

Testing Times - Day 5

With just three seconds to go before the game, Lancaster Road jogged down to the far end of the pitch.

Where a team in dark black shirts were already practising.

‘We were here first, go away!’ said their tallest player.

The referee blew his whistle again.

Lancaster Road trotted back to the middle.

‘I’m sorry...there seems to have been a mistake...’, said the referee, consulting his 200-page booklet of rules and instructions, ‘I think, we’re supposed to be on K4 not A4, follow me!’

There was feverish activity on the Lancaster Road bench, as bags were hurriedly packed, stray bottles and tops were recovered, and the team made their way over to pitch K4.

The Barcelona team strolled to their waiting transportation, a gleaming silver Mercedes minibus, with individual tables, little table lamps with lampshades, and an individualised copy of MatchAttax magazine for each player.

The referee shouted a cheery ‘See you there!’ to his Spanish friends, and led the Lancaster Road team down the dingy dell, through the enchanted wood, over the bubbling brook, round the clashing rocks, and finally arriving at pitch K4. When they got there, the FC Barcelona players were getting last minute massages, talks with the psychologist...you know the rest.

The referee’s whistle finally blew for the start of the match, which had been further delayed by the realisation that Lancaster Road’s kit was similar to that of their opponents. Inevitably, Lancaster Road had been asked to play in bibs. Mr Andrews had managed to scrape together the seven bibs needed. They were more or less the same colour. Green. Ish.

The greens actually started quite well, from the kick-off forcing a corner when Clara had basically booted it as far as she possibly could and the goalkeeper had inadvertently turned a ball, that was a metre or so wide of the goal, round his post.

But otherwise it had been one-way traffic, and the wrong way at that.

Barcelona’s eighth (yes...eighth!) goal, was to be their last, but it was arguably the best of the lot. Every player touched the ball before it ended up lodged in the back of Hardy’s net.

It started with Values (bought cheaply from Real Madrid) in the Barcelona goal, rolling the ball to Poo Yol (bought cheaply from South Korea). He had then stabbed it across to his fellow defender (a dark-skinned girl called Lillian), who had taken the ball forward down the inside left channel. Linking with her midfielders – she passed to the messy one whilst the other made a deco-y run down the right – the ball found its way to the brilliant striker who, on reaching the penalty area, slipped the ball to his striking

partner who slammed the ball past Hardy into the net.

‘Oooh!’, went the Barcelona supporters, as the players celebrated what was going to be a comfortable win.

The referee blew his whistle one final time. ‘A minute left, gentlemen!’ he called, much to Clara’s visible annoyance. Miss Thuram from the opposition scowled too.

From the kick-off, Barcelona almost immediately regained possession, with Messy-boy jinking one way then the next, before slipping the ball on really skilfully to the strikers.

But Clara, still fuming, came in with a brilliant tackle just outside the Lancaster Road penalty area. She passed the ball to Wil who took it forward and was approached by both of the Barca defenders. Wil looked up as two of the best defenders in their age group faced him down. He stopped, the ball nestling beside his right foot, and looked up.

Michael, who had seemingly lost interest in the game and had been chatting with some of the Barcelona coaching staff, suddenly came off his wing and sprinted into the box, yelling for the ball.

If only Wil could find him.

If only...

Wil dragged the ball back from a lunge from Thuram, then looked up again. Almost without thinking, he stabbed the ball with his right foot and it passed between the prone defender and the other.

Straight into Michael’s path.

What was he thinking?

Who knows?

Why did he do it?

No-one knows.

An open goal.

The ball at his feet.

On his right foot.

Only the keeper to beat.

The eyes.

Left, then right.

Side-footed.

The keeper diving.

The ball.

In the back...

... of the net!

Freddy fell to his knees as the whistle blew for full-time.

Never, in the history of football, had an eight-one defeat tasted...

...so sweet!

*OK – so we've mentioned famous players eight times here, can you spot them? Some are obvious, and some are not! Check the website for answers!