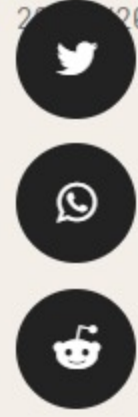


Features

# "THE ASSASSIN OF FRENCH FOOTBALL": DAVID GINOLA'S UNFULFILLED INTERNATIONAL CAREER

2019 by OLIVER YOUNG-MYLES



**N**ovember 17, 1993. Almost 50,000 fans packed into the Parc des Princes, the majority of whom were expectant Frenchmen, preparing to celebrate their qualification for USA 94; a first at international football's most prestigious tournament since 1986. They needed just a point against Bulgaria to secure second place, enough back then to qualify automatically. With the score tied at one apiece heading into added time in the second half, the Parisians were gearing up for a party. Then disaster struck.

David Ginola, a 69th-minute substitute for the legendary [Jean-Pierre Papin](#), won a free-kick deep in the opposition half. France's other substitute that night, Vincent Guérin, tapped the free-kick to the Paris Saint-Germain man. All he had to do was wind the time down and keep the ball in the corner, as far from Bernard Lama's goal as possible.

Alas, the mercurial winger instead hoisted an over-hit cross into an underpopulated penalty area straight to a Bulgarian defender. Sixteen seconds later, the ball was nesting in Lama's net, courtesy of Emil Kostadinov's emphatic strike. France manager [Gérard Houllier](#) turned away in disgust, no doubt muttering Gallic expletives under his breath. His assistant Aimé Jacquet turned away in shock, hands on head.

The whole country was in mourning and it would be four more years until the next opportunity to join the world's greatest football festival. From being certain to qualify with two games remaining, *Les Bleus* had somehow contrived to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Less than 30 seconds after the restart, Scottish referee Leslie Mottram blew his whistle for the final time, sealing France's fate. Bulgaria's players celebrated wildly; they had leapfrogged their opponents into second place behind Sweden and had a summer in the Land of Opportunity to look forward to.

The French players, on the other hand, looked utterly shell-shocked. Laurent Blanc sunk to his knees in the middle of the pitch; Bernard Lama walked around aimlessly shaking his head in disbelief; others were in tears. Ginola, who had the last touch of the ball from the kick-off, slumped over the nearest advertising hoarding, a look of desolation etched all over his face. Little did he know things were about to get a lot worse.



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In his post-match interview, Houllier laid the blame for France's humiliating exit squarely at the talented feet of the 26-year-old winger: "The adventure is over all too soon. With only 30 seconds remaining we were there but we got stabbed in the back and at the worst possible time. The referee still had his whistle to his mouth when Ginola won that free-kick near the corner flag, but then he goes and sends in a huge 60-metre cross instead of hanging on to the ball. That allowed Bulgaria to go and hit us on the counter."

Houllier went on to describe Ginola's actions as "a crime against the team". There was to be no respite for Ginola in the media either, as he was dubbed the 'Assassin of French Football' in the coming days by the press.

Ginola's decision that night was tactically naive, but was also well in keeping for his on-field unpredictability. The beauty of his play lay in his unconventionality, not blessed with searing pace but always finding a way to bamboozle his way past spellbound defenders. To shackle Ginola down would be to minimise his effectiveness of the pitch. And besides, bar himself and [Eric Cantona](#) – to whom the wayward cross was aimed – every one of his teammates was goal side. Kostadinov's winner was preventable.

What also appeared to be lost in the post-match hysteria was that the final game should have been a dead rubber anyway. On 13 October, France hosted an Israel side that was bottom of the group and without a win in their eight previous qualifiers. As with the Bulgaria game, France required a point to qualify but somehow contrived to lose 3-2, with the winning goal again arriving in the final minute.

In the coming days, Houllier resigned after failing to deliver on the French Football Federation's expectations of World Cup qualification. Any hopes of Ginola being given a fresh slate by an incoming boss were hampered as Houllier's assistant Jacquet was swiftly promoted to the top job. Jacquet was unable to ignore Ginola early on, as the winger played a starring role in PSG's Ligue 1 title-winning season, collecting the Player of the Season award in the process. However, with his reputation in France still suffering, Ginola left his demons at the Parc des Princes for Newcastle the following summer in a move that seemed to close a chapter on his international career for good.

In 1995 in a game against Azerbaijan, Ginola won his 17th and final international cap, bringing to an end an underwhelming and ultimately unfulfilled five-year spell. The timing for both was unfortunate. Ginola flourished in his spell in England, being a creator-in-chief in [Kevin Keegan's gung-ho Newcastle team](#) that captured minds but not silverware in the 1995/96 season, before dazzling for three seasons in north London for Tottenham. The 1998/99 season was to become a career highlight for Spurs' number 14, as he lifted the Worthington Cup following a 1-0 win over Leicester before being awarded both the PFA Player of the Year and Football Writers' Player of the Year.



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France, meanwhile, were establishing themselves as a major force on the world scene. Experienced players from failed campaigns such as Laurent Blanc, Marcel Desailly and [Emmanuel Petit](#) were retained and integrated alongside young stars such as [Lilian Thuram](#), Patrick Vieira and [Zinedine Zidane](#). They, of course, went on to become world champions in 1998, defeating Brazil 3-0 in a final forever remembered for [Ronaldo's](#) mysterious illness and Zidane's headed brace.

The foundations were laid and the same squad, bar a couple of exceptions, went on to lift the European Championship title two years later against Italy. For Ginola, watching former colleagues lift the Jules Rimet trophy was a galling experience. He admitted at the time: "It was fantastic for the French people, but on the other hand, from a personal point of view, it was terrible." And although he later claimed he was no longer bothered, there must be a lingering sense of regret that he could not have played his part.

Four years after France 98, Ginola hung up his boots, aged 35, after taking in a tempestuous 18-month spell at Aston Villa, followed by one last sojourn at Goodison Park during Walter Smith's final days as manager. Houllier remained at Liverpool until 2004 and though the pair would cross paths frequently during that period, the prospect of reconciliation was never entertained.

In fact, almost a decade after Ginola's retirement and 18 years after that night in Paris, the feud was bitterly re-opened as Ginola filed a lawsuit for defamation against Houllier for comments made in his autobiography, entitled *Coaches Secrets*. The case was dismissed five months later in a French court, drawing to a close one of international football's most bitter fallouts.

For Ginola, the zenith of his international career was arguably when he was voted Player of the Tournament at the 1987 Toulon tournament, playing for a victorious France side. Other former winners of the best player accolade include [Alan Shearer](#), [Rui Costa](#) and [Thierry Henry](#), demonstrating the calibre of the annual under-20 tournament.

For them, Toulon was a springboard to bigger and better things, all three becoming stalwarts and captains of their national teams, featuring in numerous European Championships and World Cups. For Ginola, on the other hand, Toulon was the best it got, his importance to the national team was never as great as then, as an exuberant 20-year-old. That his undeniable talent was never truly unleashed on the world stage will always remain a huge shame.

By [Oliver Young-Myles](#) @OMyles90

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