Why I've got the World Cup blues

Julia Wheeler
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As Italy goes on celebrating, second-homer Julia Wheeler is grinding her teeth

Am I the only person in Italy who is down in the dumps right now? As the whole country revels in the delirium of World Cup-winning joy, I am left grinding my teeth. The renovated farmhouse in Le Marche that was promised by the end of June has failed to materialise - as I gloomily predicted when the competition kicked off. Five weeks ago, I wrote in these pages: "My worry is that if Francesco Totti, Luca Toni and the rest of the Azzurri do too well, World Cup fever is liable to divert their fans from the job in their [my builders'] hands. My job. So the sooner they're dumped out of the competition and the country gets back to work, the better."

Some hope. The Azzurri (the Blues) didn't just do well - they won the blasted thing.

It is now a year since we signed the building contract specifying what needed to be done, and at what price, to create our five-bedroom rural idyll. I felt sure we had thought of everything. But we forgot the football. How daft is that?

Don't get me wrong, I was in the piazza cheering with the best of them last Sunday night. But I still couldn't get out of my mind the bitter truth - that a project which was moving relatively smoothly towards completion has come to a virtual standstill in the past month. Meanwhile, the well-publicised deadline for our arrival at the finished house - suitcases in hand, children in tow, dreams intact - has passed. And we are camping out of those same suitcases at the home of good friends.

To be fair, bits of our house are in place. In the kitchen we have a classy, deep-red worktop (albeit coated in a thick layer of cement dust). The antique terracotta floors are down; the engravings of the craftsmen who fired them revealed. The painting is progressing slowly.

The boiler is installed, but at the cost of an extra insurance policy - there is no door on the outhouse to prevent it being uninstalled by a passing opportunist. In fact, there are no doors and only one window in the whole place. And, as I write, the tiles for the bathrooms are "on their way". How often have I heard that dread phrase in the past three weeks?

In an almost comical tableau, the lavatories and bidets are stuck at the top of the stairs. The plumber is standing by, but he can't start work until the tiles arrive.

There has been a fantastic range of excuses for things not being finished.

"Your husband changed the colour of the window frames."

Yes, in May: as painting them is the last thing to be done, that still doesn't explain why the carpenter didn't begin work on them until last week.

"The tiles are handmade."

Yes, that's one of the reasons we chose them.

"They come from The North," - this spoken in the hushed tones reserved for a faraway place, a mystical kingdom where time stands still.

Oh, for God's sake. We bite our tongues and try another, more positive tack. Forget the acrimonious rows. What practical steps can we take to get the house finished? Phone calls are made, more promises follow. At the end of another heated conversation, the site manager calmly predicts that all will be well. "Rest assured," he says soothingly, "there is nothing to be gained from rushing things."

"Rest assured," I reply, "That is one danger from which I feel certain we are safe.

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