

SPORTS

SOCCER

MISSION POSSIBLE?

After 60 years of hurt
England turns to
German coach Thomas
Tuchel to end World
Cup title drought

In a bid to end its decades-long wait to win a second World Cup, England has put its fate in the hands of a German.

It's fair to say the appointment of Thomas Tuchel was not universally well-received.

"I'm sorry I have a German passport," the serial-winning former Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Bayern Munich coach quipped at his official unveiling in 2024.

He had known that morning to some unflattering headlines in the British media.

The Daily Mail described it as a "dark day for England" and said the national team had gambled on a "GERMAN".

The party leader of the right-wing Reform UK Nigel Farage asked on X: "Why can't we have an English manager?"

Never mind that Tuchel was a Champions League winner who had lifted trophies in three different countries. Or the fact that England has gone down the foreign route before a Swedish coach in Sven-Göran Eriksson and an Italian in Fabio Capello. And in the days before Tuchel's appointment, there were rumors that Pep Guardiola was also a leading candidate.

Historic rivals

A point of contention was the fact that Germany has long been England's biggest soccer rival. Since winning the 1966 World Cup final against West Germany, England has often struggled against the Germans at major tournaments. Some English fans have brought 20th-century history to the rivalry with provocative chants targeting Germany about World War II.

Debate about Tuchel's nationality, however, dissipated quickly, helped by his easy-going charm when dealing with the media and a perfect winning record during England's World Cup qualifying campaign.

According to professor Jan Ruge, author of the upcoming book *Great Powers: A History of Britain and Germany*, the wider reaction to Tuchel's appointment points to a change in Anglo-German relations after the tensions that prevailed in the decades following two world wars.

"There were questions, but it certainly hasn't turned into an ongoing saga in the way in which it would have in the 1990s or even around the turn of the century," Ruge told The Associated Press. "Everyone in the media found it unthinkable to have a German manager."

"Germany really isn't the bad guy anymore. That's long since passed. I don't think it's worth portraying Germany as the bogeyman."

Fierce criticism

Time will tell if Tuchel is portrayed as a hero or villain at the end of the England falls, but his nationality might be raised again. But England managers of the past have been the subject of brutal criticism by fans and media regardless of what it says on their passport.

England's head coach Thomas Tuchel looks on during a training session in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, on Tuesday. AP



Debate about Thomas Tuchel's nationality dissipated quickly, helped by his easy-going charm when dealing with the media and a perfect winning record during England's World Cup qualifying campaign. AP/REUTERS

He goes down as the nation's second-most successful manager after Alf Ramsey, who led England to World Cup victory in 1966.

If Tuchel can end England's trophy wait, he would become a national treasure.

"Everyone in the squad, the staff, everyone believes we can win it," midfielder Kobbie Mainoo said.

Difficult decisions

Tuchel stunned some fans and players with his squad selection for

the World Cup, leaving out big names including Phil Foden, Cole Palmer and Trent Alexander-Arnold. It was evidence that he would not be swayed by public opinion, which has been a criticism of previous coaches.

"Everyone I know about international football tells me that tournaments are won by teams, not individuals," he said. "What we're trying to achieve in the summer can only be achieved as a team."

Midfielder Jordan Henderson was one of the surprise inclusions at the age of 35.

"I know everybody likes to speak about players that aren't here, unfortunately that's the case with every England squad really," Henderson said.

"So there's so many good players, so much talent, but for us as a squad here, it's about being the best version individually and collectively, working every day to achieve our dreams."

A proven winner

Tuchel is the 14th coach tasked with the challenge of ending England's trophy drought, which now stretches to 60 years.

After Southgate's departure the English Football Association said it was looking for a candidate to "win a major tournament." That might sound obvious, but even coaches who had won big prizes with club teams such as Bobby Robson, Terry Venables, Eriksson and Capello could not emulate that success with England.

Southgate got closer than anyone since Ramsey despite a modest coaching career before being handed the national job.

His success appeared to be grounded in developing a connec-

tion both within his squad and with supporters. As a former player who missed a penalty in a semi-final about to defeat to Germany at Euro 1996, his emotional understanding of what it means to represent England appeared to resonate with a new generation.

As a foreign coach — albeit one who coached at the Premier League with Chelsea — Tuchel can't bring that same dynamic to the role.

He does, however, fit the description of a winner of major tournaments, having led Chelsea to the Champions League in 2021. He was also a Champions League finalist with Paris Saint-Germain.

He won league titles in France with PSG and Germany with Bayern Munich.

In Harry Kane, Jude Bellingham and Declan Rice, he has three of the biggest stars in European soccer and enough talent at his disposal that he felt able to leave out the likes of Foden and Palmer.

"I love the difficult decisions and I love the tough decisions because they bring in the end clarity, they bring a certain edge, and it's what you need to go all the way," Tuchel said. "From day one, we said we will always try to select and build the best group, which is maybe not necessarily just to collect the best talents."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Cherki's magical skills could be just what France needs in tight games

PARIS — If matches get tight for France in the World Cup, and a defense is particularly hard to breach, Rayan Cherki is a dream player to bring on.

The 22-year-old enjoyed a brilliant first season with Manchester City, lighting up the Premier League with his maverick skills and amazing passing. He finished second with 12 assists behind only Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes, an established Premier League player.

One of Cherki's assets saw him dribble across the penalty area with his right foot before playing a blind pass — where a player does not look in the direction of where he is passing — with his left foot to Marc Guéhenne. Afterward, City coach Pep Guardiola — who coached all-time great Lionel Messi at Barcelona — spoke of his disbelief at the creativity shown because he had not even seen it before.

In another match, Cherki assisted Phil Foden's goal with an audacious Rabona pass, in which the player's foot crosses the ball behind the back of the standing leg.

Cherki is more of a passer, but he does have the goal-happy right leg his amazing close control. Take

his brilliant goal on his City debut against Wolverhampton, where he started the move with an outrageous backheel flick.

He can also run directly at players at speed with the ball glued to his feet, attributes he shares with the record eight-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi. His goal during his debut for France last June saw him net a brilliant volley against Spain in the Nations League.

"Rayan has something special," Guardiola said. "He will become an extraordinary player with his mindset and mentality."

Options for France

Cherki gives France coach Didier Deschamps wider options thanks to his versatility. He can play as an attacking midfielder or a right winger, as he does with City, or as a playmaker just behind the center forward.

He was positioned behind Marcus Thuram in a 2-1 win against Colombia in March, where he was involved in two goals, and behind Kylian Mbappe against Ukraine last November.

When he was called up to the France squad for the first time in May last year, Cherki called it "the beginning of a beautiful adventure."

It could take him to greatness, for Cherki has the soccer world at his feet.

His hard to tell what is his strongest foot, although like Messi his magic comes from his left.

In an interview with France Football magazine in March, Cherki was asked to name City's best technical player.

Without hesitation, he replied: "Me."

Cherki also described himself as "one of the most unpredictable players on the planet."

Perfect. If France needs him to break down a solid defense.

Renowned Lyon gem

Cherki came through Lyon's another youth academy, which has produced the likes of 2022 Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema and the wonderfully skilled Hatem Ben Arfa.

He made his Ligue 1 debut at just 16 years old in October 2019 and scored his first senior goal a few weeks later in a French Cup match. When Cherki's astounding talent shone bright, He scored two clinical goals, set up a teammate with a brilliant pass from midfield, won a penalty which his teammate missed, then provided another assist. He



France's Rayan Cherki (left) in action with Germany's Jonathan Tah during a Nations League game on June 8, 2025. REUTERS

also hit the crossbar with an audacious lob.

It was a mesmerizing performance for his age and put him on the radar of Europe's biggest clubs.

In his final season at Lyon, he ended with a league-high 11 assists. City landed him last summer for 60 million euros (\$84 million), perhaps benefiting from Lyon's dire financial situation to buy him for what now

looks like a bargain price in soccer transfer terms.

Guardiola must have already known what he was getting, since Cherki scored against City in a Champions League youth game just after turning 15 — the youngest scorer in the competition.

Future of France

Cherki's remarkable balance is an

asset he shares with Messi and the late Diego Maradona, who honed his rare talent in the back streets of Buenos Aires. As a young boy, Cherki developed his technique on the streets of Lyon in east-central France. After one season with suburban club Saint-Priest, he joined Lyon's academy at seven.

While he is not expected to start for France at the World Cup, that is understandable given the glittering talent in attack.

Les Bleus will likely line up with Bayern Munich star Michael Olise, Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele and the prolific Mbappe, who scored a hat-trick in the 2022 World Cup final loss to Argentina and netted in the 2018 World Cup final win over Croatia.

Deschamps is stepping down after the World Cup and his successor is widely touted to be Zinedine Zidane — the star of France's triumphs at the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000, who, like Mbappe, scored in two World Cup finals.

Zidane was an exquisitely gifted midfielder himself and could build his team around Cherki in the years to come.

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