

‘FIGHTING FOR EQUALITY IS MY LIFE, WHAT MAKES ME PROUDEST AND HOW I WOULD LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED’

By **ANDREW SMITH**
Football Correspondent

It can feel as if there are two Lilian Thurams. One is the iconic French footballer. A defender who, across a stellar career that took him from Monaco to Parma, Juventus and finally Barcelona, became his country's most capped player, and the cornerstone of the World Cup triumph in 1998 and the European Championships two years later. The other Thuram is the devoted and passionate rights campaigner that the 49-year-old has become since his playing days ended. A man who established a Foundation For Education Against Racism, and has turned to the written word, with his first book, *My Black Stars*, now translated into English. Yet, Thuram – inspired to write it because slaves were the only people of his skin colour he was told about in school, not scientists, explorers, philosophers and the so many more black pioneers that he has chronicled – does not have to think twice when asked about the legacy he hopes for. “It isn’t difficult,” he says, speaking after the book’s launch hosted by

Scotland’s National Centre for Languages/University of Strathclyde this week. “I’m extremely proud of winning the World Cup and all that I did in my career, but, at the end of the day, being a footballer was my job. “Fighting for equality is my life, though, what makes me proudest, and how I would like to be remembered.” Thuram was determined to “change the world” when his days of travelling across it for his day job were coming to a close. Depressingly, on the matter of racism, Euro 2020 across these isles has demonstrated just how much attitudes to the scourge still require challenging. The build-up to the finals has been dominated by the booing England players received from their own supporters in warm-up encounters and the fears this will be repeated when they take to the Wembley pitch for their opener against Croatia. Scotland have also been drawn into confected controversies over the gesture being imagined as a political espousal of Marxism through associations with the Black Lives Matter movement. A clutch of crank right-wingers among the country’s commentariat

deliberately misconstrued Scotland players’ decision to stand as a repudiation of taking the knee. It was, instead, an attempt to send a stronger message through feeling taking the knee had lost some of its power across the season that players have been taking the action. As a result, the anti-lobby over taking the knee merely doubled down on their ignorance over footballers’ motivations for highlighting racism. However, Scotland have refused to be used as some sort of tool for those with barely concealed agendas. Powerful statements from captain Andy Robertson and manager Steve Clarke as to why they will take the knee when facing England at Wembley on Friday in solidarity with the home players laid that out. Thuram struggles to contain his contempt for the backlash against taking the knee and the excuse-mongering about the requirement to keep politics out of football offered up for it. “I didn’t see the images when they happened but I’ve been shocked to hear about it. Though not surprised,” says Thuram, who was awarded an honorary degree from Stirling University for his campaigning two years ago. “There

are always people who don’t like it when you call out racism for what it is. “I see that type of booing in the stadium as a way to try to put people highlighting racism back in their box. Those booing are saying ‘you want to bring your anti-racism message here and we reject that’. “It is so disappointing to see that reaction in football. “I’m not sure whether it is stupidity, or something else involved in those arguments being put forward about Marxism. For me, to whistle or boo players who are trying to send out an anti-racism message is quite obviously a political act in itself ... by those selfsame people saying politics has no place in football. “Politicians who defend what has happened in the stadiums with the booing, they are taking the easy way out because they see votes in it. It’s members of the majority population booing people who are kneeling to show their support of a minority population. It is facile politics. “Those people in the stadiums booing are effectively saying ‘we don’t want politics to come into football, we want things to stay exactly the way they are’. But not wanting change in football or

society is in itself a political position. Football does not exist outside of politics; it is part of the world. “Having sponsors’ logos on your shirt, the naming of stadiums, all of these things are part of a wider political and economic structure and you cannot just choose the bits you want. “There is nothing more political than football. And the ridiculous talk of a Marxist agenda in it, seems to miss the fact football is the best way of selling capitalism at the moment. It’s the most visible face of capitalism, part of the capitalist enterprise.” England manager Gareth Southgate demonstrated his refusal to be cowed in pushing for change with his Dear England this week, a powerful, moving and eloquent missive in which he wrote of he and his squad’s “responsibility to the wider community”, in what was an appeal for unity over their taking the knee. Clarke, meanwhile, took on the xenophobes with a statement on Friday in which he said “we must also be unequivocal in condemning the opportunistic false narrative being presented by some” over their standing gesture he made plain was “against racism and

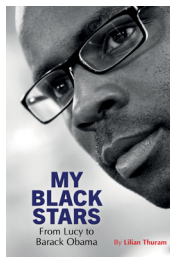
Lilian Thuram, who won Euro 2000 with France, below, believes ‘football, as the leading world support, has the power to change people’s collective imagination’



all forms of unacceptable and discriminatory behaviour across society,” and confirmed “for our match at Wembley, we will stand against racism and kneel against ignorance”. Thuram is conscious of the need for white allies, and for players and managers to be willing to use their profile and standing to confront prejudice. “Football, as the leading world support, has the power to change people’s collective imagination,” he says. “So the very fact of seeing black players, players of different racial origin, in a team can change how you view that ethnic minority within the country. It is legitimate for a black person to be seen as French, English, Scottish or whatever, because you can see them as part of a mixed team, see them as part of the country. And you need people like those managers to stand up and articulate that, to say it publicly. It is not just about seeing players of different ethnic origins then, it is about those in positions of power saying ‘this is what we are doing, we are defending a mixed society’. “Players get called on all the time for different campaigns; anti-poverty, to encourage children to read, all sorts of initiatives. And it is

acceptable for players to be involved in these campaigns. But racism, and standing up against racism, is cast as problematic, as if it is something you can’t legitimately take a stand against... yet, many players will suffer from racism on a daily basis. It’s just that the public don’t see that. “It is strategy that has worked throughout history: you always seek to make racism invisible. And the key way to do that is by silencing those who suffer from it – you hide them from view so those people don’t get to speak up. So you can then pretend it doesn’t exist. With the whistling in the stadiums, I would read that those doing that are saying ‘you have no right to stand up against racism’. What we need to do then is encourage taking the knee, encourage black players – and white players and managers – to speak up and use their voice to make that racism visible.”

My Black Stars: From Lucy to Barack Obama by Lilian Thuram, is edited by David Murphy. See liverpool university press.co.uk



Kudela ban was ‘strong’ response says Thuram

By **ANDREW SMITH**
andrew.smith@jpimedia.co.uk

Lilian Thuram’s stance on racism is unimpeachable. For more than a decade, the French footballing great has tirelessly fought against it. While many in Scotland felt the 10-game ban handed to Ondrej Kudela for racially abusing Glen Kamara in Rangers’ Europa League last 16-tie against Slavia Prague at Ibrox on March 18 was woefully inadequate, Thuram does not necessarily share that view. However, only because the 49-year-old has such low expectations of the governing body. “It is a good thing UEFA took what I believe was fairly strong action in the Slavia Prague case. I say that because they have such a bad track record in this area,” says Thuram on a suspension that forced the Czech defender to miss the Euros. “They try to play down racism because it gives the game a bad image; they try to pretend it isn’t there. Everything is done by UEFA and football authorities generally to play these cases down as rogue incidents, to sweep them under the carpet. “It is all about protecting the economics of football, because advertisers and so on don’t want to be associated with a racist sport. “For me, it is a moral argument that you come out of it aggrandi – in French that means morally



Slavia Prague’s Ondrej Kudela

stronger. You must show that by standing up to racism. Too often UEFA and others are looking at the economic arguments, thinking to themselves ‘if we make a big deal, we create a scandal and that gives a bad image to the sport’. There was an incident with a player at Valencia, Mouctar Diakhaby, who was racially abused by an opponent in a game in April. The Valencia players walked off, but were convinced to come back on the pitch. “In those instances, when players bring it to the attention of the referee that a player has been abused, or the crowd is making monkey chants, whistling black players, or whatever, typically a white referee will say they didn’t hear anything. And if the player who has been abused ends up getting angry, he will be the one that ends up getting a card. It is like with the whistling of players for taking the knee. It ends up with those confronting racism too often being painted as the guilty parties.”

Proud but nervous father backs son Marcus for Euro 2020 success

By **ANDREW SMITH**
andrew.smith@jpimedia.co.uk

The knotted stomach that forms within Lilian Thuram when he considers France’s bid to replicate what the national team of his vintage achieved between 1998 and 2000 is hardly to be wondered at. Not when the anti-racism and equalities campaigner’s son Marcus is a member of Didier Deschamp’s 26-man squad in the tilt to add the Euro 2020 to their 2018 World Cup success – aping the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 Thuram senior won. The 23-year-old Borussia Moenchengladbach attacker is one of two sons that have followed in the footsteps of the 49-year-old, with 20-year-old Khephren a midfielder at Nice. Their dad’s desire to promote black consciousness is reflected in the pair’s names – Marcus named after black Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey, while Khephren was the black pharaoh believed to be the inspiration for the features on the Great Sphinx of Giza.

The Serie A winner with Juventus is sure Marcus can join him in Euros success, but watching either son never proves easy for him. “Dads are always nervous watching their kids kicking a ball, or indeed anything in life,” he says. “You want them to do well, do the thing they love, but are always nervous for them. I think France can do it, but it is always difficult because these competitions come down to fine details. I see one of the difficulties this time is the decentralised nature of the tournament. France play Germany in Munich and Hungary in Budapest in their group. They have the quality to do it, but it’s going to be tough. “It is great to have [Karim] Benzema back [after five years], you always want the best players in your team and he is one of top centre-forwards in the world. In my experience, though, it is always the team with the best defence that wins. By defence, I mean the defensive structure of the team, how you transition.”