroe enters this energy field to process political or media issues stylistically. (It should be noted that here we are talking of what in a North American context is known as soccer.) The two examples presented here (translations mine) highlight Sabroe's aesthetic overreaction, so to speak, as he attends the matches. In the first column, Sabroe demonstratively allows his own dark mood about current national politics to taint and kill the spirit of the game for him (and the reader). In the second, quite the other way around, Sabroe challenges and refutes a dark rumor about match fixing by celebrating the purity of the performance that is being questioned.

In "A Very Limited View," Sabroe reports from Copenhagen in June 1993, when Denmark played a World Cup qualification match against Lithuania and won 4–0. Still, in Sabroe's self-proclaimed limited view, the Danes—mainly off the football field—steal the show as the match's ultimate losers. According to Sabroe's logic, Lithuania, the formal opponent in the match, is not even worth mentioning. The team becomes irrelevant to the scene because Denmark has internal affairs to deal with. Clearly, recent political events have ruined Sabroe's ability to enjoy the the game.

These events began when Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, after successfully challenging Svend Auken as head of the Social Democratic Party the year before, became prime minister in January 1993, five months before the match. Also, in June 1992, there had been a popular vote in Denmark that went against the Maastricht Treaty, or the Treaty on European Union. Six months later, in Edinburgh, Denmark's terms for accession were then renegotiated, and the country was granted four exceptions to Maastricht. On May 18, 1993, a new popular vote successfully endorsed the Edinburgh Agreement. This revised result provoked riots in Copenhagen, and police responded by opening fire on demonstrators.

In Sabroe's account, both the "regicide" in the Social Democratic Party and Nyrup's triumphant overruling of the original popular vote against European Union membership compounded the government's "bad breath and bad karma," and this foulness is now infecting the football arena.

In "A Match Fixed in Heaven," Sabroe reports from Euro 2004, when Denmark played a group match against Sweden in Porto, Portugal. The final score is 2–2, which means that Italy, another group member, is knocked out of the tournament. This gives rise to rumors that the two Scandinavian teams have been conspiring to that particular end. Sabroe's text serves to process these accusations. By portraying the good-natured attitude of the Danish and Swedish football fans before the match, and highlighting the divine elegance of the match itself, Sabroe assures readers of their legitimate right to celebrate the event.

However, the elaborate style of Sabroe's argument leaves us with a sense that perhaps he protests too much and is therefore, ironically, allowing a shadow of doubt to linger. After all, the story is based exclusively on Sabroe's subjective estimation of the situation, which his playful deployment of the first-person singular makes clear. — Christine Isager

## A Very Limited View

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*Bleak report on a football victory from upper level at Parken, where the enemy had no name.*

**P**arken, Copenhagen. I am here! I am sitting high, high above the pitch on a red plastic seat! I got a ticket from a colleague yesterday! For the national game! For Michael Laudrup and Brian Laudrup and the whole great fever once again! Pulse 180 and throat inflated in a roar from the abyss! There is just one thing. It is printed in bold characters across the ticket: Limited. A 150-buck ticket, and you get limited view! It might as well have said, "This ticket is paid by the assistance office!" Upper level, Section C1, Row 13, Seat 3, the loneliest place in the world. With a brain sunk deep into the howling sea of the collective air horn.

The speaker has just announced, "Number 10, Michael Laudrup," the

red horns are screaming like bloodthirsty birds, and now the score is 1–0. I am drowning in fireworks smoke and erect Danish bodies. This is where I am writing from:

I woke up this morning with the most limited view I have ever woken up with in my life. When I cycled down Strøget around eight, the only person in sight in the pedestrian street was Bent.

Bent's view was at least as limited as mine. He bent over a garbage can as if he was looking for something or checking his own reflection on the bottom.

Bent was dressed in red and white, a walking Danish flag, and I know his name was Bent because his friend was yelling: "Bent, goddammit, you dirty pig!" Bent was resting both hands on the can and then he threw up everything he had in his belly in it, as if he was a legendary US pitcher. You know, the guy who tosses the ball in American baseball. Bent had already been kicking big bottles of our Our Beer the night before he was going to watch our boys fight for our country in our national stadium for our sake, O Denmark! And the score is still 1–0.

### The Two Arenas

I cycled along and turned right at Højbro Square. By the howling airhorn, that was where it happened! Right by Christiansborg. I got an idea. I knew it was bad, but I couldn't let it go. I suddenly saw the two great arenas of our capital and of our country. The political arena and the sports arena. Christiansborg and Parken. Both populated with professionals, both turning into arenas for entertainment. With the quality of the entertainment best defined by the great wage differences. The poorly paid politician versus the overpaid football star. The political show, a second-rate show, even if it carried a great thought in its title: Democracy. No one in the kingdom would care to pay 150 bucks to sit in there with a limited view.

I had been in there and seen the last great show, the Union show, on May 18. I had been standing at the foot of the stairs leading from the hall to the first floor after the official result, when the prime minister came sweeping in as if he had just signed a million-kroner contract with Barcelona. I had seen how he and his party companions filled their suits with the political victory, which none of them that night realized was a defeat.

Defeat had been written in the cards they themselves had played, when—like brooding chickens after years of deprivation—they grabbed the power they had no basis for. When they took over, they became the bad-breath government.

The regicide at the party convention stuck to them. They had—no matter how reluctant we are to talk about that sort of thing in our country—blood

on their hands. They had—no matter how little we do talk about it—both bad breath and bad karma. They wanted power in order to become greater themselves.

And now the score is 2–0.

### **The Hollow Sense of Greatness**

That night I was standing in the Social Democrats' quarters and saw Nystrup flushed with victory in a way I won't soon forget. You may call it a moment when truth marches. On that night, when Nystrup and those in the Social Democratic Party, who hitched themselves to the Union wagon as victors and became great by it, on that night they appeared fatefully like those who hitch themselves to a victory by the national football team. There is no basis for the sense of greatness. The only thing it can do is fill what is empty. Or what is nothing but insecurity and identity crisis. Hysteria erupts in an empty space, where it is thrown back from naked walls, only to double the hysteria.

Thus Poul Nystrup Rasmussen on that memorable night, where his sense of self was conditioned exclusively by appearances. Had there been something inside, we would have watched a human being as balanced as one may possibly be balanced in a world that is reeling.

And now it is half time.

### **The Price of Hysteria**

I am writing this from my limited view. I am seated at upper level and my view is bloody bad. But yesterday, when my view was not as limited, I had read in *Ekstra Bladet* what Michael Laudrup had told the press:

This is too much. The hysteria over my comeback is massive. That I am back on the World Cup team can't possibly be front-page material several days in a row. That I can make a whole nation go crazy like this is frightening.

Said the man who is the object of this hysteria and might have let it fill him, if he hadn't been full of something else.

And now the score is 3–0.

The hysteria that seized the Social Democrats on that long night three months ago, when the new strongman placed himself as leader of the team, is not unlike the hysteria that seizes both the press and then the people, when the strongman returns home to lead our team. It doesn't take much for what is weak and insecure to feel great and powerful.

But inside the empty space of hysteria, inferiority lies in wait. It knows itself and knows that it is wedded to hysteria. It knows that when hysteria is crushed by defeat, it is alone. It knows that it is exactly like Laudrup said:

Frightening. If the boys lose, the nation loses.

There is nothing left but self-loathing.

And now the score is 4–0.

I don't know why I have been mixing politics with sports. It is not appropriate. And when I write that the victories won on the two great arenas of our capital are equally empty because there is nothing to them except the rush of the moment, I blame it exclusively on the fact that I got a ticket with limited view.

And what did I see, if anything? Not a damned thing, except for the future. It is, like Leonard Cohen sang, Murder. Just like the party—whose journey is now about to end—proved that it was, when it wanted power at all costs without wanting anything else.

Maybe it was that future Bent saw at the bottom of the garbage can on Strøget.

If he ever made it to Parken, though, he wouldn't have felt empty. With Denmark scoring four goals, the future was postponed indefinitely. But I wonder who we defeated?

## The Football Freak: A Match Fixed in Heaven

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Good morning, this is Your special football conscience. The time has come for You to learn what is really going on in Portugal. While angry Italians—convinced that the match between Sweden and Denmark was fixed—throw eggs at the front door of the Danish consulate in Milan and threaten to puncture the tires of the consulates' cars, You will be able to read here what is really going on:

Of course the match was fixed. It happened an hour before it started, when Morten Olsen and the Swedish national coach Lars Lagerbäck received a call on their cell phones at the same time, and a deep, insistent voice said: "Listen, boys. . . ."

They listened very carefully, since they did realize who was calling and who was telling them:

"This match shall do honor to the game of football. It shall be one of the most intense matches the crowd has witnessed for a long time. The people who attend have traveled thousands of miles, they are bursting with expecta-

tions. You shall meet those expectations. Millions are watching your team play, you shall perform the very best you can.”

Then he hung up.

Olsen and Lagerbäck looked up toward the sky to see whether they were able to spot Him. Then they went in to meet with their players and told them that they had to play football as well as they possibly could, so well that even God would be clapping his hands.

This was how that match was fixed. Not a word about results, only about quality. And this was how it was played. We were there and saw it with our own eyes. It was sensational, downright sensational. But before your special football conscience relates how it felt to be in there at Estadio do Bessa in Porto, while rain was pouring like waving silver curtains, I have to respond to an email I got from a reader in Painsville by Frowst in Southern Jutland.

Tractor operator B. Maltesen writes, “Why the bloody hell do you always write ‘I’ in your articles?”

This is a very difficult question. This is why I have passed it on to my secretary in Denmark. While she is investigating it, I have been out in the reception here at Pousada D. Maria to ask what “I” is called in Portuguese. It is called “eu.” And as long as my secretary is not phoning me back with an answer, eu will, to make B. Maltesen in Painsville happy, be using that.

But now, for the match, that memorable match at Estadio do Bessa on Tuesday night, a match where all myths about archenemies were laid to rest:

Eu arrived at the stadium around 7 p.m., Portuguese time, after thorough research on one of the topics that occupied meu (that’s Portuguese again) thoughts: The relationship between Danish and Swedish football fans. Did they hate each other? Did historical conflict between these countries mean anything to them? Was a rage simmering inside them, determined by age-long hostility between the two neighboring countries? Would the losers of the game fling themselves on the winners, blinded by hatred, and mangle them?

Aren’t You excited to know the answer? Here it is:

The time was 5:45 p.m. when eu went into a café in the area around the stadium to buy a beer. The place was packed with Swedes in blue and yellow football outfits. Their mood was euphoric; the air was thick with great expectations.

Then the door opened, and two Danish football fans in red shirts from the Danish Football Association entered. They headed straight for a group of young Swedes, held up a Danish flag right under their noses and started singing to the tune of “Guantanamera”:

“Pussy to-niight / We want some pussy to-niight / Pussy to-niiiiight / We want some pussy to-niiiiight....”

They kept doing this for quite awhile. The young Swedes were looking at them with some surprise. To be honest, like eu should be, it was an intriguing moment. Eu wouldn't bet a fortune that the two happy Danes would escape from the room alive.

When they were done singing, everything went quiet. Then the response came. All Swedes in the café bawled out to the same tune:

“Ball in the net / We want the ball in the net / Ball in the neee-et / We want the ball in the neeee-et . . .”

Afterward they drank a toast with the two Danes, and eu had mim (Portuguese) theory confirmed that all that talk about hereditary enemies is a thing of the past. Eu give you a couple of reasons:

**T**hese are two thoroughly civilized peoples, two of the richest in the world. They don't carry any social rage, and they don't relate to each other. After the Danes joined the EU, we have turned our eyes toward the south. Sweden is almost nonexistent to us. We only cross over when we go to the cottage for the weekend. We don't watch Swedish television, but CNN and MTV instead. There is no envy and no inferiority—there is nothing. We can't even admire them on account of great sports stars like Ingemar Stenmark and Björn Borg, since they don't have those anymore. They have dropped out of our consciousness, completely.

And now let me tell you what happened, when eu came into the stadium and was happy in earnest when eu saw who was seated next to me:

Blonde Stine from Århus, twenty-three years old. She had Danish flags painted on both her cheeks, and do You know what was painted on her arm? The Swedish flag! Because she met two Swedish girls when she was buying cigarettes. They painted it. And what does that tell you? Is that hatred?

Reassured for the second time, eu inhaled the atmosphere. The stadium was a sensational sight with the Danish and the Swedish fans.

“God, it's great to be here!” Stine yelled. “I love football! I played for ten years myself.”

Eu was really nervous. There were too many yellow shirts on the seats. “Sweden! Sweden!” the cries boomed. It sounded like whiplashes. Then the game started; Stine was all nerves.

“Don't you get to pay less, when you're on the edge of the seat like this?” she asked.

She stayed there for twenty-eight minutes. Then came Jon Dahl's goal. You would hardly call it a goal, for it was a strike of genius. Just before he hit the ball, he saw where the goalkeeper was, and then he sent it off in an arc that You would think God had designed. It was right there, floating, floating, and floating, and eu can tell You one thing: That ball was happy. It was

swelling with self-esteem and pride, because it knew it was meant to go in. It had overheard the conversation between God and the two national coaches, it knew that without it there would be no game, and now it did everything it could to float as divinely through the air as it could.

Gooooaal! And Stine jumped from her seat, and eu jumped with her, and if it wasn't for the fact that eu had just ordered a cup of coffee here at the pousada, and the waiter had answered, "Certainly," eu would think that eu was still hanging in the air in the stadium with all the others who couldn't believe their eyes either.

A goal like that can only be arranged with God. And a match like that can be played only if something greater than the twenty-two players on the field had a hand in it.

So now You know. That match was fixed, but not by those the Italians think fixed it. And since my secretary hasn't called back, eu will wrap up by offering my thanks for now, and in order for You not to think otherwise: Eu am ecstatic about being a Dane!

