# They lose, I win...

Julia Wheeler

10 June 2006 • 12:01am



The eastern Le Marche region of Italy

**In Italy, Julia Wheeler is praying that her adopted country gets knocked out of the World Cup - and the sooner the better**

I have never been too bothered about football, but suddenly I find myself passionately involved. In particular, I have taken a vehement dislike to the Italian national team.

It may sound xenophobic, but actually it is a good, old-fashioned defensive strategy of which former England manager Graham Taylor would be proud. By early July, Italian builders should have finished transforming my cowshed-cum-derelict-dwelling into an idyllic, five-bedroom farmhouse in the eastern Le Marche region.

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 hands. My job. So the sooner they're dumped out of the competition and the country gets back to work, the better.

I'm due to arrive in Italy three days before the World Cup final on July 9. In my dreams, I open the chestnut-panelled door, glide across the original, relaid terracotta and pop on the kettle in my trendy, but artisan-crafted Italian kitchen. My nightmare, however, is that fresh air will be circulating freely between the door jambs, the ancient terracotta will remain neatly stacked outside and not being able to make a cuppa will be the least of my worries. And it could all rest on a few football matches.

This week, as I write, there is still very little flooring, no bathroom fixtures, not a hint of a kitchen and a distinct lack of windows. But the architect is still admirably optimistic that the house will be finished in time for the arrival of the four Wheelers, plus summer guests.

When we embarked on the adventure of buying and restoring an Italian farmhouse two years ago, we were well aware of the many tales of disasters and builders' broken promises. So we saw our task as being to put together a team to realise our vision of a dream Italian second home.

Our manager is Fernando, il architetto. Urbane, fashionable and with perennially polished shoes, he is every inch an Italian, with a Roman profile and a Mediterranean temper. As the son of a builder, Fernando had spent his university holidays working on his dad's construction sites - so he knows every trick in the book, plus a few.

Our strikers are Alberto, the owner of the building company, whose gentle, almost paternal manner has given us confidence from the start, and his ruddy-faced site manager, Domenico. Domenico's cheerful smile and cheeky manner often do not seem to fit with his stories of on-going problems holding things up.

We have witnessed some intense argy-bargy between Fernando and Domenico. The most memorable came after we pointed out a schoolboy error - that the columns holding up the veranda roof were blocking the view from the French windows. We flourished yellow cards and the door arches were duly moved to where the plans - and Fernando - dictated.

Mistakes such as these are far less painful when you do not have to pay for them to be rectified. The best way of ensuring that is a "turnkey" deal; for an agreed price you know more or less that you should get a finished house for your cash. A contract might also have penalty clauses for late completion or substandard workmanship. You probably pay about 10 per cent more for this prophetic privilege, but at least it is possible to budget accordingly.

Our turnkey arrangement has paid dividends several times, notably with the discovery that the foundations in the old forno or bread oven - soon, dining room - extended only one brick's depth below the mud surface.

Our midfield generals have been Pepe the Pipes on plumbing and Luca the Lights on electricity - both smiling graciously at my grammatically diabolical Italian as they went about their work. Our rock-solid central defender is an Englishman, Ian. One of the first foreigners to move to Le Marche 25 years ago, he combines all the best Anglo/Italian attitudes.

Domenico and I have had a few minor tussles, but nothing worthy of a red card. Mostly, they have centred on what I see as his conveniently wavering pursuit of historical accuracy. There was the case of the original cooking stove built into the wall which, despite us specifying it should remain, disappeared. The explanation was simple; it was brutta - ugly. Fair play, it wasn't exactly a Smeg, but it had been part of the existing fabric of the house.

In contrast, despite my insistence that the beautiful brick entrance at the top of the external staircase should remain brick, I found it had become a matter of regional honour and was rendered. The ref is consulting his linesman on this one, while Domenico insists it reflects the traditional white-washing of porches for cleanliness and saying he will not deviate from Le Marche's noble traditions. I suspect his determination is also influenced by the extra work required to make good the chipped brickwork.

Overall, our team has played a blinder. So far the work has been good quality and, through repetition ad infinitum, we seem to have avoided what we feared most - the Barratt Home treatment for our beautiful, mellow, crumbling brick and gnarled, oak ceilings.

The character that initially attracted us to the house is mostly intact and, through good design, all the nooks and crannies have been used to best advantage. But, just like football, the game's not over until the whistle blows. I just hope it does not go to extra time - or, God forbid, the contract's penalties.

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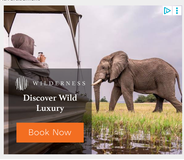


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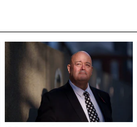
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