

It's Not Coming Home: What England's Collapse Against Argentina Means for Tuchel and the Three Lions

England reached the semi-finals of the 2026 World Cup looking to end a 60 year long final appearance drought. Unfortunately for the country so rife with footballing history, it was not to be. Anthony Gordon's goal in the 55th minute gave the Three Lions hope, but Argentina and Tuchel's tactical mishaps proved too much for England to bear. This 2026 English squad becomes the second ever team in the 21st century to take a lead in a semi-final of the World Cup and lose the match, an unfortunate record that England now holds twice in 2018 and 2026.

Let's start with the forces at play in this match. England was led by German manager Thomas Tuchel. Tuchel took over this position after Gareth Southgate, who managed the 2018 squad, and was hired specifically for matches such as this one. He was renowned for his tactical brilliance and was considered by some to be a knockout stage specialist. In other terms, he was hired specifically to get England over this 60 year hump. He built a squad around a few major focal points. Harry Kane of Bayern Munich at striker, Jude Bellingham of Real Madrid as a Central Attacking Midfielder, and Declan Rice of Arsenal at Defensive Midfielder. His squad was designed to allow Kane to play a deep-lying false 9 role with Bellingham and the wingers crashing into the box on counters before having Kane come back in to receive crosses from the fullbacks. Rice and Elliot Anderson were there to sit back and dictate the game allowing those others to advance. Argentina is managed by Lionel Scaloni. Scaloni, an Argentine, has led the country to a World Cup Victory in 2022 and a current FIFA #1 ranking. This 2026 squad is built around one man who is one of the all time greats, Lionel Messi.

Everything runs through him. Messi has scored a lot this tournament, but when Argentina plays at their best it features Messi as a playmaker, creating opportunities for his teammates inside the box while Emi Martinez holds it down in goal with a fearsome back four in front of him headlined by Tottenham's Cristian Romero and Manchester United's Lisandro Martinez. This Argentina team didn't burn through the tournament however. They needed late goals to get here. Scoring in stoppage time to take the lead against Cabo Verde before winning the game in extra time, scoring three times after the 79th minute to erase a two goal deficit against Egypt, and scoring twice in extra time of the Quarter-Finals to take down a Switzerland side who was down to ten men. Call it dark magic, dumb luck, or sheer willpower but the Argentinians have scored 12 times after the 75th minute in this tournament, and it became incredibly important in this match

Knowing how these two teams line up and operate on paper is important, but as the famous adage goes, matches are played on the pitch not on paper. So what exactly led to this English collapse? The first half of this match was the spirited, physical affair everyone expected. These two teams do not like each other. There's footballing beef over the Maradona Hand of God goal in the 1986 world cup and Diego Simeone drawing a red card from David Beckham in the 1998 edition of the tournament. There is also political beef, with the Falklands War of 1982 between the two countries who still dispute their claims of the islands. The first half was full of fouls, 19 to be exact including two yellow cards, and zero shots on target. The second half saw the game open up a bit more, especially when Anthony Gordon converted a cross from Morgan Rogers in the

55th minute. England had their much needed breakthrough, all they needed to was hold on for roughly 40 more minutes. Just 17 minutes later it would all begin to go very wrong for the Three Lions and there was one man to blame.

The Collapse

In the second half, England held only 28% of possession despite taking the lead just ten minutes into the frame. In the time between Gordon's goal and Argentina's eventual winner, the Three Lions held just 12% of possession (Sky Sports). To quote their captain Harry Kane, "Once we went up 1-0, we seemed to just try to hold on. At this level, it's not enough," (Reuters). Kane was absolutely correct on that.

Commentators had been pointing out all tournament that the teams that go out and try to win games are more successful than those who go out and try not to lose, of which England became the latter at the 56th minute of play in the Semi-Final. It happened behind Tuchel's decision making.

Tuchel's tactical change was made shortly after the goal, and reinforced with his first substitution made 17 minutes later. England opted to park the bus, a strategy which they employed to success earlier in the knockout stage against Mexico. In that match, it was forced. They were playing a true away game in Estadio Azteca in Mexico City, where the Mexican side hadn't lost a competitive game since 2014. England also went down to ten men after Jarell Quansah was shown a red card. In Atlanta, facing down Argentina things were different. Neither team held a home field advantage and both were at full strength, minus Quansah who was absent due to his red card.

For my fellow Americans who may be unfamiliar with footballing tactics, I'll explain what parking the bus is. Think of it like chewing the clock in the NFL. You are sacrificing your offensive possession to take time off the clock and be prepared defensively. The tactic includes clearing balls from the box, even if it means your team can't control possession. It has been popularized in recent years by English side Arsenal and Spanish side Atlético Madrid, ironically managed by Diego Simeone. It can be great when employed late in games, especially against opponents who are already struggling to score against you, but England employed it too early.

Back to the 12% of possession for what was essentially the rest of the match after Gordon's goal. England isn't built for that. They aren't a counter attacking threat. Kane is one of the most technically gifted and complete offensive footballers in the world, but his weakness is his pace. Morgan Rogers got the start in a role that had been weak for England all tournament, the right wing. Rogers and Gordon are both fast, but were tasked with sitting lower. Tuchel had effectively reduced England's offense to long balls out to Gordon or Rogers on solo runs or Bellingham carrying it himself. The pace of Gordon was lost at the 72nd minute when Tuchel made his worst substitution of the evening. In place of Gordon, the fastest player on the pitch for England, came Ezri Konsa. Konsa is by no means a bad player but the Aston Villa centre back signified the official parking of the bus being asked to play out of position as a fullback while John Stones and Marc Guehi played the center. From this England became even more one dimensional featuring five defenders, two defensive midfielders, one attacking midfielder, and two forwards. It was further amplified by right-back Reece James going down with an injury and being replaced by six-foot seven-inch Dan Burn, another centre

back. Burn is an old-school defender; he's big, tall, strong, dominant on headers, but he lacks a high level offensive output and speed. Alongside Burn, Nico O'Reilly came on. O'Reilly has been featured as a fullback this tournament but has experience playing midfield, but he replaced Declan Rice. Based on his heatmap and performance he was used as a fullback this match, leaving England with six defenders on the pitch.

Just three minutes later, in the 85th, Argentina would find their much needed equalizer. Messi got the ball on the wing and received a double team from Anderson and Djed Spence. He broke the double with a pass to Enzo Fernández, who had taken several attempts in this match from the range he was about to score from. Fernández sat in a void left by Elliot Anderson, right where another defensive midfielder like Rice would've been sat. With no pressure the Chelsea man converted to bring the game to 1-1. This is where it really blew up in Tuchel's face. Eight of his current 11 players were defensively oriented, although Anderson does provide his fair share of offense. Even if England could have held off Argentina until extra time, they only had two regulation subs and one that they would gain in extra time to replace all their defenders with several key contributors unable to return. Here is where many fans expected to see Tuchel go back to the bench. He had attackers in Marcus Rashford, Ivan Toney, Bukayo Saka, Ollie Watkins, and Noni Madueke waiting alongside attacking midfielder Eberechi Eze, but outside of Rashford and Toney none saw the pitch. Tuchel had made his bed and chose to lie in it, not subbing any attackers on until the Three Lions were down 2-1. Messi would find time on the wing in the 90+2' and send a cross onto the head of Lautaro Martinez to end the match.

It didn't go wrong because England didn't have the talent, it went wrong because Tuchel began to play not to lose rather than to win. Argentina subbed on offensive power while England packed in, bringing on Rodrigo De Paul, Nicolás González, and Lautaro Martínez. They put the pedal to the metal while England begged to slam on the breaks. Kane was brought down to play defense leaving clearances uncontested which allowed Argentina to keep the pressure on and keep the ball in the attacking third. Even the mightiest wall can break with enough time. Goalkeeper Jordan Pickford was called on to make some stellar saves, but he couldn't keep everything out. Tuchel's tactical mishap lost them the match in just seven minutes of play.

What it Means

England didn't get to go home and lick their wounds. They played a third place match the following Saturday down in Miami, where they had just survived the heat and Norway the previous week. It seemed that Tuchel may have learned his lesson there. England raced out to a 4-0 lead in the first half before France came roaring back with three goals. England didn't park, they kept the pressure on. They added two more to take third at the World Cup with a 6-4 victory. However, third place leaves a sour taste in their mouth. A country that has been so close still can't get over the hump. They'll get their chance at a trophy again in 2028 with the Euros, a tournament that could prove to be Harry Kane's swan song.

Kane is the focal point of this English squad, but come the next World Cup he'll be 36. It's likely he can still play, after all his style revolves around IQ and technical ability which are both hard to lose with age, but there will be questions on if he can lead

the line for the whole tournament. Kane lacks a clear successor. Despite churning out wondrous football talent, England has a cold spell with strikers. There is only one English striker who will be under 30 come the 2030 world cup who has decent, top-flight footballing experience and that is Chelsea's Liam Delap who has struggled to make an impact at his London-based club. England will go into the 2030 World Cup with their two 2026 strikers, Kane and Watkins, being 36 and 34 respectively. Delap and the other list of current under-26 English strikers will have their work cut out for them.

The 2028 Euros will likely be Tuchel's last dance as the manager for England, unless he can bring home a trophy or maybe a runner-up performance. The German just finished up his first major tournament, but the international managerial market is fierce and fast-moving. He was brought in to bring results. He doesn't have to develop talent, build a whole new system, or inspire generations. He has one of the best talent pools in the world, but he has to push them to greatness. His tactical blunder will be fresh on the minds of the fans and the English Football Association, especially after his hiring being for his tactical mind and ability to get England through the knockout stages.

It is unclear who England would bring in to replace Tuchel if he were to depart in 2028, but the 2026 World Cup brought the light the kind of profile that these short knockout tournaments need. These tournaments demand one of two kinds of managers. For weaker nations, a defensive minded coach who can stifle teams with a counter-attacking low block is ideal, but for a nation like England they need to look across the pond and across the channel. Mauricio Pochettino turned heads with his USMNT performance at this tournament, and Didier Deschamps is stepping away from the French National team with a World Cup trophy to his name. Both managers employ

a high pressing team that forces defenses to get rid of the ball quickly, allowing their offense to tire their opponents out and force mistakes. Certain English players already fit this style. Gordon played in it under Eddie Howe at Newcastle United and was brought to Barcelona for his pressing ability. Elliott Anderson once played for Howe at Newcastle and has a motor that doesn't end. Kane makes defensive contributions every game, and assuming his legs don't go out in the next four years he could run it. The logical successor to Tuchel could be Englishman Eddie Howe, or someone of the same profile. Only time will tell what will be of Tuchel and who will eventually lead the Three Lions back to the top of the footballing world.