

Christy Holly

The Irish man who went from the top of US Soccer to pariah of the game



Gavin Cummiskey

Derry man Christy Holly was hired to three elite coaching roles in US soccer before receiving a lifetime ban after investigations into sexual misconduct

The temperature was rising at the town hall meeting and all the heat was coming for Racing Louisville club president James O'Connor. It was Friday night, March 10th, 2023, and about 100 or so season ticket-holders had the former Republic of Ireland under-21 international in their crosshairs. The subject was Christy Holly, the Derry man who O'Connor had hired to be head coach in 2020, before firing him the following year as the biggest sexual misconduct scandal in American sport was coming to light.

Holly is a pariah now. Banned for life from coaching in the US, his behaviour towards Racing Louisville player Erin Simon had been laid bare in the opening paragraph of the 319-page report conducted by former US deputy attorney general Sally Yates in October 2022. But sitting in front of the town hall meeting, O'Connor was being asked to account for the club's actions around the time of Holly's firing.

How could the club have let this happen? What has changed in the meantime? How can anyone be sure the next Christy Holly won't be able to find his way into a job coaching players at their club?

O'Connor came under scrutiny for one incident in particular. He did a TV interview after Holly was fired in which he was asked if Holly broke the law. "I don't know whether I'd say illegal," was his response. "I don't know, that's a subjective viewpoint, if you like, depending on who is asking. I'll plead the fifth, I'll take the attorney line on that." Now, almost two years later, supporters wanted to know how they could take anything he said in good faith, given that was his response when the situation was at its most serious.

"It was a car crash," he admitted during the town hall meeting. "I am a human being and that was a mistake." Being Irish, O'Connor claimed to be unaware that to "plead the fifth" wasn't just a turn of phrase, that it was a legal term referring to the American constitutional right to not answer a question on the grounds you might incriminate yourself.

"If I could go back and change that interview, believe me, I absolutely would. I was dealing with something I had never dealt with before. I made a mistake and I got caught by the questions. If I say 'yes, it is illegal' it [would have] caused a furore – the player at the time wanted everything to go away. She was incredibly frightened."

As it was, all parties signed a nondisclosure agreement as part of Holly's termination. Holly walked away with a €14,000 pay-off that allowed him to avoid questions about an alleged sexual assault. Erin Simon stayed another season at Louisville before moving to England to sign for Leicester City last summer. Racing Louisville appointed an interim coach before launching an open process of finding a new one full-time, eventually hiring Swedish coach Kim Björkengen.

"Like we did the other night, you need to come out and try to be as transparent as we can," O'Connor told The Irish Times after the town hall meeting in March. "We are trying to move forward. All these events happened in 2021."

Two reports

"On April 21st, 2021, the head coach of Racing Louisville, Christy Holly, requested that a player, Erin Simon, attend a game film session with him alone. She knew what to expect. When she arrived, she recalls Holly opened his laptop and began the game film. He told her he was going to touch her 'for every pass [she] ***ed up'. He did."

"Simon reports that he pushed his hands down her pants and up her shirt. She tried to tightly cross her legs and push him away, laughing to avoid angering him. The video ended, and she left. When her team-mate picked her up to drive home, Simon broke down crying."

"Holly is not the only coach to have abused an NWSL [National Women's Soccer League] player, and Erin Simon is not the only NWSL player to have been abused." – Report of the independent investigation to the US Soccer Federation concerning allegations of abusive behaviour and sexual misconduct in women's professional soccer, by Sally Q Yates, October 3rd, 2022

"On one occasion, Holly took [Erin Simon] upstairs and began showing her film and discussing soccer, but then he searched for and showed her pornography. Holly then pulled down his pants and began masturbating in front of her."

"Holly grabbed Simon's wrist and



Former Racing Louisville head coach Christy Holly gathers his players after a match in June, 2021. Photograph: Joe Robbins/ISI Photos/Getty Images

forced her to touch his penis. Simon told Holly she was uncomfortable and did her best to get out of the house, but she did not want to anger Holly because she was scared. Simon described feeling helpless and like she could not escape.

"She recalled trying to leave Holly's house, but as she rounded a corner to go downstairs to leave, Holly grabbed her arm. Simon felt scared and physically intimidated." – Report of the NWSL and NWSL Players Association joint investigative team, December 14th, 2022

Who is Christy Holly?

Christy Holly first landed in New Jersey in 1995, aged 10, with the City of Derry swim team. He described the trip as "a reward for swimmers who were trapped in the conflict". He returned to the US every summer for the next decade, eventually moving full-time in 2007.

"Growing up in Ireland, trust me, I saw some interesting stuff," he told the Leadership Louisville podcast with Aaron Miller in August 2020. "It was a very violent, hateful place at the time. You saw people get very badly hurt."

From Culmore Point in Derry, Holly was born into a GAA family with ties to St Galls in Belfast, where his father Brian played, and the Eoghan Rua club in Coleraine. His brother Niall Holly and cousins Barry and Sean Leo McGoldrick were Derry senior footballers.

In 2007, after getting a degree in Sports Psychology from John Moores University in Liverpool, he moved to the US, working for Global Premier Soccer (GPS), a company founded by Derry brothers Joe and Peter Bradley. GPS ran youth soccer camps and Holly coached girls in them. The camps have since closed down – a US Department of Justice investigation into GPS for visa fraud forced its demise in 2020.

SkyBlue FC

In the mid-2010s, GPS supplied coaches to a New Jersey club in the NWSL called Sky Blue. Holly would later tell the Boston Globe that he was "the mutual connection" between GPS and Sky Blue, which is where his career in professional football gathered momentum.

"The women's clubs over here lose money," says Stephen Griffin, the former chief executive of GPS parent company Legacy Global Sports. "So it is easy for a guy to slot in and say, 'I'll be an assistant coach, I'll volunteer.' One thing led to another, there was a turnover of coaches and he ended up becoming Sky Blue head coach."

When Holly was coming through the ranks at Sky Blue, he had a reputation for being well-liked by everyone. He began as a volunteer coach in the underage ranks in 2013 and worked his way into the orbit of the senior and reserve teams within a couple of years, becoming head coach in January 2016. The fact that he never had a coaching licence was no barrier to his advancement – neither during his time with Sky Blue nor later with US Soccer or Racing Louisville. Partly this was down to the often ad hoc nature of the sport at the time; partly it was because the force of his personality carried him a long way.

"Holly was friends with lots of the team," says one player from the Sky Blue squad around that time. "He was fairly normal. When he got the head coach role, we thought it was going to be great. We liked him. Nobody had any red flags. Everyone liked him."

"We were a bit confused because all we



Christy Holly walked away with a €14,000 pay-off that allowed him to avoid questions about an alleged sexual assault. Erin Simon stayed another season at Louisville before moving to England to sign for Leicester City last summer

knew him as was a volunteer assistant coach. Like, how does somebody go from that to being a head coach? But because we all liked him, because he had charisma, it was fine. We thought he was going to be good."

For Holly, it was a huge achievement. The NWSL was accepted by all as the best league of its kind in the world at the time. It was the first iteration of a pro soccer league in the US to survive past three seasons and, at just 31, Holly was the youngest head coach of any of the 10 teams.

Sky Blue had serious talent in the squad as well – 10 of the 22 players had featured in the previous summer's World Cup. They had the best goalscorer in the league in Australian striker Sam Kerr, as well as serial Olympic and World Cup winners in Kelley O'Hara and Christie Pearce Rampone. Megastars.

But it soon became clear that Holly wasn't up to the job. Sky Blue could only manage three wins in their first 11 games in the 2016 league and, behind the scenes, he struggled to convince the players that he could improve the situation.

"The problem was, he sucked as a coach," says a Sky Blue player contacted by The Irish Times. "I've had the worst of the worst and the best of the best coaches in my career and he was very close to the worst. He couldn't solve problems. It was always our fault."

"He would spend video sessions just narrating what was happening on the screen. You can get away with that at college level but do that with professional players and they work out very quickly that you don't have any solutions. On the training field, his sessions were repetitive. If we asked questions, he yelled at us and told us to figure it out."

Ultimately, though, there was another factor at play in Holly's demise at Sky Blue: he began an affair with one of his players, Christie Pearce Rampone. The defender was one of the best-known players in the game and had just finished a glittering international career during which she'd earned 311 caps for the US national team and captained them to enormous success. She was married with two kids. "He is not in that position very long and he ends up having an affair with Christie Pearce Rampone," says Stephen Griffin. "Now he is inside the organisation. He is the coach and his mistress is one of the most famous American players of all time. He now has cover, he has credibility. He is with her."

While relationships between coaches and players were generally frowned upon because of the power imbalance, Holly and Pearce Rampone didn't break any league rules by starting a relationship. But it did cause growing tension within the Sky Blue dressingroom, creating a clear rift between the pair and the rest of the squad.

Holly's behaviour became increasingly erratic. Players complained of verbal and emotional abuse, Pearce Rampone, who by now was in her early 40s and clearly on the wane, nonetheless played every minute in the 2016 season and was still a fixture in 2017.

Eventually the atmosphere in the dressingroom became so toxic and disruptive that it led to Holly being fired in August 2017, midway through his second season as head coach. Sky Blue made no mention of the turmoil as Holly was let go, instead saying that they "wish him nothing but the greatest of successes in whatever he chooses to do going forward".

Christie Pearce Rampone retired two days later.

How did Holly get a job at US Soccer?

In July 2019, the US women's soccer team won their fourth World Cup. Christy Holly was an opposition analyst for the US squad during the tournament in France and holds a World Cup winner's medal as a result. That same year, according to the two investigations, his alleged sexual misconduct towards Erin Simon began.

Simon first encountered Holly in 2016 when she was 22. She had just graduated from Syracuse University when he offered her a contract at Sky Blue. She was released in 2018 – after Holly and Pearce Rampone had left the club – joining West Ham United in the English Women's Super League. In the NWSL investigation, Simon credited the move "in large part to Holly's help and connections".

As she made her way through the early part of her career, Simon saw Holly and Pearce Rampone as mentor figures. She spent time with them away from the game and called to them when she came home to New Jersey for the summer of 2019. On one particular visit, she claims Holly grabbed her breasts when Pearce Rampone was present but had her back turned.



Christie Pearce Rampone was inducted into the US National Soccer Hall of Fame. She has never made any public comment on the end of her time at Sky Blue or on the allegations surrounding Holly, who has referred to her as his fiancée in media interviews

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Twelve months after leaving Sky Blue, Holly began a "limited per diem" arrangement with the US Soccer Federation (USSF). The Yates report states that he was paid "less than \$10,000" in 2018 and 2019 for work which included opposition scouting for the senior squad, talent identification and assistant coaching at under-17 and under-23 training camps.

It has never been made clear how Holly came by this job. In an interview with the BBC not long after the World Cup final in Lyon, he spoke about travelling to 10 different countries in the previous six months. "I managed a lot of the national team's players at [Sky Blue] so I had a good relationship with head coach Jill Ellis."

Ellis managed the US team from 2014 to 2019 and Holly has described her as a mentor in interviews. The NWSL report states that while Ellis "ultimately made the decision" to hire him, "she did not undertake any due diligence, background checks, or reference checks".

It also branded his recruitment as "relationship-based" while Ellis recalled that BJ Snow, who oversaw the US scouting network, recommended Holly. But Snow did not assist either investigation and efforts by The Irish Times to interview him proved unsuccessful. Last year he launched a youth soccer camp with his wife, Lindsay Tarpley, the 125-cap US international and two-time Olympic gold medalist, out of the Portage club in Michigan.

In August 2019 Holly informed Simon that she had been called up to the US under-23s. She was "nervous" about his presence as an assistant coach, claiming that he "repeatedly" invited her to his room during the camp. Though she declined, Simon could not shake the feeling that she owed him. Later that year, when she got an offer out of the blue to join Houston Dash, Holly told her that he "may have talked to some people behind the scenes".

Racing Louisville FC

When Holly signed Simon for a second time, to Racing Louisville in November 2020, she texted him to say all advances must cease "now you're my boss". Holly texted back: "I've got until January 1st." That was the date she would join Louisville, when he would officially become her coach again.

According to Simon, his advances only escalated. On one occasion Holly and Pearce Rampone were in Simon's parents' house for dinner and while Pearce Rampone was getting a tour, Simon said that he grabbed her buttocks. She moved away and told him he was insane.

Before the season started, Holly invited Simon over to Pearce Rampone's home for video analysis sessions, saying his partner would also be present. She was not. Simon said that Holly touched her, pulled up pornography on screen, pulled down his pants and masturbated in front of her. She claims Holly grabbed her wrist and forced her to touch his penis. She said nothing because she feared for her safety and believed he could ruin her career.

And yet, when Racing Louisville appointed Holly, James O'Connor described the Derry man as a "well-rounded individual". Racing's then-president Brad Estes said: "His character and values will fit perfectly within our organisation."

O'Connor was promoted in 2022, replacing Estes as club president. The 43-year-old Dubliner had a solid playing career in England, mostly in the Championship. He made 454 appearances

in 12 seasons for Stoke, West Brom, Burnley and Sheffield Wednesday before finishing his career at Orlando City. He coached for five seasons in Orlando and Louisville before moving into an executive role at Soccer Holdings, Racing's parent company.

"We had a profile in mind for head coach," O'Connor told The Irish Times of the decision to hire Holly. "We wanted league experience and someone who had an understanding of the best young players coming through the American system. There was his experience of working with the youth national teams and his experience of scouting international opponents. So, when we looked at him, there was a number of factors, like the degree in psychology, that we felt confident in giving him the opportunity."

Within the NWSL report, Sky Blue claimed to have given O'Connor a clear warning about Holly's conduct. US national coach Vlatko Andonovski even recommended "due diligence" be carried out by Louisville before the hire was completed as "there is obviously a reason why he got fired from Sky Blue". O'Connor was also aware of Holly's relationship with Christie Pearce Rampone.

One Sky Blue co-owner asked club executive Mary Smoot "to convey that Holly did not leave due to job performance reasons". Smoot recalled telling O'Connor and Estes that "the players did not have a positive experience" with Holly.

She noted that neither man asked any follow-up questions. "To me, it sounded like they [had] made their minds up. It wasn't a long conversation. They didn't ask me if I would hire him." Soon after, O'Connor informed the media that the Sky Blue ownership had given Holly a "glowing recommendation". Smoot categorically denies this.

Before the alleged sexual assault of Simon, three Louisville players complained to O'Connor about the head coach's methods, with at least one player feeling betrayed when management brought Holly into the discussions as it "created a fear of retaliation". O'Connor's stance on this now is that four months into a newly formed team, addressing complaints about Holly's management style was "best served by bringing everybody together".

"There was one particular player that was not pleased with how Christy had been speaking to her," said O'Connor. "That was addressed privately with Christy. The player felt there was a discrepancy in how he would shout at her, or shout at younger players versus older players. You would speak to the older players, and they just felt the younger players needed to be a little bit tougher."

The NWSL disagreed, subsequently fining Racing Louisville \$200,000 for the handling of his recruitment, time at the club and circumstances around his dismissal.

Aftermath

Over the course of the past eight months, The Irish Times has repeatedly asked Holly and Pearce Rampone to comment on the accusations made against him. They have not responded.

After being fired by Racing Louisville, Holly returned to New Jersey, where he currently lives with Pearce Rampone and her two daughters. He worked at a restaurant in Spring Lake until the Yates report came out last October. Currently, he is believed to be employed in construction.

In May 2022, Christie Pearce Rampone was inducted into the US National Soccer Hall of Fame, in recognition of a phenomenal international career, serving as captain on 113 occasions. She has never made any public comment on the end of her time at Sky Blue or on the allegations surrounding Holly, who has referred to her as his fiancée in media interviews.

Christ Rampone is Christie Pearce Rampone's ex-husband. "The most important thing is my kids," he told The Irish Times. "It is an ongoing nightmare."

"We got divorced towards the end of her career. The marriage was really rough. As captain of the [US] team for nine years, we were travelling all over the world, 200 nights a year, with the kids. So it wasn't easy on us. We needed some distance at the end."

"Christy Holly moved into the house immediately and with the children they saw him as a family friend. I don't know what kind of man would do that. You would give it some time and let the children breathe a little bit. The girls are relying on their mother to make good decisions. She has him in the house. I cannot imagine a worse situation."

Erin Simon's most recent appearance for Leicester City was against Manchester City in February. "This has not been an easy journey by any means," she posted on Instagram last October when the Yates report came out. "However, the outpouring of love and support I have received from so many people has given me more strength, hope, and motivation to continue moving forward towards making a change. Let us be the voices who turn this sport back to a safe place we all deserve."

In January, Holly was one of four coaches to receive a lifetime ban from coaching in the NWSL. Since then, US Soccer has placed him on a "risk management list." Any attempt by him to coach soccer at any level in the US will be reported to the US Center for SafeSport.

– Additional reporting by Malachy Clerkin

Qatar Diary

Doha fever dream: Tales from the protest World Cup



Gavin Cummiskey

Long before Fifa president Gianni Infantino's jaw-dropping opening monologue this was always going to be a troubling celebration of the world game

In Doha the trains run on time.

At this efficient World Cup, Mbappé, Messi and Morocco drowned out external noise. Artificial sounds inside eight death stadiums ceased whenever the three Ms began to play.

Stories to be reshaped and retold; Messi torturing Joško Gvardiol, Sofyan Amrabat slide-tackling Mbappé, Moroccan migrants beating the Europeans.

World Cup moments to exist beside Pelé, Maradona, Zidane.

The mask slips clean off when the World Cup pauses for two days after the group stages. "Death is a natural part of life, whether it is at work, whether it is in your sleep," said Qatar's chief executive Nasser Al-Khater, when asked about 'Alex,' a Filipino national who died while working at the Sealine resort, Saudi Arabia's training base in Mesaieed.

So valued he is mononym. Within 24 hours the family of Abdullah Ibhais accused the Qatar authorities of torturing the father of two.

"Abdullah was trying to showcase Qatar in its best light, to own up to its mistakes, and to do right by them and all the migrant workers who have suffered as a result," said the Jordanian family of a whistleblower who worked inside Qatar's World Cup Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, until sentenced to three years in jail for bribery and misuse of funds. "Fifa is complicit in Abdullah's imprisonment and Fifa's silence is tearing apart our family."

Qatar denies the claim that Ibhais was tortured, insisting he was convicted on "an abundance of strong and credible evidence". Besides a retracted confession, none of this evidence has been released into the public domain.

Four migrant workers perished during this World Cup, which is one more than the Qataris initially claimed perished in the building of eight stadiums over 12 years of construction.

Or, as Amnesty International insists, 12 years of slavery.

Tuesday, November 8th

A shaky start. World Cup ambassador Khalid Salman informs German television that homosexuality is "damage in the mind".

The interview is cut short. "Everyone is welcome in Qatar," insists the World Cup Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, "but we are a conservative country and any public display of affection, regardless of orientation, is frowned upon. We simply ask for people to respect our culture."

Argentines and Brazilians, the British, all Europeans, Asians, Australians and Saudi Arabians refuse to respect the Qatari culture. Not for one second, not in Souq Waqif, not at games.

This was a World Cup of contradictions. Grottesque wealth propped upon abject poverty.

One of the cruelest aspects of the tournament was access. The country that owns Al Jazeera and BeIN Sport blocked its lowest earners from sitting at home to watch the tournament. It cost \$220 to stream the World Cup. Free to air BeIN Arabic teased matches, showing kick-offs before flashing back to studio.

The Uber drivers have three separate apps to see games as they zipped from Corniche to West Bay. Many only became taxi men for the month as building sites and universities were shuttered. Same goes for the children of Doha, denied formal education while the World Cup played out on subscription TV.

Kids could wander into Fanzones, but 10pm kick-offs saw off most, but not the Moroccans who wheeled babies into Souqs and squares. The North Africans and Saudis made this an Arab World Cup, crossing the land border in their droves.

Saturday, November 19th

Gianni Infantino dog whistles. "Today I feel Qatari. Today I feel Arab. Today I feel African. Today I feel gay. Today I feel disabled. Today I feel a migrant worker."

Monica Marks, professor of Middle East politics at NYU Abu Dhabi, offers supposition around Infantino's true intention.

"Infantino's spiel showcases multiple rhetorical tricks of what we might term the 'deploying anti-Orientalism as a cudgel to squash substantive critiques of power' trade," Prof Marks tweets. "These rhetorical sleights of hand are especially insidious because they can so easily zombieify would-be brilliant critics on the left, including academics and journalists, some of whom unwittingly enter into weird weddings with the abusive, corrupt and powerful in MENA when those actors cry Orientalism."



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A shaky start. World Cup ambassador Khalid Salman informs German television that homosexuality is 'damage in the mind'

"I can't step inside the bloke's head, but his deflections were so risible I see two options: 1. He knowingly used anti-colonialist discourses to deflect critique from Qatar and, by extension, himself and Fifa. 2. He's guzzled Kool-Aid to rationalise his work and genuinely believes it."

Within 48 hours, Greek MEP Evan Kaili utters the exact same pro-Qatari rhetoric in Brussels before her arrest December 9th on charges of money laundering, corruption and criminal organisation. "I am sitting here on the global stage as a gay man here in Qatar," says Fifa director of media relations Bryan Swanson following Infantino's speech. "We have received assurances that everyone will be welcome at this World Cup."

Penny for Swanson's thoughts when a gay English fan is strip-searched for wearing rainbow colours in Doha, while Palestinian flags are waved by the Moroccan players (both legitimate forms of protest in a free society). This was not the Qatar World Cup, it was the south Asian and central African World Cup. They ran the tournament, along with Nepalese servers and Filipino maids, but without a trade union to protect them. Without a Mick Lynch-figure to fight their corner on Al Jazeera, no ruling monarchy or government can be kept in check.

Sunday, November 20th

On opening night Morgan Freeman asks: "Am I welcome?" "We sent out the call because everyone is welcome," replies Ghanim Al-Muftah. "This is an invitation to the whole world."

Qatar's defunct female football team, without caps since 2014, quietly disagrees. "How can so many countries, languages, and cultures come together, if only one way is accepted?"

Exactly, Freeman, exactly. Large swathes of the 67,372 attendance Land Rover to safety at half-time of Qatar versus Ecuador, leaving bussed-in Lebanese in Qatari maroon to chant inanely.

Earlier, at the Protest World Cup, Iran captain Ehsan Hajsafi treads dangerous ground by supporting "all of the bereaved families in Iran" who have suffered under the ongoing Islamic Republic's violent repression of female rights.

Monday, November 21st

England 6 Iran 2. Inside the Khalifa International stadium, Persians howl and wail

at their own national anthem, as the players refuse to sing.

In stark contrast, Harry Kane, along with six other European captains, abandon the One Love armband, designed to support LGBTQ+ rights, for fear of receiving a yellow card.

Roy Keane on ITV: "The players could have done it for the first game, Kane and Bale, take your yellow card, take the punishment, what a message that would have been. I think it was a big mistake by both players, they should have stuck to their guns, if that's what you believe then go with it."

American soccer writer Grant Wahl is detained for 25 minutes by security outside Ahmad bin Ali Stadium for wearing a rainbow T-shirt. "I'm OK, but that was an unnecessary ordeal," Wahl tweets. "Go gays."

Tuesday, November 22nd

Swanson's assurances ring hollow as a Viking helmeted fan in One Love armband and rainbow socks is denied entry to Denmark versus Tunisia.

Keane: "The World Cup shouldn't be here. The corruption regarding Fifa, the way this country treats migrant workers and gay people. They shouldn't have the World Cup here, you can't treat people like that. It's not right, it shouldn't be here."

Thursday, November 24th

Light in the darkness. Ken Early's 'I've had a few Budweiser' podcast, live from The Oasis pub, enters the zeitgeist.

Friday, November 25th

"Woman, Life, Freedom" flags are snatched off Iranian fans at the Wales game in Ahmed bin Ali stadium.

Monday, November 28th

Walking out of The 974 stadium, after Brazil 1 Switzerland 0, we enter a glitzy hotel to watch Uruguay versus Portugal. The young English woman at reception, with heavy eyelids, sings a familiar tune: "You need an exit strategy in Doha, once you have achieved what you came for, you leave." Others, like our Afghan Uber driver, can never leave. We cough up €100 for five beers.

BBC versus Qatar's Supreme Committee

"I used to look up to Gary Lineker growing up," Hassan Al-Thawadi, secretary general of the SC, tells Talk Sport, "so for me it is very disappointing that Gary, I say it openly, never bothered to engage. We reached out three or four times in February. At least hear us out. There was never a desire to listen to our part of the story." Lineker replies on Twitter: "Well, this is news to me. Neither my agent nor myself received any request to engage with anyone involved with Qatar 2022. I have my weaknesses, but I'm not that rude. Very odd."

The BBC tells The Athletic they do not "dispute there was ongoing contact" for a meeting with Al-Thawadi but says it was unable to find "a date to suit all parties".

Enter Piers Morgan, asking Al-Thawadi if it is safe for gay people to be in Qatar?

"It's safe for everybody. Unequivocally Piers, yes."

And safe for gay people to live in Qatar? "Yes. I think it's safe for everybody to live in Qatar, Piers."

What if a gay couple showed demonstrable displays of affection?

"Public displays of affection are generally not part of our culture. Regardless of who you are, regardless of your sexual identification and so on, public displays of affection are not, and I say that within reason. Holding hands in the streets is fine."

For gay people? "Holding hands in the streets for anybody is fine."

It is? "What I'm saying is public intimacy is not part of our culture."

Evidently, Al-Thawadi has never been to Asian Town, where men lock fingers and embrace in the shade. And see Achraf Hakimi, a devout Muslim, climbing into the Al Thumama stand to embrace his mother, who showers him with kisses, after Morocco's victory over Belgium.

"What we try to do is find common ground," he adds. "We might not see eye to eye but we have to find a way of coexisting and moving forward."

A burly American is manhandled out of the Iran game for wearing a rainbow armband. He is released and returns to his seat when a Danish camera crew starts filming the arrest. The police turn away, confused. Until this circus packs up, homosexuality is a grey area.

"We are a relatively conservative culture. In the West the individual's personal rights always trump, let's say, the community rights," Al-Thawadi explains. "That's what is most sacred. But there are other societies, the Arab world being one of them, in the Middle East, it is the communal values, which is fundamentally related to religion, that is of a higher value, of higher importance."

One of these community values relates to female rights. In Qatar, if a woman is raped yet the man claims it is consensual sex, as was the case with a Dutch woman in 2016 and a Mexican World Cup employee in 2021, she can be charged with the crime of extramarital sex. Both women were found guilty of zina, the law that criminalises unmarried sex. Both escaped the country.

Tuesday, November 29th

BBC Persian shows an Iranian gasping for air on the ground outside Al Thumama, held by a police officer's knee on his upper back, screaming: "woman, life, freedom."

Wednesday, November 30th

Qatar remains a land of opportunity, a gateway to other realms. My Ghanaian friend Nasser is living proof. Next year the 24-year-old will receive a three-month visa to visit New York, where his sisters and brothers live, and come 2024 he can get a four-year visa for the US, when he intends to "find a wife, and start a family".

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They shouldn't have the World Cup here, you can't treat people like that. It's not right, it shouldn't be here – Roy Keane

"Qatar has given me that opportunity. Because Africans don't just get visas into the US, but coming from Qatar, where there is no crime, they know you are clean."

"You work the system," he adds, "because you got to live your life and Qatar is not living, it's only about getting someplace else. There is no life here. Just a chance to make money."

"I own this car now," he slaps the steering wheel, "it was paid off inside two years, a full tank costs [€15] so I'll sell it to pay my flight to New York."

Thursday, December 1st

ITV presenter Mark Pougatch, strolling down the marina, shows early signs of Stockholm syndrome.

"A one city World Cup is really not such a bad idea... halfway through one is beginning to feel a bit conflicted as we know exactly what is going on off the pitch, we have discussed it, but the experience here – I have to be absolutely fair – it is very calm, it flows well... this World Cup is going quite smoothly."

Sunday, December 4th

Arsène Wenger guzzles the Kool-Aid. "Dressed in Fifa robes, suggesting the teams that focused on 'competition' over 'political demonstrations' had better starts to the tournament is total bulls**t," writes Kevin Kilbane. "What has happened to the once profound Arsenal manager? What has he become?"

Monday, December 5th

We have a stupid idea, to make a picture diary of my day for family back home. It starts well. Rooftop pool. Metro. But walking into the media centre I snap the "entrance" sign above the security hut.

The police man scanning my accreditation asks to see the photo. I show it to him. He pulls me aside and calls his superior. He is young, strong, intimidating.

"Delete it." "Why, because you are in the background?" "Delete it."

"Delete it. And ask why again, saying I'm taking pictures of most things I see."

"You've taken other pictures of police in Qatar?"

No. He moves his hand to his belt. His superior takes my phone as a discussion in Arabic ensues. The younger man appears to be in

■ Actor Morgan Freeman performs alongside Ghanim Al-Muftah during the opening ceremony at Al Bayt Stadium prior to the Group A match between Qatar and Ecuador on November 20th in Al Khor, Qatar.

PHOTOGRAPH: MOHAMED FARAG/GETTY IMAGES

command. I guess what he's saying and delete the deleted photos section of my phone, and ask him why again.

"There is no why in Qatar. We say, you do."

Really? "Where are you from?"

Ireland.

He's losing his temper, so I offer my hand. We shake. The situation cools as I am scanned and processed.

At half-time in the Japan versus Croatia quarter-final in Al Janoub, Brian McFadden and Keith Duffy perform on the pitch as BoyzLife.

Tuesday, December 6th

"Joseph's labour camp has no name," writes Sam Kuntz for Josimar-Football. "It's not on Google maps, and yet it sits in plain sight, wedged between spectator entrances and the endless facilities that come with a mammoth ground that will host the World Cup final."

Fakhreddine Derouich, a Moroccan security guard working at Spain versus Morocco, glances over his shoulder to see Hakimi's panenka, letting out a roar before bursting into tears, covering his face, breathing deep and getting on with monitoring the crowd.

Wednesday, December 7th

Two migrant workers I speak with regularly – an Indian door man and Filipino waitress working non-stop 10 hour shifts – are so exhausted they can barely stand up. Both in their 20s, they looked older every day. Miguel Delaney, writing in the London Independent, feels "there are moments when it is difficult not think this is what elements of the American deep south must have been like during slavery".

Thursday, December 8th

As the Tory press accuses Mick Lynch of "trying to destroy Christmas", I cannot stop thinking about Sean Ingle's line in The Guardian about Abdullah. "Ibhais says he was jailed after raising concerns that the Supreme Committee planned to deny that World Cup workers were involved in a strike of between 4,000 and 6,000 people in Doha. He says he found 200 workers in Education City Stadium and Al Bayt Stadium that had no drinking water and had not been paid for four months."

Friday, December 9th

Two workers die at Argentina versus the Netherlands. Kenyan security guard John Njau Kibue falls from the Lusail concourse and American soccer writer Grant Wahl dies in the press box, suffering an ascending aortic aneurysm as the penalty shoot-out begins.

"We want answers on the circumstances of his death," Anne Wanjiru, Kibue's sister, tells the Standard newspaper in Nairobi. "They are claiming he was intoxicated. We hear he had worked for long hours. The clarity of how he fell is not coming out. We don't know where to start. It is very painful – they should help us."

On December 12th, Wahl's body lands on US soil. "Our sincere gratitude to everyone involved in repatriating Grant, in particular the White House, the US Department of State, Fifa, US Soccer and American Airlines," writes his wife Dr Céline Gouner. "An autopsy was performed by the New York City Medical Examiner's Office. There was nothing nefarious about his death."

Saturday, December 10th

France 2 England 1

Monday, December 12th

"Fifa's egregious whitewashing of serious abuses against migrant workers in Qatar is both a global embarrassment and a sinister tactic to escape its human rights responsibility to compensate thousands of workers who faced abuse and the families of those who died to make this World Cup possible," said Tirana Hassan, acting executive director of Human Rights Watch. "Fifa continues to cash in on billions of dollars in revenue but refuses to offer a single cent for the families of migrant workers who died or those workers who were cheated out of their wages."

Tuesday, December 13th

Light in the darkness. Sofia Martinez, the Argentinean interviewer, makes Messi smile after his tour-de-force against Croatia: "The World Cup final is coming and sure, we [Argentines] all want to win the cup but I just want to tell you that no matter the results, there's something that no one can take from you, and it's the fact that, truly, you made your mark in everyone's life. That's more important than winning a World Cup, you already have us."

Wednesday, December 14th

"It is not usually this quiet," says Sariff, our Bangladeshi Uber driver as we leave Asian Town, the industrial area where workers live in sandstone blocks beside a cricket arena and shopping mall. "[The car park] is where everyone gathers, when they return."

The mirage ends soon. Asian town still bustles with young men sending money home via western Union.

"After the World Cup road works and construction begins again." The real Doha begins again.