

Meet the digital content producer who pulled a sickie to go to Wembley... and got sacked

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By Molly McElwee



Nina Farooqi's euphoria when Harry Kane scored England's winner was clear to see for anyone watching the European Championship semi-final on Wednesday night. Standing right behind the goal at Wembley, Farooqi and her friend were screaming and jumping in the air, arms around each other and an England flag wrapped around their shoulders as the television cameras zoomed in. It was the best moment of her life as a football fan.

But less than 12 hours later she was brought right back down to earth by a phone call from her boss, delivering the news she had been sacked for attending the historic night at Wembley.

"It's mixed emotions: we're through to the final, I'm still on that high, but I've also lost my job," Farooqi told *Telegraph Sport*. The 37-year-old digital content producer from Ilkley, Bradford had pulled a sickie after a friend offered her a last-minute ticket to the England match.

"My friend won the ticket in her work ballot, and knew I'd do anything to get to the game - there was no way I was going to turn it down," Farooqi said. "This hasn't come around since 1996, I vividly remember crying on my mum's sofa when Gareth Southgate missed his penalty, and the football fan in me just couldn't do it. Football is my life."

But Farooqi said she thought she was unlikely to be granted the day off to attend, due to work being short-staffed. So she decided to call in sick and hopped on Wednesday's lunchtime train from Leeds to London Kings Cross, before heading to Wembley.

When she and her friend got into the ground, they realised their seats were right behind the goal. Though Farooqi felt a jolt of nerves about whether she might get caught, she rationalised that in a crowd of 66,000 people it was highly unlikely.

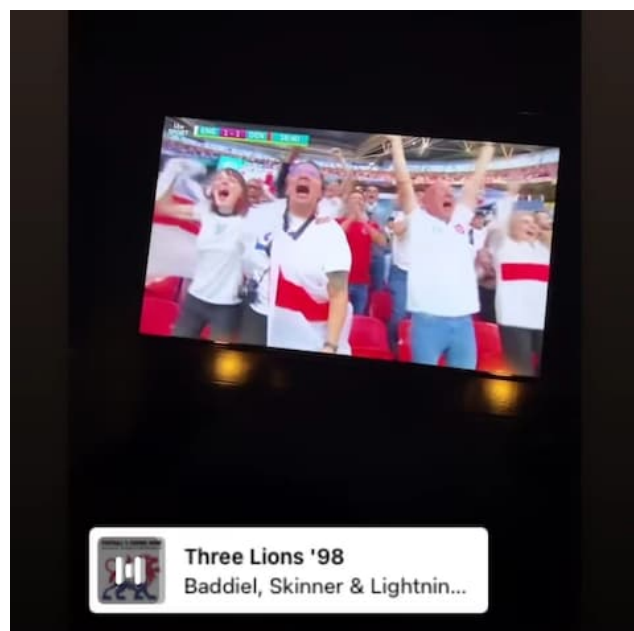
But she was wrong. Checking her phone at half-time, after England scored their equaliser and she had had her first five seconds of fame, she realised her incognito trip down to Wembley was no longer a secret: "We were all over the news, my face was on every television screen across the world - I had friends from Australia and America telling me they'd seen me. I was even on [television presenter] Stacey Dooley's Instagram story. My phone blew up. The whole world had seen me celebrating. The rational part of me thought, 'oh no, is this going to come back to haunt me?'"

The answer was yes. Unfortunately the heartwarming scenes of her celebrating both goals did not draw any sympathy from her employers. After getting a 6am train back up to Yorkshire to be at work on time on Thursday morning, she got the call telling her not to bother coming in.

"They said they'd seen I'd been at the game, and I was honest about why I did it. But I didn't get any sympathy at all and they said that's it. That's their call and the consequence of what I did. There is a bit of regret, no one wants to get fired, but then also I would have hated the regret of missing out. I'd do it all over again."

Farooqi's former employers, Composite Prime, told *Telegraph Sport* they "would have encouraged attendance to such an important football match", but as she lied she was "in breach of her contract". They added that they will be allowing all staff the Monday morning off to recover from the final.

Farooqi says her office job funded her football life, as she also freelances as a photographer and video producer in the men's club game and across the Women's Super League.



Farooqi even made an appearance on Stacey Dooley's Instagram story Credit: INSTAGRAM



Farooqi and her friend were seen jubilantly celebrating England's equaliser Credit: NINA FAROOQI/ITV

Her community of friends in women's football in particular have rallied around her since she lost her job, and have already sourced offers of new freelance work for her. "They have all been incredible, and it will be incredible to watch the Euro 2020 final with them on Sunday at home."



Farooqi (right) has said that she would do it all over again Credit: NINA FAROOQI