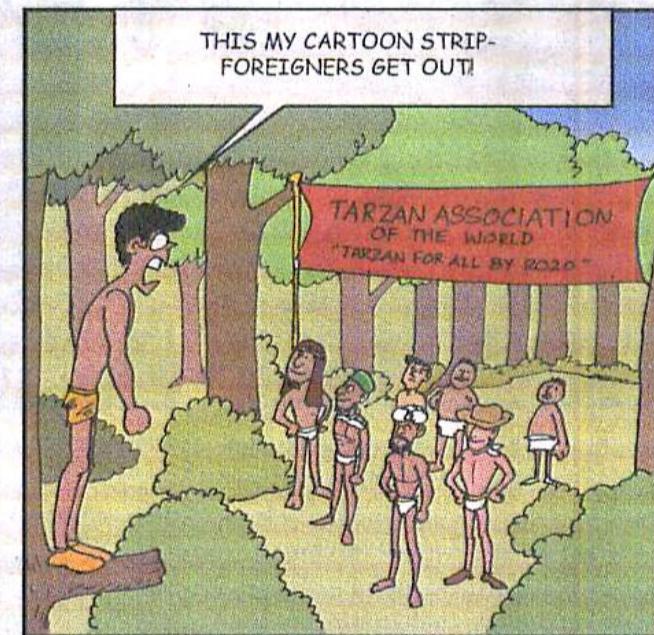
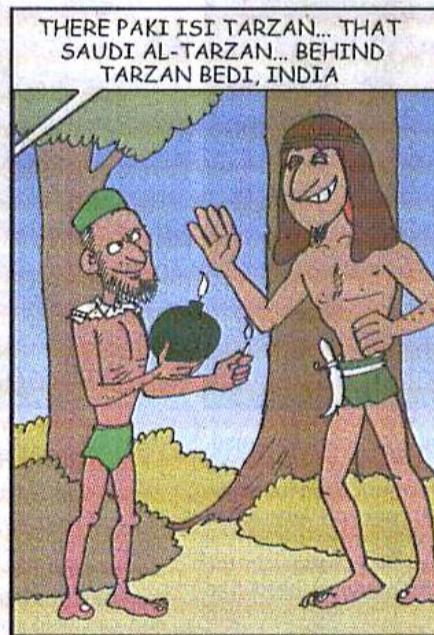
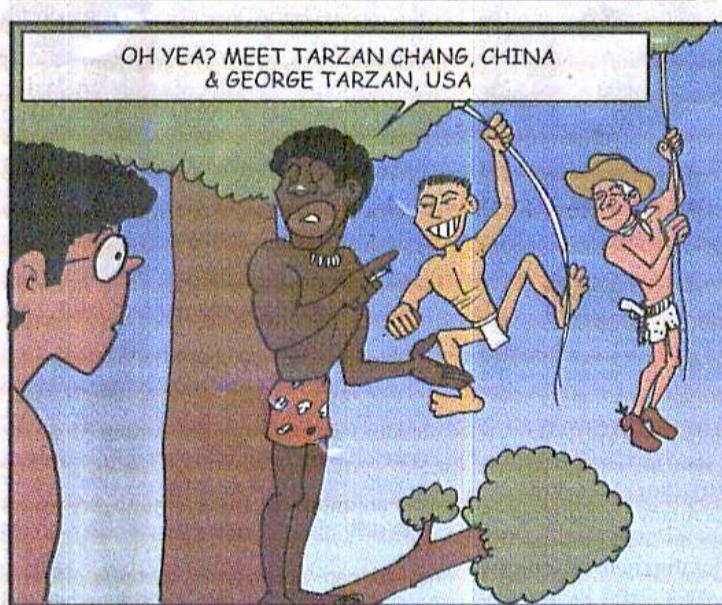
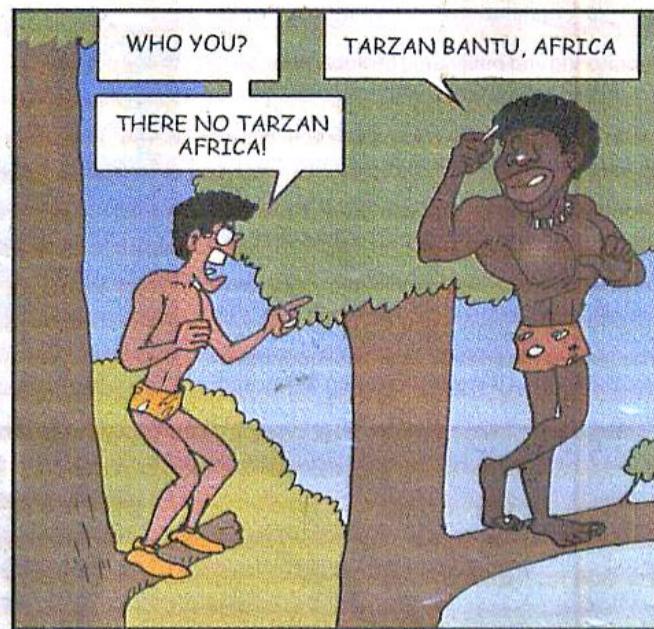
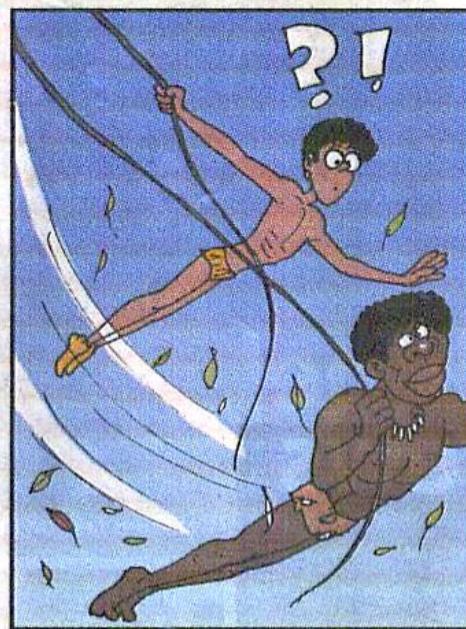
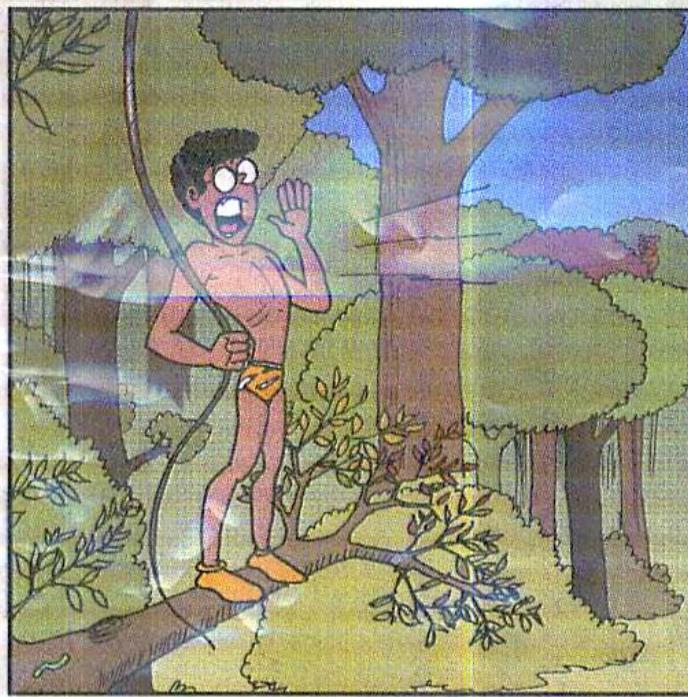


# Babu

Tarzan trouble



## Let's face a few facts first.

Given that everything goes according to plan (for Russia that is), the fate of England following last week's international break looks very bleak.

The Three Lions could well find themselves unable to qualify for the next European Championships and their destiny at the moment lies out of their own hands.

It's a pathetic predicament for a nation which boasts perhaps the best league in the world and which is loaded with marquee players of the like of Steven Gerrard, Wayne Rooney and Frank Lampard to but name a few.

But is it really a surprise?

Not so much. (read on to find out why).

On October 11, 1997, exactly ten before the day that England capitulated so remarkably against Russia on the artificial turf in Moscow, they were playing another decisive qualification match World Cup qualification in this case.

The scene for that encounter was Rome, the stadium the revered Stadio Olimpico and the opposition Italy.

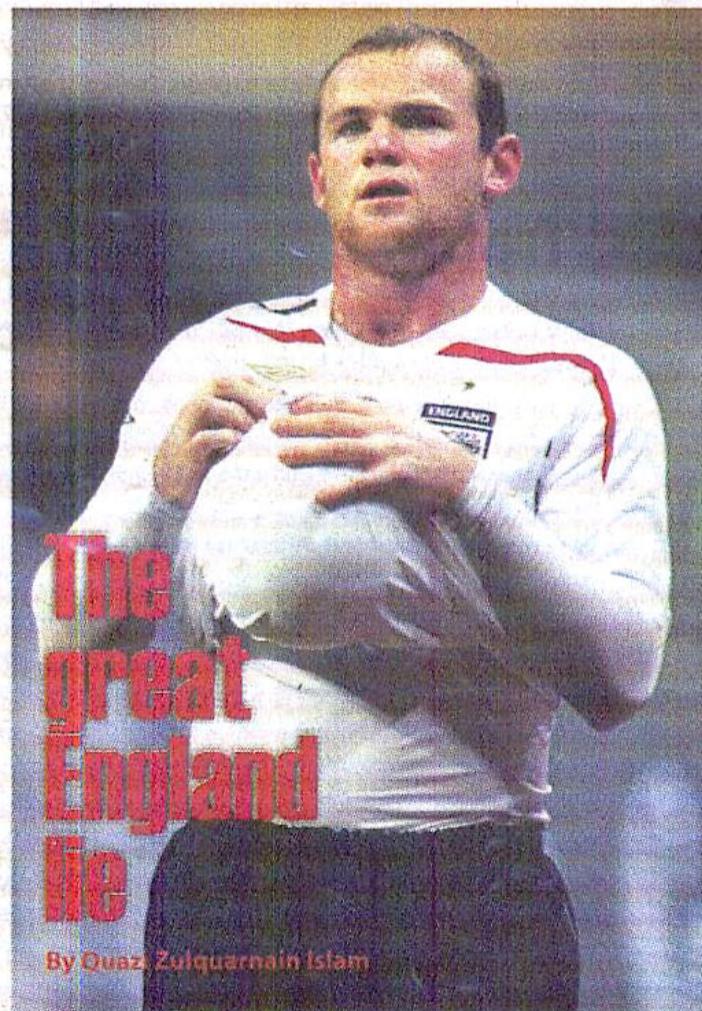
After ninety minutes during which fans witnessed one of England's best away performances in the last two decades, Glenn Hoddle's team comfortably reached the required 0-0 result, being 90 minutes superior, better organised, more balanced, physically, mentally and tactically against a stronger rival.

Ten years on, during the first-half against Russia things looked to be set for much the same.

The much-maligned Steve McLaren had taken a bold decision prior to the match, dropping Frank Lampard to the bench and thus dispensing of the malfunctioning Gerrard-Lampard duo, opting instead for better balance with Gareth Barry.

It paid off early as Wayne Rooney fired in a spectacular volley to give them the lead.

So far the script read exactly as the English wanted it to. All they had to do was hang on for the rest of the



game.

But the twist in the tale was that this is exactly what this England team are so unable to do.

The fact that the English are unable to hold onto a lead is nothing new. They have done it time and again and there are enough instances in just the past few years to show for it.

In Euro 2000, they threw away a lead to lose to a rampant Portugal, in Korea-Japan 2002, they did the same

against Brazil, in Euro 2004 it was France via Zidane's turn to capitalize, while in Germany 2006 even Gerrard's late goal didn't help as they conceded an equalizer at the death to Sweden.

It has become an all too common fallacy of the English squad and the reasons for this, although quite simple, are not very easily evident. (or sugar-coated over)

What is wrong is that the English players are intellectually feeble and

terrified of change.

How else do you explain the same failings that return to haunt English football time and again - panicking under pressure and limited in thought and imagination.

Football, like all other things starts at the brain. Thereby no matter how good you get physically, how well you can run, how long you can last, if you can't outthink or emulate your opponents tactical skills, you can only go so far.

Flashback to that evening in Rome ten years ago. The England team of that day showed creativeness, determination and self-confidence - three traits that were so essentially missing in Moscow last week.

Most of it was down to the fact that they possessed a few exceptional individuals that day. David Seaman on goal, Tony Adams in the centre of defence, Paul Ince, David Beckham and particularly Paul Gascoigne in midfield, together with Teddy Sheringham and Ian Wright up front, helped by the rest equally inspired plus in-form teammates.

Critics would ask whether the aforementioned individuals were any better players than Steven Gerrard and Joe Cole or Michael Owen and Wayne Rooney?

No, they weren't.

But they were inherently better footballers able to think and reason rather than running the full length of the pitch without a clear idea of what they had to do.

England, in Moscow looked good at the start but as soon as they had the lead, the players looked unsure about what they had to do.

Should they hold on? Should they go for another goal?

Shorn of a man who could think his way out of a closed box in the middle and possessed with a coach lacking in tactical skills like McLaren hardly helped their cause.

It's why England, despite playing much, much better than in Zagreb or Tel Aviv, eventually lost.

The ability to keep possession

simply does not figure in the English players' mentality. Neither does the ability to play a two-way role and switch from one to another seamlessly. They can attack and defend equally well but they can't do one or the other separately when called upon!

The English players aren't just married to one position, they are married to one way of operating in that position, and to specific team-mates around them.

Which explains why players of the calibre of Lampard and Gerrard fail to strike a chord in the center of midfield. Neither can compliment the other, frustratingly so, because neither can assume one duty in and of himself.

The only two England managers who have achieved some modicum of success in the international stage are Sir Alf Ramsey and Bobby Robson and both coined effective tactical formations.

Ramsey developed the now famous 'wingless wonders' while Robson moved away from the accepted to switch between three and four at the back. Even now assistant Terry Venables mirrored the Dutch when it suited him during their ultimately fruitless Euro 96 campaign. Plus he also taught the English to keep the ball, a trait which strangely seems to elude him now. (or maybe the players aren't smart enough to implement it!).

Critics will argue that the 442 is England's strength, their way of doing things but as a respected journalist so rightly argues, 'There is nothing wrong in playing to strength; unless that strength has become a weakness.'

England may yet qualify but for them to achieve real tournament success changes need to be afoot quick.

(If you have alternative opinions regarding England's incompetence mail them in at zulquarnain.islam@gmail.com)

Sharier